Issue 15, June 2008

Editorial 4

ARTICLES

“To use a metaphor at a time like this would be obscene:” a study of cancer, poetry and metaphor
Cathy Altmann 7

Burning Down the [Big] House: Sati in Sydney Owenson’s The Missionary
Frances Botkin 36

Wounded Space: Law, Justice and Violence to the Land
Jennifer Coralie 52

Seeing Stars: Reading Melancholy and Power at Madame Tussauds through the Lens of Hiroshi Sugimoto
Elizabeth Howie 75

Concrete Containment in Late Capitalism, Mysticism, the Marquis de Sade, and Phenomenological Anthropology
Apple Igrek 95

“Edging Back Into Awareness”; How Late it Was, How Late, Form, and the Utopian Demand
Dougal McNeill 115

CRISIS OF MEMORY

Traumatic Memory and Holocaust Testimony: Passing Judgement in Representations of Chaim Rumkowski
Adam Brown 128

Recreating Postmemory? Children of Holocaust Survivors and the Journey to Auschwitz
Esther Jilovsky 145

Blurring the Boundaries: History, Memory and Imagination in the Works of W G Sebald
Diane Molloy 163
REVIEW ARTICLE


Ashley Woodward 178

TRANSLATION

“To a man with a big nose”: a new translation

Jorge Salavert Pinedo 198

ESSAYS

*The Great Inland Sea*: reflections on the *buddhadharma* in the post-secular age.

Martin Kovan 204

Kazantzakis’ Poor Man of God: Philosophy without Philosophy

Nick Trakakis 221

BOOK REVIEWS


Elizabeth Burns Coleman 259


Jay Daniel Thompson 267


Andrew Padgett 270


James Garrett 274


Adam Lodders 277


Louise Gray 283
Carlo Salzani 287

David Blencowe 291

CREATIVE WRITING

Three Poems
Vivienne Glance 297

In a straw house by a blue stream: Chinese Poems
Christopher Kelen 301

Light Pink Summer
Susan McMichael 306

A Brew that is True
Nicola Scholes 309
Issue 15 of Colloquy: text theory critique comes in a new format that we think presents the best of both worlds – it combines both general articles and a themed section (albeit a short one, on this occasion). For the foreseeable future, this will be the format for Colloquy – twice a year, with a special theme each issue and space for general articles to boot. This change is made in response to demand and means that we offer postgraduate students from institutions both local and abroad the opportunity to submit their work in line with a Call for Papers or in regards to their own specific areas of research. As well as this Colloquy offers the possibility of publishing new translations (this issue contains a Spanish poem), review articles, book reviews, creative pieces, and opinion essays (another new section, with a focus this issue on matters of faith and/or speculative philosophy). We believe that this makes Colloquy a uniquely vibrant and valuable tool for postgraduate and early career researcher publication.

The themed section of Issue 15 draws from papers presented at the recent German Studies Association of Australia conference titled Erinnerungskrise / Crisis of Memory. With an explosion of interest in the concept of memory (Erinnerung and Gedächtnis) in recent years, the three postgraduate papers published in this issue consider a range of new concepts including post Holocaust memory and traumatic memory, and their interplay with literature, history and the human experience.

As always the editors want to thank the many referees who made this issue possible.
Issue 16, to appear in December 2008, will feature papers devoted to Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” and Jacques Derrida’s “Force of Law,” with contributors having been invited to extend their analyses to include the cognate works of such thinkers as Schmitt, Arendt, Agamben and others in the continental tradition. In keeping with the interdisciplinary character of Colloquy, explicit applications of Benjamin’s or Derrida’s insights to literary and cultural production are also expected. This special issue will be guest edited by Carlo Salzani and Michael FitzGerald.

Colloquy is presently seeking unsolicited submissions for this and future issues. We are also seeking submissions for Issue 17 that consider the theme “Alternative visions: philosophies of freedom in South Asian Diasporic Writing.” Students of postcolonial studies should find this area of particular interest, although as always Colloquy remains open to researchers from all areas of the humanities with a focus on critical inquiry and creative responses. This issue will be guest edited by Elin-Maria Evangelista, Isabella Öfner and Pooja Mittal. This issue will also feature select postgraduate papers from the Communications and Media Studies conference, to be held in August 2008, on International and Intercultural Communications in the Age of Digital Media. These papers will consider current understandings of globalization and the most pressing questions facing media and communications scholars today, including relations between the empirical and the theoretical in media cultures in action, what ideas we use to make sense of them, and whether or not disciplinarity is even still a workable idea.

The submission deadline for Issue 17 is November 15, 2008. Academic articles, review articles, book reviews, translations, opinion essays and creative writing will be considered.

THE EDITORS
ARTICLES
“To use a metaphor at a time like this would be obscene:” a study of cancer, poetry and metaphor

Cathy Altmann

Introduction

“Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease.”¹ Susan Sontag’s famous dictum may no longer be entirely true, given the proliferation of writing on cancer in the late 20th century and beyond.² But, almost thirty years after Sontag wrote, cancer itself is still scandalous, despite her prediction that greater medical understanding would remove the stigma of cancer. This paper will examine the role of metaphor in relation to the “scandal” of cancer. It will consider the impact of metaphors drawn from popular culture, biomedicine, alternative medicine, and the holistic health movement, before examining
the unique role of poetic metaphor in the work of Australian poet Philip Hodgins.

Metaphor, at its simplest, is figure of speech which unites two disparate areas of human experience. It is far stronger than simile, because of the collision of one area with another: compare “her eyes are like the sea” with “her eyes are the sea.” The compression of metaphor gives it its punch. Philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is such a powerful form of communication because of its ability to unite the abstract with the physical and visual. The immediacy of the visual image makes it compelling. It appears incontrovertible, since it is easily visualised. Consider the metaphor “life is a journey.” While life is an abstract concept which we struggle to define, journey, on the other hand, is a part of our everyday experience. The power of the metaphor is its visual simplicity. The fact that this is an over-simplification has not prevented the metaphor from becoming so widely used it is a cliché.

However, a metaphor is not merely a figure of speech. As Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated in their study, Metaphors We Live By, metaphors “provide the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world.” So the metaphors we use matter. The metaphor “life is a journey” affects and reveals our concept of life, which affects the very way we experience life. The metaphor also blinds us to the many ways life is not a journey.

Metaphor, as the above analysis demonstrates, is a fiction which “has the power to redescribe reality,” to use philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s description. The reality of life is redescribed in terms of a journey. Ricoeur concludes that the “place” of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb to be. Metaphor, which says both this “is like” and “is not” something, acts out in microcosm the split between the sign and the signifier. Metaphor is thus embedded, not just in everyday language, in public rhetoric, or even in our conceptual framework, but on the level of ontology. Once the ontological knot has been tied (life is a journey), it is almost impossible to undo. Jacques Lacan posits the subject as created by language, so that we are always an “organism-in-culture,” to use Catherine Belsey’s phrase. We cannot escape the symbolic order into which we are born, and the signifying systems that go with it. Language and metaphor are ways in which we internalise our culture. Therefore our language is not tied to the “world of things” but is the product of our culture, and bears traces of the culture in its metaphors. So it is no surprise that cultural attitudes towards “life” or “cancer” are found deep down in the language by which they are described.
The task of this paper is to explore the implications of this understanding of metaphor in relation to cancer. Cancer is still a disease which is not well understood. It is subject to many kinds of mythologising and, in Western society, it can evoke an unparalleled dread. If metaphors reveal concepts and affect experience, what do they reveal and obscure about cancer? What do they suggest about cultural attitudes to the disease? What effect is this imagery likely to have on those diagnosed with cancer? Section I focuses on contemporary culture and its metaphor-making in relation to cancer. Section II explores imagery used by practitioners of both biomedicine and alternative medicine, and Section III asks what happens when a poet, writing from within the cancer experience, uses metaphor.

I. Cancer and metaphor

Cancer is able to provoke reactions of dread and fear unlike almost any other disease. A Roy Morgan poll in 2001 found that cancer is the most feared disease in Australia. This is not related to its actual mortality rates, since heart disease kills more Australians than cancer each year. As sociologist Jackie Stacey’s cultural study of cancer puts it, emotional responses to the disease are accompanied “by an almost physical shudder.”

Cancer patients find themselves treated with a mixture of fear, pity and admiration for their heroic “struggle” against the disease. In this environment, it is not surprising that cancer is mythologised, and that metaphors reflect this. Cancer is still called “the big C,” John Wayne’s term for his lung cancer. “Oh no, it’s the big C” was the first thought of a woman I spoke to about her reaction to finding a lump in her breast. The term suggests a monster, too horrible even to be named. In contemporary culture, cancer is not only monstrous, but evil. Professor David Hill, head of The Cancer Council Victoria, called cancer “a diabolical enemy” in a recent public speech. So it follows that the overriding cultural metaphor is that cancer is war. This metaphor is so prevalent it has become almost unnoticeable. Like the metaphor “life is a journey,” it exists at the level of cliché, used by academics and popular magazines alike. Professor Hill’s speech echoes the popular rhetoric about cancer: “Of course The Cancer Council is here to fight cancer. We’re here to defeat cancer.” So familiar is the metaphor that his comments appear to be commonsense. Similarly, the end of Kylie Minogue’s breast cancer treatment hit the magazine stands with headlines shouting: “KYLIE’S TRIUMPH: ‘MY SECRET WEAPON.’” The “weapon” turns out to be “Olivier’s love for her.” This
unexpectedly military metaphor for love makes sense only in the context of the ascendant military discourse about cancer. War imagery is constantly referred to: “Kylie’s battle with breast cancer;” her short hair is “a badge of courage;” “she’s beaten cancer,” and is now ready to help “others who are fighting breast cancer.” At the other end of the media spectrum, The Age describes Janette Howard as having “battled,” “fought and defeated” cervical cancer. Obituaries and eulogies for cancer patients invariably contain references to military terminology: the person has died after a long battle with cancer; they have put up a courageous fight against it; and in dying they have finally succumbed to the disease.

It is not just that we metaphorise cancer as war; our understanding of the disease is defined by military terminology. As Sontag points out, the disease is perceived as “aggressive,” an invasion of enemy cells, which attack the body’s defences. Cancer cells attempt to infiltrate surrounding territory, and take over organs. Scans must be taken of the body landscape to detect the presence of enemy activity. The counter-attack comes from “Natural Killer (NK)” cells, which target tumours. Treatment is another form of counter-offensive: chemotherapy kills cells with chemical warfare, while radiotherapy is akin to aerial warfare, where the body is targeted with rays. The aim is to annihilate the enemy cells, even though other healthy cells will be destroyed too (“collateral damage?”): this is the necessary cost of the war on cancer.

However, the military analogy has some disturbing implications. For those undergoing treatment, military strength becomes metaphorically associated with the patient’s emotional strength or will power. Hence the frequent advice to cancer patients to “be positive” and “be strong.” It is questionable whether alternative medical models which teach that you can heal cancer with the strength of your positive thinking would have become popular in a culture that did not already accept that cancer is war. Cancer patients are invariably depicted as “brave” and “courageous,” but this can become an easy distancing strategy for those unwilling to listen to patients’ actual experiences. The metaphor also makes it difficult for patients to admit to feelings such as fear and cowardice, unacceptable qualities in a battle.

Yet there are undoubtedly some patients for whom the military terminology is energising. They rebel against the passive “sick role” and the feeling of being a victim which serious illness can bring, and decide to fight, even if they die doing so. There is even a website selling T-shirts with slogans such as:
CANCER OPTIONS
A: GIVE UP
B: FIGHT LIKE HELL
I CHOOSE B

The anger that accompanies a diagnosis of cancer can find an effective outlet in this fighting spirit: “CANCER CAN KICK MY ASS.”

However, it is often those writing or talking about the person with cancer who use fighting terminology. “I won’t let cancer beat me” is the headline of an article about Sydney horse-trainer Tony Wildman. In the article itself, Wildman says nothing of the kind, but talks instead about the debilitating effect of chemo: “I’m starting to lose my eyesight, my hands and feet tingle and I get really tired. There’s also the depression.” The dichotomy between the headline and the person’s language is found in numerous media reports about cancer. This suggests that the military analogy is imposed regardless of the patient’s actual experience.

When treatment ends, the analogy is extended. Patients, like Kylie Minogue, are hailed as victors who have beaten the disease, presumably due to a combination of bravery and clever surgical tactics. Yet this is precisely where the analogy breaks down. There is no white flag of surrender on the battlefield, no terms of peace. As one oncologist put it, “you can never say never with cancer.” This leads to an alarming disjunction between the imagery and patients’ experience. Yet the metaphor persists, like the concept “life is a journey,” although it obscures the many ways in which cancer is not war. This is because metaphor’s ability to simplify complex issues is appealing, and its visual imagery is so compelling. We can far more easily visualise a battlefield than the body’s complex biology, the working of T-cells, cancer cells, lymph glands, or the immune system. The metaphor offers black and white certainties, victory versus defeat, whereas cancer itself often does not.

Finally, the “cancer is war” metaphor is even more demoralising for those dying of the disease. Those alive and well are hailed as “survivors.” And if surviving cancer is “beating” it, death or recurrence of cancer must be “losing” to it. Those who are dying not only have to deal with their death, but with the metaphorisation of that death as a military defeat. This can add to the burden felt by those with the disease. One woman described her mother’s shame at dying of cancer, because of a sense that she had “lost the battle.” The nasty underside of the analogy is the implication that the battle with cancer is lost due to a lack of strength, bravery, or fighting spirit. The metaphor is powerful enough to transfer military concepts to the workings of a disease.
This analysis of cancer imagery raises the issue of why cancer, rather than any other disease, is so dreaded. Part of the answer is that cancer is a disease whose causes and progress are still not fully understood. It is more likely that a mysterious disease will be mythologised as a horrifying enemy. A disease which cannot always be cured is frightening in a culture which wants to believe medicine can cure anything. When I told people I had cancer, a common response was, “It’s amazing what they can do these days” – “they” being medical professionals. We want to believe that doctors can fix us up, and that illness only comes to people who are old or have not looked after their bodies. We want to believe that we can control death, and that we are effectively immortal. Cancer destroys all these illusions. James Patterson’s study of cancer in American society concludes, “in a society that feared death over all things, no other illness was dreaded so much.”

In fact, cancer has become synonymous with death. Why do people fear cancer? “Cancer equals death. That’s it,” was the response of one member of a cancer support group.

In our culture, death remains “the obscene mystery…the thing that cannot be controlled. It can only be denied.” Paradoxically, our refusal to face death means we have an exaggerated fear of it. No wonder cancer is metaphorised as a diabolical enemy, which must be combatted with every offensive weapon available.

However, none of these analyses quite explain the gut-level revulsion which cancer evokes. This is exactly the physical response Julia Kristeva describes in her work *Powers of Horror*. This response is provoked by what she terms “the abject.” The abject exists on the border between our bodies and the world. It involves a revulsion at contact with bodily emissions such as vomit, blood, urine, faeces or pus. These are wastes we want to expel in order to live, but which remind us of the difficulty of keeping our body clean, and our vulnerability to defilement and death. When the boundaries of the body are transgressed, there we encounter the abject. So the abject gives rise to a whole set of anxieties about bodily defilement, pollution and purification. Stacey comments:

The abject, then, is both separate from, and yet part of, the subject. It is that which we want to exclude, but which threatens to re-enter. As such, it is a constant reminder of the mutability of our borders and the vulnerability of the subject.

Kristeva’s analysis of the abject explains the intense fear, not just of cancer, but of the treatment it involves. Surgery and chemotherapy are particularly dreaded. They offer ample experiences of the transgression of bodily boundaries: cannulas inserted into veins, blood leaking out the holes left by
needles or surgical knives, drainage tubes inserted after breast cancer surgery which drain blood and fluid, toxic chemicals going in through veins and mingling with blood, hair falling out, orange urine, vomiting, diarrhoea, hot flushes and night sweats. Here the body issues forth from “its pores and openings” in sickening fashion.\textsuperscript{34}

In cancer, there is not just defilement at the border of the body and the world, but cells invade and transgress boundaries within the body. It is this pollution and transgression of boundaries from within that explains much of the horror of cancer. That which causes death grows within the cancer patient. It should be expelled in order for the subject to live, but it cannot be. Like the corpse, cancer is “death infecting life,” the ultimate reminder of the fragility of our borders.\textsuperscript{35}

Kristeva comments that “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place … of what will be ‘me.’”\textsuperscript{36} This kind of alienation from the self is exactly what occurs when cancer cells, the Other, take the place of normal cells. The frightening aspect of cancer is that the Other remains indistinguishable from what is “me” until it is too late. The first cancer cells can exist undetected for years. When treatment ends, similarly, cancer cells could still be alive and active, busy settling in place of the self. How can death be fought if it has infected life? How can the body be purified if the Other is indistinguishable from the subject’s “own and clean self?”\textsuperscript{37}

The cancer patient can thus experience an alienation from their own body and a state of abjection unlike those with other illnesses.\textsuperscript{38}

The bodily transgressions involved in both the progress and treatment of cancer explain much of the dread cancer evokes in our society. It is not surprising, then, that cancer evokes “flight or fight” responses: fear and avoidance on the one hand, and militaristic metaphors on the other. It is also not surprising that cancer patients are stigmatised, pitied and romanticised through metaphors which provide distance from the abjection of cancer. It is no accident that the most common cultural metaphor for cancer arises from outside the cancer experience, and is imposed on it in popular, academic and medical terminology. The militarisation of cancer is endemic in our society. It offers a powerful visual appeal and a dramatic simplicity. The fact that it obscures the reality of the cancer experience and that it adds to the burden to those dying of the disease, does not prevent it from shaping the way we perceive and experience cancer.
II. “Just a disease?”

Given the stigma involved when cancer becomes metaphorised, it would seem desirable to move to a state beyond metaphor where cancer was seen “just as a disease.” This is Sontag’s hope:

My point is that illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness [is one] most resistant to metaphoric thinking.

Once cancer is medically understood, Sontag argues, it will become just another disease, and patients will be free from stigma. In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag claims optimistically that attitudes to cancer have in fact evolved and “getting cancer is not quite as much of a stigma,” largely due to fear of cancer having been replaced by fear of AIDS. Yet fifteen years after she wrote, the fact that AIDS has not become the epidemic predicted in the West (though it has is Africa), has left Western cancerphobia intact. More importantly, advances in biomedicine have not changed the metaphorisation of cancer at all. This is because illness is culturally constructed and it is impossible to experience illness outside cultural meanings ascribed to it. As DiGiacomo puts it: “no one ever experiences cancer as the uncontrollable proliferation of abnormal cells.”

Sontag’s argument that the most truthful way of perceiving illness is that which is most resistant to metaphor raises the question of whether this resistance is possible. Here, Lakoff and Johnson’s conclusion to *Metaphors We Live By* is most helpful. They comment:

But metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors. It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world.

On this basis, dealing with the stigma caused by the militarisation of cancer is not a matter of moving beyond metaphor so much as of choosing which (or perhaps, whose) metaphors to use, aware that this choice will shape the way we perceive and experience cancer.

Given that it is impossible to perceive cancer without metaphor, it is not surprising that even biomedicine does not present cancer as “just a disease.” This is partly because biomedicine is practised by doctors and medical staff who themselves are influenced by cultural attitudes to cancer, a point Sontag overlooks. Doctors’ perception of cancer patients differs
very little from the rest of the population, as Meira Weiss’ study demonstrates.\textsuperscript{44} She compared metaphors of AIDS, cancer and heart disease used by 40 doctors, 75 nurses (all with experience in oncology or AIDS) and 60 students at Israeli universities. For all their training, medical staff used similar metaphors for cancer patients to non-medical staff. Cancer was metaphorised by both as a transformation in normal cells which pollutes the whole body and self.\textsuperscript{45} The language of pollution echoes Kristeva’s concept of defilement and the abject. Weiss also asked respondents to draw their image of a patient with each disease. The visual representations of cancer and AIDS patients were extremely disturbing: “The outlines of their bodies were drawn with gaps; their internal organs were often hanging out. They were represented as without hair, without gender, and without any surrounding context.”\textsuperscript{46} These images are reminiscent of faceless casualties in a war. In contrast, heart disease patients were depicted as normal people. They were drawn with detailed faces and even clothing. This comment from a respondent is typical:

When it’s about your heart, it’s a specific organ. A problem in plumbing. Not contaminating. Not altering your self or your body, not disrupting any boundaries. Not like cancer or AIDS. The other is safe. [Michal]\textsuperscript{47}

It is striking how much of Michal’s language echoes Kristeva’s comments about the abject, the transgression of boundaries and the sense of an Other taking the place of self. Medicine cannot free cancer from stigma or metaphor, as Sontag hopes, when medical practitioners reflect many of the stigmatising assumptions of the culture around them, and see cancer through the same controlling metaphors.

Further, biomedicine itself may appear objective, but its frame of reference is heavily metaphorical. Michel Foucault’s 1973 study of medicine, \textit{The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception}, shows how we have come to see the body as “the space of origin and of distribution of disease.”\textsuperscript{48} In modern medicine, visual and spatial metaphors are paramount. This coincides with the arrival of pathological anatomy and the supremacy of the medical gaze.\textsuperscript{49} The clinical gaze is a Western phenomenon which depends on what Stacey calls “the discourse of \textit{visibility}.”\textsuperscript{50} So we take for granted the physical examination, and the scans which will allow doctors to see what is undetectable to the naked eye: ultrasounds, X-rays, MRI scans, nuclear medicine, pathology. In modern medicine, seeing is believing. Visibility is “the first face of truth.”\textsuperscript{51} It is difficult to question the importance of the visual in biomedicine from within a culture saturated by it.
Yet even a brief glance at a cancer pathology report shows its reliance on visual and spatial metaphor: “a cavity in the outer lower quadrant,” “two foci of residual DCIS,” “extending 7mm along the duct.”

For the cancer patient, having one’s breast, for example, described as “an horizontally orientated ellipse of skin including the nipple” can be an alienating experience. The underlying metaphor is one of a split between mind and body. It leads to sense of alienation, felt most keenly when physicians “do not communicate to patients as human beings, but as bodies in the abstract, analogous to the communication between a garage mechanic and the owner of a car.” It is clear that biomedicine, which presents itself as objective and devoid of figurative language, relies on imagery to describe and treat illness. The language assumes a mind-body split. Not only is the medical profession shaped by the prevailing cultural attitudes to cancer, but the discourse of biomedicine is itself metaphorical.

While cultural metaphors continue to stigmatise cancer patients and shape the perceptions of medical staff, it might be hoped that practitioners of alternative medicine would employ less damaging imagery for cancer. Australian cancer patients are frequent users of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). In a 1995 study, 21.9% of Australian cancer patients used CAM, the most common being relaxation/meditation, diet, megavitamins and positive imagery, with over 75% of these patients using two or more therapies. A 2005 study found 17.1% of NSW cancer patients were using at least one complementary and alternative therapy, mainly herbal treatments and naturopathy. Cancer patients use CAM for a variety of reasons: for “symptomatic relief;” “concerns about the toxicity of conventional therapies;” a belief that “CAM can fight cancer, or boost their immune system;” or to provide “a new source of hope.” This suggests that these therapies offer patients the hope of actively taking control of their illness. As one woman put it, “For weeks, I drank carrot juice twice a day, even though I hated it, and I felt better for doing something, anything.”

While it is not disputed that some CAM, such as acupuncture, massage and relaxation, have been shown to help in reducing stress, managing pain and improving quality of life, it is also true that some practitioners make untested claims that their CAM can cure cancer. The appeal of these treatments, apart from their offer of hope to the hopeless, is dependent on the metaphors which underpin them. These need to be examined critically. Firstly, the metaphor of mind-body dualism in biomedicine is often replaced by one of wholeness. The catch-phrase is “holistic health.” The holistic health movement grew out of the counter-culture of the late 60s and 70s, and is characterised by opposition to biomedical and pharmacological
The term “holistic” has appealing connotations of integration and unity. The person is understood as “a unique, wholistic interdependent relationship of body, mind, emotions and spirit,” and healing involves bringing these factors into wholeness, resulting “in an integration with the underlying inward power of the universe.” Hanegraaff comments: “This individualization of health care, in which not an abstract ‘disease’ but the unique individual in his/her undivided wholeness is at the centre of attention, is arguably the most central characteristic of the [holistic health] movement.” This metaphor of interconnectedness leads to an emphasis on the role of the mind in “creating” and healing illness.

Two prime exponents of the belief that people create their own illness are US author Louise Hay, and Australia’s Ian Gawler. Louise Hay’s book You Can Heal Your Life, based on her healing from cancer, has sold more than 35 million copies and been turned into a film. She runs workshops for AIDS patients (called “Hay-rides”) and has her own publishing house, Hay House. Her work has been translated into 25 different languages. Hay argues that “we create every so-called ‘illness’ in our body ... Every cell within your body responds to every single thought you think and every word you speak.” The metaphoric split between the mind and body is replaced by imagery of an interdependent whole. Thoughts and words are believed to be material and to act directly on the cells. Yet the authority of Hay’s argument rests on the reader’s unconscious recognition of the metaphoric similarity between thoughts, words and cells. All are small, discrete and apparently inconsequential. Yet the cancer patient knows only too well that tiny individual cells can kill. It is then possible to believe, through the metaphor, that thoughts can have a power far greater than their size.

The concept that “we create our own reality” is central to New Age thinking. It is an antidote to the frightening randomness of much that seems to happen to us, or to the idea that we are powerless in the face of forces larger than ourselves. Hay puts it like this: “Every thought we think is creating our future;” “You might notice what thought you are thinking at this moment. Is it negative or positive? Do you want this thought to be creating your future? Just notice and be aware.” The slightly bullying tone of this notwithstanding, Hay’s metaphor is one of the individual as the creator of the world – their world. The individual is given God-like responsibility for everything that happens to them in their present, past or future lives. “We are all responsible for everything in our lives” is the mantra. It could also be argued that this individualization reflects the prevailing social and political culture in which it has arisen, particularly American culture, where the doctrine of personal responsibility for health, wealth and happiness is a pa-
particularly comfortable fit.

The implications of this imagery are no less disturbing than those of popular culture or biomedicine. If we “create” our every illness, cancer patients are directly to blame for their disease and its outcome. The discourse of creating one’s illness, like the metaphor of victory, has the corollary that death from cancer means we have failed to “clear the metal pattern that was causing the cancer.” Hay states directly: “If we are willing to do the mental work, almost anything can be healed.” It follows that we are to blame for our own illness, and recurrence or death from cancer must be the result of an unwillingness to do that mental work.

This aspect of New Age teaching has led to vehement criticisms from health professionals and terminal patients. Ken Wilber documented his wife’s experience of guilt and inadequacy, following the failure of affirmations and visualizations to heal her breast cancer. However, New Age practitioners such as Louise Hay would argue that the belief that we create our own reality (including our own illness) should not lead to guilt. Guilt is a negative emotion, anathema to New Age thought. The concepts of blame, sin and guilt need to be discarded, or one has missed the point of the teaching. Instead, practitioners argue, the belief in creating your own reality is empowering. As Hay states, “Your point of power is in the present moment.” In the present moment a person has the power to choose their thoughts and beliefs and so create a new future. The doctrine also gives people a framework of meaning for their lives. Everything that happens, “happens for a reason” (in fact, this phrase is becoming a cliché in popular culture). Events are no longer random or meaningless. Instead the question is: “what is the Universe trying to teach me through this experience?”

However, there is a damned if you do, damned if you don’t, aspect to this teaching. A person either accepts that they have caused their illness in the first place, and takes total responsibility for healing themselves, or they don’t, and are told that this refusal will exacerbate their illness. Ken Wilbur noted a “thinly-concealed rage” beneath the surface of questions such as “why did you choose to give yourself cancer?” He paraphrased this as: “I don’t want to hurt you, I love you; but disagree with me and you will get an illness that will kill you. Agree with me, agree that you can create your own reality, and you will get better, you will live.” Apart from this double bind, it is a very tall order to avoid feelings of guilt or blame, while also accepting responsibility for creating one’s own illness. And even if one does accept this, it is impossible for people in a traumatic situation to focus entirely on positive thoughts. The moment they fail, they have an added burden of fear that they are creating more illness. As one woman put it, “The more I heard
about the necessity for positive thinking in the face of my cancer, the more terrified I became that because of who I am, I was going to die.”

There is a further problem with the “think positive” mantra. It encourages patients to avoid acknowledging the grief and emotional distress involved in their cancer experience, delaying their ability to integrate what has happened to them. Instead of acknowledging a problem as real, which is seen as “negativity,” affirmations are used to deny a problem exists at all. “My body is always working toward optimum health;” “I am eternally young.” Helen Garner’s recent novel, *The Spare Room*, based on her experience with a dying friend, is a disturbing account of what such denial does to the dying person and their relationships with others. Nicola has terminal cancer but she repeatedly states that she’ll be better in a week:

“So instead of becoming a Type A heart disease type of person, they will instead become compliant and try to win love … They want to be
Later, when there is further loss such as a job or partner, the cancer-prone person loses their external source of self-esteem. Gawler concludes:

That combination of hopelessness and helplessness … transfers from a state of mind to a state of body, suppressing the body’s capacity to identify potential cancer and eliminate it. So often, when people are diagnosed with cancer, the question is why me? A better question is why now?\(^{87}\)

Gawler’s assertions rely on the concept of holism, as well as on a series of persuasive metaphors. A mental state of helplessness becomes a metaphorical analogy for the body’s helplessness in the face of cancer. This appears to make sense, because of the cultural image of cancer as an evil aggressor. Gawler’s imagery of the cancer personality suggests someone who is a victim, stripped of their self-esteem and feeling powerless in the face of significant losses. This is a convincing metaphor for people’s experience in the wake of a diagnosis. In fact, Gawler takes common feelings after a diagnosis of cancer – helplessness and hopelessness – and moves them back in time to being the cause of cancer. No wonder many patients identify with Gawler’s claims. Whether or not they felt like helpless victims before cancer, being diagnosed with cancer is likely to induce some of those feelings.

There are several problems with Gawler’s language. Apart from blaming the cancer patient, his metaphors also provide a convenient distancing from cancer’s frightening ability to cross boundaries of age, race, class and gender. If cancer only comes to “Type C personalities,” the rest of us are safe. When the person is the cause of their cancer, there is no need to question “why me?” or “why her and not me?” As Sontag put it a generation earlier, cancer has become an occasion for deciphering the patient, not just the disease.\(^{88}\)

The sense of control which alternative therapies offer is extremely appealing to cancer patients, and removes the passive “sick role” they are assigned by biomedicine, as well as the alienation from one’s own body.\(^{89}\) However, the appeal of alternative therapies comes at a cost. Influential practitioners such as Louise Hay and Ian Gawler rely on patients’ unconscious recognition of metaphors for cancer to give their arguments plausibility. The person is a metaphoric God, creating their own reality; thoughts are images for cells; the secret progress of cancer is its metaphoric cause; the mind’s helplessness is analogous to the body’s helplessness to ward off cancer. Again, the power of these metaphors lies in their simplicity and
visual appeal, but their impact is most disturbing. They impart a subtle, or unsubtle, message of blame.\textsuperscript{90} By giving patients almost all the power over their cancer, they suggest that they have caused it in the first place, and are responsible for any recurrence. Added to the grief and fear involved in a cancer diagnosis is a burden of shame. Practitioners would claim that this is empowering, and any idea of guilt or blame must be left behind. Yet it is culturally and psychologically extremely difficult to do so. In fact, a recent U.S. study found nearly 40\% of women blamed themselves for their breast cancer.\textsuperscript{91} These metaphors may also give an illusory sense of power over one’s own life and death, which leaves people ill-equipped to deal with the finally uncontrollable nature of death.\textsuperscript{92}

It is impossible to experience cancer outside of cultural metaphors, as merely a disease. Both biomedicine and the holistic health movement use metaphoric thinking to describe and treat cancer. Their truth-claims seem self-evident, partly because of the power of the underpinning metaphors. However, these metaphors are as problematic as the militaristic metaphors explored in Section I. They involve distancing cancer patients from their own experience, either bodily, mentally or psychologically, and they can reinforce stigma and shame.

\textbf{III. Obscene metaphor}

So far, this paper has examined metaphors from sources which are separate from the individual’s cancer experience, whether they are media clichés about Kylie’s battle with cancer, drawings by non-patients of disintegrating cancerous bodies, pathology reports, or the teaching that “you create your own illness” by exponents such as Louise Hay or Ian Gawler. This section will consider what happens when a poet creates metaphor from within the cancer experience.

Philip Hodgins is an Australian poet whose vast poetic output was created almost entirely in the shadow of his diagnosis, treatment and eventual death from leukaemia at age 36. A poet brings an entirely different approach to imagery and the stigma of cancer, which this section will explore. Metaphor is the stuff of poetry. It provides the poet with a means of exploring cancer without direct statement, using shocking juxtapositions and powerfully suggestive comparisons. But not any metaphor will do. A poet is likely to shun clichéd metaphors, such as “cancer is war” – unless he extends them into unexplored terrain. More often, a poet with cancer is one who forges new imagery for the disease in the crucible of bodily pain.
Secondly, poets with cancer are able to speak from within the disease, with an authority born of bodily experience. In doing this they move from being abject to being a subject. The separation and horror that comes from the abject nature of cancer is undermined. The Other becomes a person speaking and writing, and in that writing the Otherness is broken down: the reader experiences something of cancer from within.

Finally, a poet with cancer is engaged in what Foucault terms “parrhēsia,” meaning truth-telling, or all-telling, of a most significant kind. By parrhēsia the poet with cancer is able to tell a story of being wounded. This becomes, for those who know they are also wounded, something that ethicist Arthur Frank describes as “an opening which heals.”

Philip Hodgins (1959-1995) grew up on a dairy farm near Shepparton in central Victoria. At the age of 24, soon after his first poems had been published in magazines such as The Bulletin, he was diagnosed with leukaemia and given three years to live. This resulted, Alex Skovron recalls, in an explosion in his creative output, one that lasted until he died, not three, but twelve years later, aged 36. In all, he published eight books in nine years: seven poetry collections and a verse novella about a failed farm, Dispossessed. The poems alternate and mingle his two chief themes: illness and rural life. Hodgins is widely recognized as one of the major Australian pastoral poets.

In contrast to ready-made metaphors for cancer, Hodgins creates a passionate variety of personal metaphors for his illness. These are drawn from his childhood and experience on the land; from upended metaphors of light; and from the nature of words themselves.

Growing up on the land, and continuing to live on it during his illness, Hodgins turns to the land and home as powerful sources of imagery. So diseased landscapes and houses become disturbing emblems of the body. This is particularly evident in “The Secret,” a grim sonnet which parallels the land with the narrator’s condition:

all the eucalyptus trees
around the never-finished house
have got a terminal disease (59).

The rhymes are bitter and the Shakespearean form is fractured into its blocks of three quatrains and a couplet, a common feature of Hodgins’ sonnets. The landscape in this poem is deeply metaphorical. Not only are the trees “terminal,” but “there’s something lacking in the soil,” so that nothing will grow. By unspoken analogy, the deficient soil becomes a
The country itself is described as "marginal." The marginal country becomes an emblem for the narrator: no-one visits him, and the third quatrain places him between the absence of his "many friends" and the platitudes of the nursing aid ("who always says I’m on the mend"). Being “marginal” is a telling metaphor for the sense, which terminal illness brings, of being out of the main picture and on the edges. The devastating truth is that both writer and land are marginalised. They are shunned because they are dying.

Nowhere is Hodgins’ sense of the diseased landscape more powerfully ominous than in his poem “A House in the Country” (286-7). The poem is a meditation on the loss of what Raymond Gaita calls “the necessarily embodied nature of our at-homeness in the world.” How can we be “at home” in the world with cancer metaphorically eating our bodies from within? How can the narrator be “at home” when the family home is eaten from within by termites? When even the children’s bedroom is not sacrosanct?

Hodgins’ imagery is never abstract – rather, he uses a narrative so precise, physical and vernacular we are forced to experience the scene in an almost filmic way:

The first stud I prodded buckled and split
and something hard to focus on, a sprinkling
of tiny cloned albino movement, split
and dispersed, and was followed by even more
when I levered the stud apart, the panic of
a light-shy mass, so translucently pale
they looked as if they weren’t fully formed. (286)

The sickening revelation of termite-riddled walls, which “spill” and “flow” with termites in the next stanza, becomes a powerful image for leukaemia – cancer which flows and spills from veins. The termites have taken over the house/body. This leads to a truly apocalyptic moment:

as the seconds dropped away as small
and uniform as termites a feeling burrowed
into me as bad as if I had cancer. (287)

The horrible irony of the simile is not lost on the reader. The termites have become a symbol not just for cancer but for fear itself, fear that burrows in and cannot be dislodged, however much it is smashed, since its “conduits”
riddle the whole foundation. The image of seconds as “small and uniform as termites” suggests that time is sickening to contemplate. After cancer, time is eating the body up. Hodgins extends the metaphor into the futility of trying to kill this invader. Neither the narrator’s violence nor poisons “vile as chemotherapy” can stop the queen, “an evil sausage producing more/and more termites that would eat our home.” In this poem, the house and land become metaphors for the body, no longer “at-home,” but rotted and invaded by a secret, tiny presence, undetectable until it is too late.

“A House in the Country” explores the revulsion and sense of decay from within – Kristeva’s abject – experienced by one with cancer. The abject is experienced through the contamination by the termites, and the sickening images of their movement: “the panic of/ a light-shy mass.” The “bloated queen” whom the poet imagines “sealed in a slightly warm/ and humid city” is a particularly nauseating embodiment of the abject. Yet because Hodgins writes from within the abject – the termites are in his home; the cancer is in his body – he forces readers to experience it from within as well. The barrier between those who are “clean” and those who are “unclean” is broken down. We identify with the poet, as we see the termites and feel his revulsion at tiny things crawling and seething. Once we have identified with those who have cancer, as metaphor enables us to do, they become no longer abject, but subjects, and people.

It is already clear how powerfully Hodgins is able to use imagery from the land in his meditation on cancer. The suggestiveness of his metaphors stands in contrast to the one-dimensional imagery discussed in Sections I and II. In turning to the land, however, Hodgins also turns to his past. What he calls “childhood’s small killings” become omens of his own death. Like the sack of drowned kittens, they float to the surface of the poems.

Despite Hodgins’ focus on the past, he rarely explores it with nostalgia, that kind of dreamy half-enjoyment of melancholy. But neither is there an acceptance of brutality, which Brendan Ryan argues is similar to the “acceptance that is evident in many of [Hodgins’] poems dealing with cancer.” There is no evidence of acceptance in either the cancer or the pastoral poems. Instead, there is killing which has a sense of foreboding. “shooting the Dogs” (86-7) is one such killing. The narrator has to shoot the farm dogs before a move to the city. The chopped ironic wording is designed to shock after the conversational tone of the opening: “got the old one as he bounded back/ and then the young one as he shot off/ for his life.” After the death, the sound of the gravel on the shovel “like something/ trying to hang on by its nails” is appalling. Death is like this, we see. It happens before we are ready for it, and all our clawing back cannot get us out of the grave. The shooting becomes a metaphor for both Hodgins’ death,
and ours.

This use of imagery is even clearer in “Catharsis” (10), where the powerlessness of the kittens in the face of a ruthless figure of death – the poet – becomes a portent of Hodgins’ death. The poem comes from his first collection, *Blood and Bone*. Hodgins had just been given three years to live, and his meditation on drowning the kittens becomes ominous in this context. The “catharsis” of the title is both a word-play and a suggestion that this one of “childhood’s small killings” has its tragic completion in his own death: “Today it floated to the surface.”

The combination of human and animal deaths is nowhere more gruesomely explored than in “Chopped Prose with Pigs” (81-4). The farmer who slips in the pig pen is reduced later to “about half the things/ he had been wearing/ plus all the bigger bones.” This poem comes as close to the abject as any of Hodgins’. Apart from the pigs devouring human bones, the narrator also butchers a pig. We see the blood pumping out the jugular “like an accident,” and when the narrator reaches in for the guts, he finds himself “disgorging handfuls of animal warmth.” It is typical of Hodgins that the title of his third collection, *Animal Warmth*, suggestive of farming nostalgia, in fact signifies a pig’s guts. Death means mess and blood. It also means devouring – as in many of the poems, one animal is eaten by the other, leaving only “the bigger bones.” The reader is invited to see in the pig pen the remnants of their body, and Hodgins’.

There are many other deaths in Hodgins’ past: the dead calf; the slaughtered sheep which his friends eat talking “of anything but death;” the bloated cow which the boys ride down the creek; the possum skeleton in the water-tank sludge; the shag drowned in the drum net; the sheep carcass, to name a few. As Hodgins puts it, “One boy will think of days like this/ more often than the rest” (67). The animal deaths on which Hodgins meditates become portents of his own death. Hodgins’ metaphors for death suggest that death is random, dispassionate, brutal and sickening. It is also punitive. Hodgins’ own death is somehow linked to his participation in killing: blood for blood.

Hodgins not only uses imagery drawn from the home, land, and animal deaths in his exploration of cancer. He also reverses the symbolic meaning of light, with frightening consequences. This unexpected reversal is present in Hodgins’ earliest poems, such as “Room 3 Ward 10 West 17/11/83” (5).

I see the light is badly bruised and in one spot

it even bleeds.

We are not used to light being described like this. Surely it brings healing and life? Yet here it has become sick flesh, able to be bruised and bleed.
The shudder this evokes is the shudder of death in life. The wounded light prefigures the poet's own body with leukaemia, ending up in Room 3 Ward 10 West.

In “Insomnia” (19), Hodgins again refuses the symbolic reassurance of morning light after a night spent in quiet fear: “from behind the slab of curtain/ an outbreak of daylight is spreading.” Light is diseased, a deadly virus. Its spread is an "outbreak" which cannot be contained, like a rampant cancer. Even the slab of curtain is a metaphoric tombstone or mortuary slab, the source and end-point of this outbreak.

Another awful inversion of light symbolism is found in one of Hodgins’ last poems, “More Light, More Light” (319). Hodgins’ ironic translation of Goethe’s dying words shows how appalling “more light” actually is. In the first stanza the sunlight is “sickly,” “with all the life taken out of it.” It filters through closed curtains. In the second stanza, the nurse opens the curtains. But “more light” brings neither cleansing nor hope. Instead, the light is frighteningly described as a “brilliant virus” taking over the room. It is disease in aggressive mode. Worse, “more light” brings only a brutal exposure of the room. Everything is laid bare, no illusions are left, and “even the places you had never thought to look” are lit up with unwelcome brilliance. Hodgins suggests that cancer and death are as ruthless as this light, leaving nowhere to hide as they expose your life for what it is now, not what “it dimly appeared to you all that time ago.”

Finally, the poet Hodgins finds in words themselves a rich source of imagery for cancer.

They say it has something
to do with words
but no-one really understands
how it works. (“The Sick Poem,” 314)

Words, like the termites in “A House in the Country,” are small and uniform. They are cell-like in their unity and mystery. No-one, not even doctors or poets, understands how words work. It is chilling that words, the poet’s own material, become a source of death. They parallel the poet’s own body, “nurturing its own determined death” (8). Yet he works with them, as he must. The poet is stuck with words, the same way that Hodgins, or any of us, is stuck with their own body. In “The Sick Poem” (314-15), the poem itself “has cancer:”

to use a metaphor
at a time like this
would be obscene.

Of course this entire poem is an extended metaphor, a comment on all Hodgins’ work with words, words which themselves are “sick” and unable to bear all he has to say. The poem is also a symbol of his body: it could not “feel any worse/ if you threw acid/ on the page.” His metaphors are obscene, because cancer is obscene. This is what gives his poetry its power. The obscenity of pigs eating human bones; of shooting dogs in the head; of disgorging handfuls of pig intestines; of virus-ridden light which exposes the self and past; of the sausage termite in the humid mound; of the bloated cow ridden by the boys – all become metaphors for the obscenity of cancer.

The final way in which a poet can challenge the stigma of cancer is by what Foucault terms “parrhêsia,” meaning truth-telling, or all-telling. This all-telling is especially clear in the case of Hodgins. He will not tell us just part of his experience, the part which casts himself or his friends in the best light. No, we get it all: his appalling fear, his friends’ platitudes, his self-pity. We also get all the truth about dying of cancer, by a poet who keeps speaking *in extremis*. The final poems cover “the last few days and nights:” the needle “goes in slowly and it hurts;” “you vomit through stages of nausea and pain./ And when there’s nothing left to vomit you vomit again;” finally “he lies as still as someone already dead./ Hi-tech machines surround him now like family” (311, 18, 16). But more than this, it is the metaphors themselves which convey the inward truth of Hodgins’ experience. He keeps making metaphors to the end. The Irish blood connection between him and the nurse (“Are your folks killing mine?”) is an allegory for his blood, which kills (310). The look which passes between nurse and dying man is “as intimate as surgery” (316). Hodgins’ metaphors provide a particular way of telling the truth. It is a truth about the meaning and experience of his cancer which cannot be articulated in any other way.

In Foucault’s analysis, *parrhêsia* comes at personal cost. For Hodgins, the personal cost of his *parrhêsia* is his identification of himself as cancer-ridden and the exposure of his human vulnerability. These are metaphoric wounds, which might cause him to be shunned by a society which does not want to see wounds, or death, or terminal illness. It is no accident that Hodgins quotes Sontag: “cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry” (38). Cancer is still scandalous. To be a cancer patient is still somewhat akin to being a leper. Yet Hodgins’ vulnerability in these poems allows others with cancer to be similarly vulnerable and to tell the truth, rather than to maintain fictional metaphors that create less scandal but more pain.
Hodgins’ metaphors are as obscene as his experience of cancer. His poems touch “a metaphoric nerve:” we feel the pain and horror with him (57). So the boundary between us and the abject collapses. We experience the abject from within, and this transforms it. A poet who speaks radically changes the silence that being a patient implies, a silence which allows others to impose stigmatising metaphors. He or she is no longer merely an embattled soldier, a mechanistic body, or a collection of unhealthy thoughts, but a person. The medical narrative and the holistic-medicine narrative begin to crumble in the face of the sheer individuality of the poetic narrative. Yet in this individuality, the individuality of others’ suffering is affirmed. As Arthur Frank puts it, “when any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story.”\(^\text{107}\) This is what Hodgins’ poetry achieves.

**Conclusion**

Metaphors matter. They provide “the only way to perceive and experience much of the world.”\(^\text{108}\) Their ability to unite the concrete and visual with the complex and abstract gives them a simplicity which is extremely powerful. Yet they also change the way we experience a disease such as cancer, with disturbing effects.

Militaristic imagery for cancer reveals the deep loathing, and the lack of understanding, of the disease in contemporary culture. Cultural metaphors also become a convenient distancing device, allowing patients to be admired for their “bravery” – a bravery which they have no choice about, and which makes it difficult to discuss the real emotions involved. Cancer is depicted as a monster which must be attacked, partly because it is synonymous with death, in a culture which fears death more than anything else. But more than this, cancer transgresses boundaries of body organs; its treatment involves the abjection of blood, vomit and shit; and it alienates self from the body. The shudder which cancer evokes is the shudder at what Kristeva terms the abject.

However, imagery used by biomedicine and exponents of holistic health is also problematic. Sontag argues that the truest way to view disease is one, like biomedicine, which is “most resistant to metaphoric thinking.”\(^\text{109}\) Yet metaphors cannot be “resisted” except by virtue of other metaphors.\(^\text{110}\) Biomedicine is no exception. The discourse is based on visual and spatial imagery. The clinical language of pathology reports, which depicts bodies as entirely separate from the people who live in them, can be
alienating for patients. Moreover, doctors share the same metaphoric understanding of cancer as the community. This is revealed by their drawings of cancer patients’ bodies as fragmented and barely human. In contrast, the holistic approach of some practitioners substitutes imagery of “wholeness” and “creation.” However, influential exponents such as Hay and Gawler rely on unconscious recognition of cultural metaphors to convince patients of their theories. A complex disease such as cancer is reduced to powerful visual images – negative thoughts paralleling cancer cells, or emotional helplessness paralleling bodily helplessness. These metaphors offer the appealing illusion of control, even over death. They also impart blame.

Although we cannot “resist” metaphoric thinking, we can still examine the impact of cancer imagery on patients’ experience. We can question the adequacy of metaphors, however strong their visual appeal. In doing this, we can undermine the shame and stigma such metaphors help to create. Finally, we can let those with cancer speak and write using their own imagery, which arises from the pain and fragility of their individual experience.

Australian poet Philip Hodgins is an example of one who creates his own metaphors for cancer, “obscene” and frightening though they are. Rather than being imposed by outsiders, Hodgins’ language comes from the intimate landscape of his own body and past. The physical immediacy of his imagery forces us to experience cancer from within. The abjection of cancer is exposed and the reader is no longer able to maintain a safe distance. Even in the final stages of death from cancer, Hodgins continues to expose his human vulnerability through metaphor. His metaphors tell the truth about his experience and its meaning, which cannot be articulated in any other form. This truth, of the poet’s own woundedness, speaks to those of us who are aware of our vulnerability. It allows us to be similarly vulnerable. Paradoxically, metaphors of woundedness are also deeply healing.

Society may not want to know about woundedness, or cancer, or mortality, but an increasing number of people are living beyond cancer treatment and being forced to confront precisely these things. Arthur Frank called ours a “remission society:” a place where many of us have had cancer and may pass as healthy citizens, but are in fact only on “visas.” We require periodic checkups and know we could be expelled at any time. In such a context, it is even more urgent that those with cancer tell their stories. A poet with cancer is in a unique position to do this. Through metaphor, they are able to give voice to the truth of their experience. They embody the disease they bear witness to. And their vulnerability speaks to those who realise they are wounded, does away with empty clichés, and reminds us of our common fragility.
NOTES


2 Contemporary poets who have written about their cancer experience include Australians Jennifer Harrison, Robyn Rowland, Doris Brett and Philip Hodgins; U.K. poet Julia Darling; U.S. poet Audre Lourde, to name only a few.


6 Stacey, Teratologies, p. 51.


9 Stacey, Teratologies, p. 74.

10 Personal conversation, Melbourne, 2005.

11 The scope of this paper is to consider metaphors used for the disease, cancer. Cancer itself has also become a metaphor for anything insidious and evil. It is particularly used of social disintegration (“the cancer of corruption is eating away at society”), as Sontag outlines in Illness as Metaphor. However, cancer would not be used as a metaphor for social evil if the disease itself did not provoke such dread.

12 Professor David Hill, Daffodil Day Arts Awards Exhibition Speech, Melbourne, 27.7.2006.

13 Sontag, Illness, p. 64.

14 Hill, Speech.

15 “Kylie’s Secret Weapon,” New Idea, (29.4.06), cover, pp. 6-7.

“Kylie’s Secret Weapon,” pp. 6-7.

Misha Schubert, “A decade on, Media-shy Janette Howard Finally Reveals the True Nature of Her Cancer Trauma,” The Age, (17.10.06), p. 3.

Sontag, Illness, pp. 64-5.

A subset of T-cells, part of the immune system. Personal conversation with oncologist, Melbourne, 2005.

Sontag, Illness, pp. 64-5.

I have heard even patients with terminal disease, and their families, comment on the fact that they are “being positive,” with the unspoken assumption that this is good and necessary, and the suggestion that it may avert death.


See “Survivor T-shirts,” date of access 2.6.08, <http://www.cafepress.com/buy/lung+cancer/survivor>

“Survivor T-shirts.”


Personal communication, Melbourne, 2005.

Personal communication, Melbourne, 2005.


Personal conversation, Melbourne, 2006.

Sontag, Illness, p. 55.


Stacey, Teratologies, p. 76.

Kristeva, Powers, p. 108.

Kristeva, Powers, p. 4. An oncologist comments that the war analogy is appealing because it blames what is “a betrayal of self” (since “our own cells have grown out of control”) on a “foreign invader,” perhaps to make it easier to deal with. Personal communication, Melbourne 2006.

Kristeva, Powers, p. 10.

Kristeva, Powers, p. 53.

I would take issue with two aspects of Kristeva’s argument about the abject. Firstly, that the function of both religion (specifically Christianity) and literature is to purify the abject; and secondly, that contemporary literature involves “a sublimation of abjection” (Powers, pp. 17, 26). Christianity does not seem to involve a purification of the abject so much as a willingness to confront it in service of others.
This is evidenced by Jesus’ physical touching of “unclean” lepers, the bleeding woman, prostitutes, foreigners, corpses and ultimately in the experience of crucifixion itself. Secondly, while some contemporary literature may involve a sublimation of abjection, what of the poet or writer with cancer? When Kristeva wonders, “who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?” the answer may well be: the poet with cancer. Kristeva, Powers, p. 209.

39 Sontag’s phrase. Stacey, Teratologies, p. 47.
40 Sontag, Illness, p. 3.
42 Stacey, Teratologies, p. 47.
43 Lakoff, Metaphors, p. 239.
49 Samson, Health Studies, pp. 22-5.
50 Stacey, Teratologies, p. 55.
51 Foucault in Stacey, Teratologies, p. 56.
52 Melbourne Pathology, “Clinical Notes: Specimen No 20067-T05” (Collingwood, 16.3.05), p. 1.
54 Samson, Health Studies, p. 186.
58 Begbie, “Patterns.”
59 G. Halvorson-Boyd and L. Hunter, Dancing in Limbo: Making Sense of Life After


62 Tighe and Butler note that “New Age is often used pejoratively, whereas holistic health has retained its positive image,” so much so that in recent works the term “holism” is used as a synonym for what was previously known as New Age. Tighe, “Holistic,” p. 431.


64 Quote from Weber, in Hanegraaff, *New Age*, p. 54.

65 Hanegraaff, *New Age*, p. 54.


74 Hay, *Heal Your Life*, p. 5.


76 Hanegraaff, *New Age*, p. 236.

77 Quoted in Hanegraaff, *New Age*, p. 244.

78 Halvorson-Boyd, *Dancing*, p. 103.


Parson quoted in Herndl, ”Critical Condition,” p. 774.

Halvorson-Boyd, *Dancing*, p. 106.

Halvorson-Boyd, *Dancing*, p. 106.


Although the word “wounded” may suggest the war metaphor, it emphasises not victory but brokenness. I am using it in the Christian sense of Henri Nouwen’s work. See Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Great Britain: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1994).


Alex Skovron, Personal conversation, Northcote, 2006.

Philip Hodgins, *Selected Poems* (Pymble, N.S.W.: Angus&Robertson, 1997). All in-text parenthetical references are to this edition.


Professor Raymond Gaita, “Hope” (Melbourne University: Student:Staff Forum Lecture, 31.8.06)


There are parallels with Louise Hay’s analogy between thoughts and cells, but Hodgins’ use of the metaphor could not be more different. Hodgins is pointedly aware of his own metaphorising, and this poem ironically refers to both medical experts and self-help gurus: “A well-paid team of experts/ is looking through it,/ a sample has been taken/ and yes, words were there;” “Perhaps you should/ love
what's wrong with it?/ Embrace the flaw…” p. 314.

105 Miller, “Truth-telling,” p. 27.
107 Frank, Wounded, p. xii.
108 Lakoff, Metaphors, p. 239.
109 Sontag, Illness, p. 3.
110 Lakoff, Metaphors, p. 239.
111 Frank, Wounded, p. 9.
112 Frank, Wounded, p. 140.
Burning Down the [Big] House: Sati in Sydney Owenson’s The Missionary

Frances Botkin

Sydney Owenson’s prodigious career reflects her preoccupation with issues of identity and performativity, topics that dominated her literary and political agendas. Best known for her 1806 novel The Wild Irish Girl, Owenson famously adopted the public persona of her eponymous heroine and performed the role of the Irish princess for literary and social circles in London and Dublin.\(^1\) Owenson learned her love of Ireland and the art of performance from her father, an Irish actor and theater manager who was committed to establishing a National Theater in Ireland.\(^2\) Owenson’s many Irish novels attest to her own commitment to Irish independence and Catholic emancipation, but she also wrote controversially about France, Greece, Italy and India. Her writings are populated with zealous protagonists – particularly women – who are profoundly devoted to the preservation of their religious or national identities. Her 1811 novel The Missionary: An Indian Tale, for example, introduces a heroine whose performance of sati disrupts colonial and missionary power. Examining the Hindu woman’s vexed status as a repository of culture, The Missionary explores the ritual space of sati as the gendered site for the articulation of cultural resistance.\(^3\)

Set primarily in seventeenth-century Kashmir and Spanish-controlled Portugese Goa, The Missionary covers a twenty year time span, concluding roughly four years after Portugal’s successful revolution against Spain.
The Portugese priest Hilarion D’Acugna, travels to India to pursue the missionary project where he contrives to convert the much-admired Luxima, Brachmachira of Kashmir. The ill-fated religious leaders fall in love, struggling with the conflict between their religious obligations and their passion. Once discovered, Luxima loses caste, and the Dominican authorities of the Inquisition indict Hilarion for heresy and for the seduction of a neophyte, sentencing him to immediate death by fire. When Luxima (who has just escaped a nunnery) jumps upon Hilarion’s funeral pyre, she incites a long-imminent Hindu uprising against colonial rule. Underscoring women’s troubling role in the transmission of Hindu culture, Luxima’s aborted ritual provokes the centuries-long debate about sati and female agency.

Nineteenth-century conversations about sati considered in part the distinction between voluntary and forced sati, an issue that Lati Mani suggests helped shape colonial discourse and policy. These same debates have re-erupted in a fairly recent spate of critical commentary, much of which responds to Gayatri Spivak’s now proverbial question, “Does the Subaltern Speak?” Indeed, many critics have found it difficult to assert the will of the sati, because her voice, if heard at all, is silenced by a painful and fiery death. Moreover, as Spivak suggests, speaking for – even in defense of – the widow introduces a whole new set of theoretical problems. Paul Courtright rightly identifies in many representations of sati “a profound and irreducible cultural ambivalence, shared by Hindus and Westerners alike, whether traditional, colonial or modern in mentality” (48). Unsurprisingly, British novels about India often reiterate this ambivalence, invoking the complexities of most analyses of the ritual.

The practice (or compulsion) of self-immolation indeed raises complicated questions about the Hindu woman’s social and cultural status. When a woman commits sati, she is believed to become a symbol of power to her family and her community, and the generative (though potentially destructive) strength of her sat (virtue) is thought to be self-emanating and forceful. Sati in fact means “good woman” or “truthful woman,” and has come to refer to the practice as well as the woman. As John Hawley and Donna Wulff explain, the decision to commit sati results from the energy or possession of her sat:

As she moves forward to the act of self-sacrifice that demonstrates outwardly what she inwardly already is – a woman of pure virtue and truth – she is believed to radiate the nurturant beliefs of motherhood upon her family, her community, and those who come to worship her. This power is felt to persist after death, as well. Hence ... she wields that powerful combination of the virginal and the motherly.
The ideal sati is—like Luxima—at once bride, widow and virgin, reenacting a timeless (though regionally varying) ritual that blesses her family and husband even after her death. Performing a ceremony that blends together the two rites of passage—wedding and funeral—the sati dresses as a bride, carefully adorning herself in jewelry and red clothing with the help of other women who sing and chant as the preparations (sringar) are made. In so doing, she prepares to be eternally united with her husband. As bride/widow, virgin/mother, woman/goddess, the sati exceeds her status as merely a devoted wife, becoming a powerful and revered embodiment of perfection.

Hindu mythology views sati as an important link between the earthly and the spiritual worlds. Often associated with the Great Goddess, the sati shores up a plurality of forms into a unitariness that both incorporates and transcends the earthly world. For others, she evokes the goddess Sati who avenged her father’s insult to her husband by sacrificing herself in a self-emanating fire. Sati is also associated with the goddesses known as satimata or “sati mothers”: real women who immolated themselves and who are venerated at various sacred spots; these women are simultaneously real women and goddesses. Finally, as Harlan explains, satis are said to transform into supernatural beings akin to goddesses who can be at once good and “powerfully destructive.” Because the sati is believed to possess the power to both bless and curse her family and community at the moment of her death, she inspires fear and respect. The sati story, Harlan writes, “resists attempts to keep goodness and real power—namely uncontrolled and unhandled power—separate.” Harlan’s study emphasizes the subjectivity of the sati in making and articulating the choice, directing the ritual, and achieving the cultural power of the practice. Moreover, the assertion of intention to become a sati is an important part of the process. In other words, as Harlan puts it, “this seemingly brief moment of female power undermines women’s subordinate role in the gender hierarchy.” With her utterance of intention, blessing or curse, the sati garners cultural and religious power.

There were of course many other (and more self-serving) justifications for sati. Supporters of the practice, for example, justified it as a means of guarding the widows’ virtue: “the ultimate chastity belt,” as Sakuntala Narasimhan puts it. In addition, widow-burning reduced what little economic control women held in Hindu society because it insured that the widow’s inheritance remained in the husband’s family rather than at her disposal. Even those who advocated the abolition of sati such as Rammohun Roy worried about the potential surplus of needy, lusty widows: “If there was no concremation, widows may go astray; if they burn, this fear is removed.”
On the other hand, Hindu scripture seems to promote ascetic widowhood rather than sati. An 1817 vyawastha (pundit report) stated that scriptural sanction was ambiguous and officials consequently negotiated the ambiguity by policing the practice, making a crucial distinction between illegal or legal sati.

Nineteenth-century Europeans predictably responded to the practice of sati with expressions of shock and horror; however the civilizing and missionary project were not on quite the same page. While the missionaries unilaterally opposed sati, the East India Company was hesitant to interfere in the practice of sati, and it relied upon the scriptural interpretations of Brahmins and pundits to support its views. Consequently, the EIC regulated the practice, forbidding methods of coercion such as drugging or binding the widow, and it was illegal for a woman under 16, pregnant, or with an infant to commit sati. Sati had to be the voluntary decision of an unhindered lucid adult in order to be legal.

European representations of the ritual reiterate the binary of forced versus voluntary sati, depicting either the violent coercion of the widow or, conversely, a beautiful young woman’s brave but submissive ascension to the pyre. As Andrea Major has suggested, shifting interpretations of the custom reflect the concerns of the metropole’s own society, recognising cultural similarities rather than differences. Westerners like Owenson received information about sati from mediated eye-witness accounts in official reports, missionary propaganda, and travelogues, all of which reflect the discursive ambivalence attending the practice. Owenson’s novel engages and challenges these representations of India generated by the metropole and its agents.

Owenson wrote *The Missionary* when the issue of EIC control and cultural intervention in India was highly contested. In 1813, the year missionary activity was legalized in India, the EIC’s monopoly of the Indian trade was abolished. Although Owenson’s text only addresses contemporary issues in India once (see below), her paratextual material creates a narrative framework that makes clear her engagement with the issue of the colonial project within Europe as well as in India. *The Missionary* includes a number of footnotes that employ a variety of scholarly sources, mostly travel accounts from the seventeenth-century. John Drew identifies Owenson’s “total immersion” in the work of Jones as well as her reliance upon Francois Bernier (the first European to visit Kashmir) for her setting, suggesting that she collected her Indian material from Charles Ormsby’s Oriental Library which “supplied her with rare books that gave the sanction of authority to her own wild and improbable visions.” That Owenson may have felt she needed “sanction” suggests that she understood that she was expressing
ideas for which she might be censured. Julia Wright observes that Owenson’s version of India is “de(angelo)centered”: of seventeen sources on Indian history and culture, eleven were originally written in languages other than English, including Bernier’s travelogues, Colebrooke’s and Jones’ translations of legal texts, and Dow’s translation of Persian history. Owenson’s patchwork of sources imbues her novel with an excess of meanings that provides the reader with an understanding of India that is as intentionally un-British as it is un-definitive. This multiplicity of interpretative and representative possibilities permits the novel to critique England’s missionary and civilizing projects while seeming to address a different time and place.

Although Owenson’s novel addresses seventeenth-century India and Portugal, a footnote about the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 alludes to contemporary British religious and civil domination of India. The reference to this incident invokes the EIC’s concern that Indians would respond with hostility to missionary activity:

An insurrection of a fatal consequence took place in Vellore so late as 1806, and a mutiny at Nundydrag and Benglore occurred about the same period: both were supposed to have originated in the religious bigotry of the natives, suddenly kindled by the supposed threatened violence of their faith from the Christian settlers. (241)

The much-debated Vellore incident occurred when Indian sepoys (soldiers in the British army) killed hundreds of British soldiers in response to regulations that required them to wear uniform headgear, shave their beards, and remove caste marks. Although initially the incident was attributed to Muslim intrigue, Bentinck’s 1806 “Report of the Commission” determined that the Sepoys revolted against the new military dress out of concern for their cultural identity and caste status: “The Sepoys appear to have felt, that the wearing of the new Tarband [sic] would make them come to be considered as Europeans, and would have removed them from society and intercourse of their own Casts.” The Vellore Mutiny signalled an important moment in the history of the British presence in India, shifting away from the policy of nonintervention and toward assimilation. The subsequent debate sparked a pamphlet war of more than twenty-five authors and later the Quarterly and the Edinburgh Review joined the conversation. Siraj Ahmed writes that this pamphlet debate was “one more example of the discursive conflict between the principles of the civilizing mission and the politics of empire.” An avid reader of and respondent to the periodicals, Owenson most certainly would have witnessed these debates.

Owenson’s footnote about the Vellore incident calls attention to the
very real threat of rebellion against cultural repression, a reality reinforced by the revolutionary energies witnessed in Europe and its colonies in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. Overtly linking British colonial rule in India to Spanish domination of Portugal and its colonies in seventeenth-century Goa, *The Missionary* identifies a similar pattern of cultural repression and insurgence. The narrator explains that Spanish control of Portugal and its colonies was declining, and "it was known by many fatal symptoms that the Indians were “ripe for insurrection”:

The arts used by the Dominicans and the Jesuits for the conversion of the followers of Brahma, the evil consequences which had arisen by the forfeiture of cast … with the coercive tyranny of the Spanish government, had excited in the breasts of the mild, patient, and long-enduring Hindus, a principle of resistance, which waited only for some strong and sudden impulse to call it into action. (241)

Frustrated with the tyranny of Spanish religious and secular oppression, then, the Hindus rebelled, provoked by the figure of Luxima on Hilarion’s pile:

A sudden impulse was given to feelings long suppressed:—the timid spirits of the Hindoos rallied to an event which touched their hearts, and roused them from their lethargy of despair;—the sufferings, the oppression they had so long endured seemed epitomized before their eyes in the person of their celebrated and distinguished Prophetess. (250)

The Hindus, like the Portuguese, suffered at the injustice of Spanish colonial rule and the iniquity of the Inquisition.

Owenson explicitly links the Vellore footnote to the brutality of the Inquisition by its proximity in theme and position to the preceding footnote. Both footnotes evoke the fear and paranoia swirling around a society that rules with religious bigotry and tyranny. The second note, from the anti-Catholic Stockdale’s *History of the Inquisition*, explains the secrecy with which the Inquisitional proceedings are conducted and the repression of those over whom it flaunts its power: “If by accident the slightest word should escape one, which concerned it ever so little, it would be necessary immediately to accuse and inform against one’s self” (241). In fact, a compatriot and Jesuit informed against Hilarion, demonstrating the divisiveness within one’s own national community and among the different orders of the Catholic Church. *The Missionary* thus censures the religious fanaticism of the Catholic Church and its behavior towards both Christians and Hindus.
Hilarion’s ordeal before the Dominican tribunal echoes Luxima’s trial before her own community elders, and both have been turned in by watchful and malevolent supporters of their respective religious elites. Two Brahmins report Luxima to the authorities, and her Grandfather performs the rites of excommunication, suggesting that even family bonds weaken under the yoke of religious persecution. The Guru reads aloud from the laws of Menu, sentencing Luxima to the life of a Chancalas (outcast and wanderer), quoting also the law that sentences to death by fire the man who seduces a guarded, eminent Priestess. Although Hilarion is mysteriously spared his gruesome death during Luxima’s ceremony, he is later served the same sentence by the Dominicans for essentially the same offense. The ceremony of Brahminical excommunication in *The Missionary* closely resembles the *auto-de-fè*; both involve solemn processions, the display of religious symbols and – importantly – fire, the purifying element. The narrator explicitly draws this parallel when describing the night of the *auto-da-fè*:

It was on such an evening as this, that the Indian Priestess witnessed the dreadful act of her excommunication; the heavens smiled then, as now; and man, the minister of error, was then, as now, cruel and unjust,—substituting malevolence for mercy, and the horrors of a fanatical superstition for the blessed peace and loving kindness of true religion” (247).

Owenson’s novel here exposes the mercilessness of patriarchal religion, enforcing rituals that compel its members to endure humiliation, exile or death. Owenson’s representation of this male ritual space, enforced by the elders of the communities, conflates Catholic and Hindu practices. As Ahmed comments, “in the shared element of fire, the irrationality of the Inquisition and Roman Catholicism blurs into the irrationality of sati and Brahminical Hinduism”. Where Hindu and Catholic “irrationality” diverge, however, is on the issue of proselytization.

Hilarion’s attempt to convert Luxima — though couched in the vocabulary of romance — reveals the gendered violence of the missionary project. When she is stripped of her caste and title, shunned by her family and excommunicated, Hilarion takes advantage of her vulnerable state and baptizes her. The ritual sacrament signals for Hilarion her rebirth as a Christian, but for Luxima it marks her entrance into her new life with her lover. When Hilarion asks her to take up the cross and follow him to Goa, she replies, “Follow thee! O Heaven! *Through life to death*” (191). Here the ritual of baptism is merged with the ritual of sati; Luxima transforms the baptismal rite into her intention of becoming a sati who follows her mate “through life
to death.” However, Luxima commits herself to Hilarion rather than to his Christian God.

Although Luxima goes through the motions of conversion, she never relinquishes her commitment to Brahma, a fact of which Hilarion is cognizant. He blames his failure, however, upon the religious “prejudices” of the Hindus rather than upon the efficacy of “the sacred truth” of his cause. He perceives Hindu “superstitions” to be:

[T]oo intimately connected with the temporal prosperity of its inhabitants, with the established opinions, with the laws, and even with the climate of the country to be universally subverted, but by a train of moral and political events, which should equally emancipate their minds from antiquated error, in which they were absorbed, and which should destroy the fundamental principles of their loose and ill-digested government. (196)

Hilarion’s attitudes towards Hinduism reflect Western claims of ascendancy over the East. Clearly, Horatio views Luxima’s religious beliefs as idolatrous and wrong (“antiquated error”) and he imposes his “truthful” religion upon her. Hilarion’s use of the term “loose” to describe the Indian government implies the natives’ sexual as well as moral slackness, invoking the representational stereotypes of India so prevalent in the time period. That he sees “a train of moral and political events” as necessary to the salvation of the Hindus suggests that he views the missionary and civilizing projects as inextricably linked. His morally superior attitude toward the Indians reflects his conceptualization of Hindus and Christians as falling into binary oppositions of East and West; immoral and moral; antiquated and modern; and male and female.

Owenson’s novel reiterates these binaries primarily in the characters of Luxima and Hilarion: “she, like the East, luxuriant and lovely; he like the West, lofty and commanding” (109). Luxima is presented as sensuous and emotional, even deranged at times, while Hilarion embodies Western (self-) control and reason. Luxima’s commitment to her “impious idolatries” makes Hilarion profoundly uncomfortable, and his initial observation of her devotion to Camdeo, the God of Mystic Love at once fascinates him and inspires him with horror and disgust: “He considered the false Prophetess the most fatal opponent to his intentions, and he looked to her conversion as the most effectual means to accomplish the success of his missions” (100). Fearing her influence as a woman and religious leader, he hopes to subdue her, to “shade the brow of the Heathen Priestess with the sacred veil of the Christian nun” (100). Hilarion, in short, wishes to veil her, belying the Western claim to liberate the oppressed women of the East. It is not surprising
that, as Sophie Gilmartin has pointed out, the ritual of placing a woman in a convent parallels the sacrifice of the Hindu widow as a kind of “European sati.” Hilarion’s desire to possess and control Luxima reveals his own anxiety of identity and the fragility of his own faith: “To listen to her was dangerous; for the eloquence of genius and feeling … gave a force to her errors and a charm to her look, which weakened even the zeal of conversion in the priest.” (126) As the Other of the East, Luxima at once threatens and tempts him.

The Dominicans – rather than Hilarion – do in fact subdue Luxima’s Otherness with the “sacred veil of a Christian nun,” and they likewise confine Hilarion to the Santa Casa to await his own sacrifice alongside two “relapsed Indians” (248). The text makes clear the “disgusting and absurd cruelty” of the forced conversion of the Hindus in two separate footnotes that explain that Indians are not punished by the Inquisition unless they have been baptized, because then they are viewed – as Luxima eventually is – as “lapsed Christians” (243 and 244). Owenson points to the potential violence of rituals that reify repressive hegemonic boundaries. Although Luxima resists conversion and escapes the nunnery with the help Hilarion’s pundit acquaintance, she now resides in a vulnerable threshold space:

Driven with shame and obloquy from the alter of Brahma, her life had become forfeit by the laws of the Inquisition as a relapsed Christian … she had forfeited cast, according to all the awful rites of Brahminical excommunication. It was therefore impossible to restore her to her own cast, and difficult to preserve her from the power of her new religion (242).

Because Luxima has broken a plethora of religious and social laws – Catholic and Hindu – she is alienated and criminalized. In her isolation, she suffers a mental derangement, “the melancholy insanity of sorrow”; in this state, she sits quite still, “sometimes murmuring a Brahmin hymn, sometimes a Christian prayer” (251). However, Owenson points out that Luxima’s confusion derives specifically from her confinement in the convent. When she first sees Hilarion on the pyre, his figure strikes her “like a light from heaven on her darkened mind … love and reason returned together; intelligence revived to influence of affection – she felt, and thought, and acted – whatever his fate, she resolved to share it” (251). Luxima’s devotion and innate strength fuel her resolve. In addition, her excess of identity, emblematized by the adornment of her caste marks and cross as she jumps on the fire, permits her to maintain her commitment to both her spiritual and her earthly loves. By performing sati, Luxima reclaims her identity as a Hindu and affirms her love for Hilarion, bridging the gap between her
religious and emotional commitments.

_The Missionary_ introduces sati as Luxima’s decision rather than as a cultural imperative imposed upon her by the elders of her community or family. In fact, several times throughout the novel she articulates her wish to die with Hilarion, and when she sees him on the pyre, she calls out to Brahma to eternally unite their spirits (251). Luxima’s chanting of the _Gayattra_ – the chant pronounced before voluntary immolation – and her invocation of Brahma conveys her intention of performing and her accord-
dance with the ritual of sati. Moreover, her prerogative of choice is estab-
lished earlier in the text when the reader learns that Luxima in fact chose _not_ to commit sati when she was married and widowed as a young girl. Her husband died while on a pilgrimage, but before their relationship was con-
summated. Unlike many Hindu women, she had options: her unique status as a widow, virgin and member of the Brahmin class afforded her the alter-
native of becoming a Brachmachira, a rare order of vestals who make pil-
grimages and prophesies, living a life of chastity and purity. Rather than
enduring the widow’s lot of shame and poverty, Luxima becomes a cele-
brated community leader who wields religious, social and economic
power. The _Missionary_ thus represents Luxima as a sort of Superwoman,
embodying all the traits (and more) thought to be ideal in the Hindu woman.
A pundit explains the elevated status of Hindu women – especially Luxima – to Hilarion:

> Pure and tender, faithful and pious, zealous alike in their fondness and their faith, they immolate themselves as martyrs to both, and expire on the pile which consumes the objects of their affection, to inherit the promise which religion holds out to their hopes; for the heaven of an Indian woman is the eternal society of whom she loved on earth. In all the religions of the East, woman has held a decided influence, either as a priestess or a victim.

The choices for Indian women – victim or priestess – denote their lamenta-
bly limited realm of power. But Luxima exceeds the traditional expectations of Hindu women in her possession of social, economic and religious power in addition to the possession of her _sat_. For her, joining Hilarion in death signals her perfect moment of “triumph and sacrifice” (249). In this way, Luxima’s determination to commit sati calls attention to the agency she can exert over herself as well as to the troubling means by which women con-
tribute to the transmission of Indian culture.

The ritual of sati parallels Hindu wedding rituals, because both are im-
portant rites of passage for the Indian woman. Sati conflates women’s symbolic death (or loss of identity) through marriage with a literal death that
is itself symbolic of marriage. The overlapping of wedding and funerary rituals in Owenson’s *The Missionary* (an issue in her *The Wild Irish Girl* as well) illuminates a model that Rush Rehm terms “marriage to death.”

Marriage and funerary rituals, Rehm explains, are similarly constitutive of family and community. A wedding ties together two families, creating a new conjugal unit, while families or communities often coalesce around the deceased in order to reaggregate. Recalling Victor Turner, Rehm writes that these rituals share a tripartite structure consisting of a separation from the old phase, transition through a liminal period, and incorporation into the new phase. The liminal period is particularly crucial, because it provides an “opportunity for disordered play that serves as the seedbeds of cultural creativity.”

Luxima’s performance of sati enacts this kind of cultural creativity by uniting the Goan Hindu population against colonial Spanish forces.

An important aspect of Rehm’s marriage to death model is the possibility for the rituals that are supposed to be constitutive of the family to fail to achieve the desired transition. He notes that in tragedy, these rituals are often shifted and confused to provide experiences of “instability, to shake the audience out of comforting notions of order and to challenge accepted social or ideational norms.”

Luxima’s sati ritual cannot achieve the desired transition, because Hilarion is not her husband, and their union is not sanctioned by her community or family. She therefore challenges social, political and cultural norms expected of her as a woman, a Hindu, and a Priestess. Furthermore, Luxima’s appearance on the pyre sets in motion a series of tragic events: when Hilarion snatches Luxima from the flames, the officers of the Inquisition accidentally stab her in the heart. She thus calls upon Brahma, inciting the Hindu audience into action:

> They believed it was their god who addressed them from her lips – they rushed forward with a hideous cry, to rescue his priestess – and to they rushed forward to avenge the long-slighted cause of their religion and their freedom;—they fell with fury on the Christians, they rushed upon the cowardly guards of the Inquisition, who let fall their arms and fled in dismay. (250)

As a repository of Hinduism, Luxima symbolizes its oppression by both imperialist and colonialist forces. Her self-immolation creates an important point of resistance that, to again quote Rehm, challenges “values and modes of behavior represented by male authority.” Undermining the power of the Inquisitional officers, challenging Spanish colonial rule, and mobilizing her compatriots out of their torpor, the novel represents Luxima’s performance of sati as a voluntary act of rebellion and devotion.

Although Hilarion does not save Luxima’s soul, he does save her from
the flames of his funeral pyre, invoking the historical debate surrounding colonialist responses to sati or, in Spivak’s words, “white men saving brown women from brown men.” The subsequent rebellion of the Hindu masses creates the diversion necessary for Hilarion and Luxima to escape. In other words, Luxima’s attempted self-immolation creates the environment that rescues her “rescuer” from his own death. Hilarion’s situation brings into relief his own position as a colonized other and emasculated victim.

While Luxima’s self-immolation is voluntary, Hilarion is forced to commit a kind of sati. Hilarion accepts his fate as irrevocable, and he approaches the altar with dignity; however, he does not choose death. Hilarion ultimately renounces his faith, his missionary project, and his Western roots. Urging Luxima to resist her approaching death, Hilarion exclaims,

Dearest and most unfortunate, our destinies are now inseparably united! … Alike condemned by our religions and our countries, there now remains nothing on earth for us but each other! Already have we met the horrors of death without its repose; and the life for which thou hast offered the precious purchase of thine own, must now belong alone to me (255)

Although Luxima might be willing to commit sati in order to be eternally united with her lover, she will not die without renewing her commitment to Brahma; in fact she had never truly converted to Christianity. As she explains to Hilarion, “It was thou I followed, and not thy doctrines; for pure and sublime as they may be, they came darkly and confusedly to my soul” (231). This passage indicates that Luxima had surrendered to Hilarion on an emotional rather than a spiritual level, and significantly, that his missionary efforts have ultimately failed. Luxima’s final words urge Hilarion to disseminate her story and preach religious tolerance. Instead, he returns to Kashmir and practices an amalgamation of Christianity and Hinduism until his own death. Hilarion’s capitulation signals the failure of the missionary and civilizing projects as well as a deficit of character, of zeal, and of faith. Conversely, Luxima’s excess, her layers of faith, love and passion, permit her to ultimately uphold her loyalty to her Hindu religion and her Catholic lover.

Owenson’s heroine’s typically demonstrate a profound commitment to their religious and national identities, performing rituals that link an oppressed past with a liberated future. In 1859 Owenson republished her novel as Luxima the Prophetess, changing the title to reflect the novel’s true protagonist. By this time, sati had been long-outlawed. After its abolition in 1829, many native Hindus feared that the practice of sati would inspire the wrath of the British police, a concern that conflicted with deeply
ingrained cultural beliefs. Consequently, in 1857, colonial India witnessed another rebellion, reminiscent of the incident at Vellore in that its source was an affront to Indian religion and culture. In retrospect, Owenson seemed in 1811 herself a prophetess, foretelling that this permutation of cultural and religious intolerance would set the vexed tone in India for a long time to come.

Owenson disseminates the story that Hilarion failed to tell, a story of patriarchal control, religious persecution and colonial oppression. However, it is significant that Luxima does not actually die on the pyre, but instead she dies being rescued from it. The novel’s conclusion thus successfully skirts the issue — the material reality of sati. Indeed, for Owenson, as for many others, the sati functions as an ahistorical symbol of the oppression of women and of the subaltern, and she perhaps unwittingly represents and reproduces the double colonization of her heroine. In *The Missionary* the subaltern does in fact speak, but Owenson’s novel — replete with essentialist stereotypes — exposes the problems inherent in giving her voice.

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**NOTES**


2 Owenson in fact staged a comic opera for her father entitled *The First Attempt, or the Whim of a Moment* (1807) in order to bring the retired actor back on stage. Claire Connolly views this production as designed to “extract maximum gain from the popular interest in both her writing and her reputation” Connolly, Claire. “I Ac-
Sati can refer to the practice of self-immolation as well as to the woman who performs the act. While in English “sati” refers primarily to the act, Hindi employs the latter usage.

The D’Acugna family were historically associated with Portuguese revolution and reformation.


Many of these accounts responded to the 1987 immolation of the young widow Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan, which incited a public controversy. In the case of Kanwar, the war waged between those modernists (especially feminists) who view sati as murder and pro-sati traditionalists (mostly men).

Lati Mani, for example, argues in *Contentious Traditions* that these widows were not the subjects but “rather, the ground for a complex and competing set of struggles over Indian society and definitions of Hindu tradition” (2). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, too, considers this problem, suggesting that we investigate “both the subjective pain and the objective spectacle that this shift reveals.” “The Subject of Sati: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Sati”, *The Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 3.2 (Spring 1990), 1-27, p. 2. Oldenburg offers a thorough analysis of feminist responses to Kanwar’s death, including demonstrations and detailed reports, in John Hawley, ed., *The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (New York: Oxford, 1994), pp. 101-127. See also in the same volume Ashis Nandy’s “Sati as Profit Versus Sati as Spectacle” (131-148) and “Widows as Cultural Symbols” by Ainslie T. Embree (149-158).

Pompa Banerjee’s insightful reply to Spivak identifies the paradox central to the issue: “It appears then that the sati did speak….She spoke willfully only at the instant of the extinction of her own will”. Pompa Banerjee, *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 191.


Luxima had been previously married when she was very young, but her husband died before they consummated the relationship. Because she was a widow and a virgin, as well as part of the Brahmin class, she was able to become a Brachmachira. See below, page 43.

Lindsey Harlan explains that the future of the sati varies in different accounts. Either she and her husband live eternally in heaven, or they are reincarnated to-

13 Hawley and Wulff, Devi, p. 6. For a discussion of goddess and goddess worship see Hawley and Wulff’s Prologue.


15 Hawley, Sati, p. 15.


19 Many accounts of the practice explain that the widow was often thought to blame for her husband’s death because she failed at her task of protection. Practically, of course, the men often died first because older men usually married younger women.


21 Quoted in Narasimhan, p. 33. Ainslie Embree argues that Roy’s concern was primarily for women who did not burn; he was preoccupied with the condition of women, especially widows, in Hindu society (156).

22 By the middle of the eighteenth-century, Britain’s East India Company had begun to function as a state, and Warren Hastings instituted a series of reforms that hinged upon a policy of nonintervention. The Orientalist Sir William Jones (the founder of the Asiatick society of Bengal) and Edmund Burke, among others, agreed with Hastings that imposing a foreign legal system on indigenous people would potentially incite rebellion. The EIC’s agenda was clearly dominated by the drive for commercial or imperial success, but regardless of their motives, the late eighteenth-century witnessed a wide range of orientalist scholarship. Unfortunately, the Hastings impeachment trials caused British attitudes toward India to devolve into contempt and suspicion. As Parliament tightened its control over the EIC, Victorian administrators attempted to assimilate the Indian people by anglicizing them. Julia Wright, Introduction to The Missionary (Broadview, 2003), p. 26.

23 British texts on the subject avoided mentioning the significant prohibition of the ritual by women who were menstruating, though the Hindu treatises and commentaries mentioned it specifically. Hawley, Sati, p. 182.

24 See Andrea Major’s Pious Flames (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for a discussion of nineteenth-century British preoccupation with gender, suicide and religion. She suggests that colonial knowledge has more to do with cultural similarities that the binary opposition of East and West.

25 See Lati Mani’s Contentious Traditions for an excellent discussion of these accounts.


28 Dorothy Figueira writes that Continental (as opposed to English) representations of sati often vilified Brahmin priests as a means for rationalist enlightenment thinkers, especially in France, to criticize the failings of Christian clerics without naming them explicitly. Dorothy Figuiera, “Sati in European Culture” in Hawley, *Sati*, p. 62.

29 See Julia Wright for a discussion of the Muslim conspiracy in her Introduction to *The Missionary* pp. 27-29. Quote from p. 28.


31 Julia Wright suggests that Owenson may have added the footnotes that cite Stockdale, who published her novel, when she switched from her previous publisher to him. Stockdale definitely published the *History of the Inquisition*, and it is likely that he authored it as well. Wright, p. 44.

32 Ahmed, “‘An Unlimited Intercourse”’, p. 25.


34 The pundit explains that Luxima has inherited the family wealth, according to the Laws of Menu, but Wright points out that Owenson misquotes the laws of Menu and that Luxima would not have been the legal heir. Wright, p. 272.


36 Rehm, *A Marriage to Death*, pp. 4-10.

37 Rehm, *A Marriage to Death*, p. 5.


41 Harlan defines a martyr as one who defends a notion of truth unto death, but does not choose death. In Hawley and Wulff, *Devi*, p. 121.
Wounded Space: Law, Justice and Violence to the Land

Jennifer Coralie

One of the most complex and pressing issues confronting Australian society today is the degradation and destruction of the environment. The fact that our soils, forests, wildlife and water have deteriorated so rapidly over the last two hundred years forces us to consider how our culture has impacted on this continent. Historically, our ethnocentric contempt for an “inferior” race, which often led to violence against indigenous people and the land, meant that our ignorance of indigenous knowledge systems denied us a shared space in which to discuss solutions. We have only gradually begun to realize that our understanding and management of the Australian environment can be enriched by recognising the knowledge that Aboriginal people have about “country” and living sustainably on this ancient and fragile continent. This paper analyses the role the law has played in shaping our nation and suggests that the law may be in fact implicated in the practice of injustice. It is imperative that we address the legacy of violence perpetrated against indigenous people and the land, and that questions of justice and not only the law are raised at the same time.

In this paper I will follow several strands of thought emerging from my reading of three major texts on the subject of violence and the law: Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”, Jacques Derrida’s “Force of Law: The
Mystical Foundation of Authority”, and Hannah Arendt’s On Violence. The first strand is Benjamin’s insight that generalization contradicts the nature of justice.¹ This opens up the possibility that law could be viewed as a series of negotiations within the context of a possible justice, and, in the context of my subject, that legal pluralism in Australia following the recognition of Aboriginal customary law may offer us a shared space in which to discuss difference. Another is Derrida’s statement that

the excess of justice over law and calculation … cannot and should not serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles. … Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving (donatrice) idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation. It is always possible … [but] an absolute assurance against this risk can only saturate or suture the opening of a call to justice, a call that is always wounded. But incalculable justice commands calculation.²

The call to justice exceeds both law and justice, but one must always say “perhaps.”

Deborah Bird Rose speaks of wounding in relation to land, which is where the title of this paper originated; why “wounded space” and what does it have to do with the law and justice? By wounded space, and here I quote Rose, “I mean geographical space that has been torn and fractured by violence and exile, and that is pitted with sites where life has been killed.”³ Rose focuses on geography as a cultural system, specifically as European geography “transported” to Australia. I would suggest that geographical space, not just the polis, must be included as part of the public realm and that the destruction of any part of the public realm is violence. Hannah Arendt’s relational ontology “the always already present” includes the individual within a network of concerns that includes the earth which supports human life. Violence to the land does not appear as violence to white Europeans: it is invisible to us. There is however an inseparable dimension between violence to indigenous people and violence to the land. To say that something is wounded is to imply at the same time that there once was wholeness and also that there exists a possibility in which healing can occur. The longing for undamaged space can also mean that, in the Australian context, the Other, whether it is unspoiled wilderness or a harmony and spirituality residing in Aboriginal people in general, becomes even more distant from us and separate from everyday reality. “A ‘redemptive function’ is thus ascribed to Aboriginal people, constructing ‘the Other’ as full of significance which we lack.”⁴ The obverse of this of course is a denial or “radical exclusion” that denies full intentionality and subject status
to Aboriginal people and to nature. Indigenous geography was ruptured or wounded by colonization, that is, a coherent system of spatial organization and communication that formed a “chain of connection” across the continent was interrupted through loss of life, of land, of language and culture. Rose argues that Australian settlers have inherited wounded space because of the violence that was used against both the indigenous inhabitants and the land itself: in other words, our actions have come back to bite us.

In the framework of colonization in Australia, an analysis of the role law has played can help us to understand why our relationships with indigenous Australians and with nature are failing, and why a recognition of the damage already done must take place in the concrete here-and-now, through dialogue and negotiation and the practice of justice rather than through the framing of new laws or empty rhetoric.

Discourse in the public realm has shifted to ideas about “practical reconciliation,” individual land use agreements and other negotiated agreements, an emphasis on the benefits of privatization, the encouragement of individual home ownership, the “failure” of Aboriginal homelands, and increasing violence in those homelands. By paying attention to the language of this discourse, which urges fairness, equal opportunity and an end to separate treatment (which is presented as a kind of favouritism on the one hand, and exceptional circumstance in the form of radical state intervention into the lives of indigenous Australians on the other), we can see that what in fact is taking place is a radical but hardly new attempt to impose one social and intellectual tradition on another tradition. The “failure” of traditional indigenous societies being supposedly self-evident, it follows that the “success” of our society, as the only alternative, is also self-evident. Inherent in this viewpoint is the belief that uniformity creates equality and that there is a cultural norm against which people can be measured. What is left out of this worldview is the inequality in power relations between settler/conquering societies and indigenous societies who co-exist as “conquered and encapsulated peoples.”

One meaning of gewalt as used by Walter Benjamin is force, or having dominion over, and one way of having dominion over another culture or species is through the giving of names: calling this continent “Terra nullius” was in a sense the giving of a non-name, or the taking away of a (unknown) name. The doctrine of terra nullius also had more serious conse-
quences: along with social cohesion, Aboriginal traditional resource rights were wiped away by Crown sovereignty and possession for 200 years. As Marcia Langton explains: “Traditional resource rights have been procured in two ways: by statutory recognition of rights under the ‘grace and favour of the Crown’ or by case law.” And further: “Australia is unique among the former British colonies in that no recognized treaty was ever concluded with any indigenous group.” There are instances of official or legally binding documents that acknowledge the prior occupation of this continent by its indigenous inhabitants: such naming by the state forces us to concede that people did indeed live here and that violence was done to them in the name of another, such as the British crown.

Rather than going through Benjamin’s critique of violence (specifically legal violence) point by point I think it is useful to take a look at the actual legal manoeuvres that took place over time in this country. Judith Wright, in her book *The Cry for the Dead*, outlines the inability of British law to provide any kind of legal framework that could deal with the reality of conflict between the indigenous people and the settlers. The question of law was first raised in relation to punishment: in 1805 five whites were arraigned for the murder of two pardoned Aborigines. Governor King had to decide if whites should be hanged for killing Aborigines and if so, on what legal grounds? Aborigines had no legal status, but even though they were “within the Pale of His Majesty’s protection,” since “they could not plead to charges they were ignorant of, the only method of dealing with them was by pursuit and punishment.” The British government sent a dispatch from His Majesty in the same year which said in effect that “any instance of Injustice or wanton Cruelty towards the Natives will be punished by the utmost severity of the Law,” and that any such actions would result in the perpetrator “being dealt with in the same manner as if such act of Injustice or wanton Cruelty should be committed against the Persons and Estates of any of His Majesty’s Subjects.” This did nothing however to resolve the issue of the legal status of the Aborigines. When Cook claimed the eastern coast of the continent for the King, such action was legally justifiable only on the principle that the land was *terra nullius*, or unoccupied. *Terra nullius* was a doctrine of international law, applied here through domestic interpretation: it was relevant in terms of acquisition of sovereignty but not relevant in other areas. Once the British Crown had given directions that indigenous people were to be treated as subjects by coming under the protection of British law, they should therefore have been treated as equal subjects. It is a myth that the 1967 Referendum put an end to the non-subject-hood of Aboriginal people when two references to discrimination – that special laws were necessary for Aboriginal people, and that Aboriginal people should
not be counted in the census – were removed from the constitution, and Aboriginal people supposedly became full citizens. Indigenous people had been counted in census counts as early as the late 1800s. However, it is true that the law has been used as a strategy of exclusion (if not as a blunt instrument), and that this is not a thing of the past: it is useful to remember that the law has always been implicated in the history of imperial dominion. Val Plumwood calls this exclusion or hyper-separation “an emphatic form of separation that involves much more that just recognizing difference … The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment.”¹² Law is used to legitimize the actions of the state even when those actions are clearly unjust. As Benjamin says:

For the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power.¹³

The inability of some local authorities to recognize the Aborigines as true subjects or indeed as human beings meant that violence against them could proceed both inside and outside of the law: the perceived absence of any law of protection was equal in effect to the establishment of an unjust law. In fact, justice was left to individuals; throughout our early colonial history the only nonviolent resolution of conflict took place when private citizens as well as the odd intelligent official acted with sympathy and trust, two of the “subjective preconditions”¹⁴ that Benjamin believed necessary for any nonviolent resolution of conflict.

The failure to fully recognize Aborigines as the prior inhabitants and rightful owners of the land also rendered their connections to the land invisible and made it possible to claim that they lived like ‘wild beasts’¹⁵ on the land, without tools, agriculture, buildings or cultural artifacts worth mentioning. Under British law and custom, the cultivation of the land and the possession of fixed dwellings or settlements – in other words evidence of labour, that “basic principle laid down for Adam by divine authority that in the sweat of his brow he should eat bread”¹⁶ – was presumption of right of occupation, and the newcomers simply failed to see or interpret what was actually there.

The capacity to wage successful war could also give title to land: in Australia British soldiers were involved in frontier violence on many occasions, but the word “war” was never used to describe these engagements. This would have meant admitting a state of war which would in turn have
produced a peace treaty with all its implications. Benjamin states that “even in cases where the victor has established himself in invulnerable possession, a peace ceremony is entirely necessary.” The word “peace” being correlative to the word “war,” makes this peace ceremony “a priori, necessary sanctioning regardless of all other legal conditions, of every victory.” Further,

law nevertheless appears ... in so ambiguous a moral right that the question poses itself whether there are no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests. We are above all obligated to note that a totally nonviolent resolution of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract.¹⁷

In Australia war was never declared nor was there a nonviolent resolution of conflict: how then did the law affirm itself and by what authority did it operate? In a society built on crime and punishment, convicts were controlled by a system of harsh punishment meted out by soldiers; the settlers and squatters were granted land and made contact with indigenous people before any policy or agreement with the tribes was reached. Those who found the Aboriginal presence on their land-grants “troublesome” felt free to deal with the problem in any way they saw fit. The settlers themselves and the police were the only instruments for dealing with frontier clashes. The “law” of the police was the only law most indigenous people knew: the police aided in the dispossession of land, the dispersal of tribes and the destruction of whole communities. The “law” was further corrupted when indigenous people were persuaded to don uniforms and a Native Police force was formed. From this can be seen the truth of Benjamin’s statement that “the “law” of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain.”¹⁸ In Australia, the police operated in the legal vacuum created by the abrogation of direct responsibility for governing the colony by the British. In the early twentieth century Aboriginal people were placed under the protection of the state: such protection was governed by a whole raft of laws that did not apply to citizens, and enabled and enforced by the police under the direction of the Protector. Indigenous people could be excused from believing that from the early nineteenth century to the present day they have been living in a police state.

Through this denial of subject-hood and agency to Aboriginal people it was possible to ignore the reality of Aboriginal social organization and the rules and behavioral codes that governed relationships between people and between people and the land. Judith Wright’s book charts the destruct-
tion of the land along with its original inhabitants. Biblical authority as well as English custom justified the clearing of “wilderness” since cultivation was the highest use to which land could be put even though most Australian land was actually unsuitable for such use. By the early twentieth century Darwinian theories of evolution rather than Divine decree pronounced the Aboriginal people destined for extinction. By the 1920s most of the surviving members of tribes were removed from their traditional lands and taken to reserves where they would be “protected” until they died out. Far from being impartial, the law has always operated as an instrument of exclusion. All attempts to practice justice other than on an individual level were doomed to failure.

In order to speak of violence to the land and how it relates to the law, it is necessary to discuss how a colonizing consciousness aims to erase difference through denying any overlap between nature and culture in its dealings with the colonized other. Rather than emphasizing how culture might in fact be embedded in nature, it stresses instead the differences between human and non-human. In Australia, a system of British/Roman law codifies relations to land in terms of ownership, property, and the rights of individuals to treat land as a commodity. Marx regarded the land as the main means of production; in Capital he wrote that the “soil (and this economically speaking, includes water) in the virgin state in which it supplies man with necessaries or the means of subsistence ready to hand, exists independently of him and is the universal subject of human labour.” The land is not only the subject of labour but is also an “instrument of labour.” Nature is denied agency in the dominant narrative: it has no inherent value apart from its usefulness to humans.

Our national identity was founded on the conquering of “wilderness” and is still informed by notions of nature as enemy, as other; even as the emphasis changes to an attitude of care through practices of preservation and conservation, nature is still separate. Deborah Bird Rose calls this assumption that humanity is fundamentally separate from, and can control, Nature, an epistemological error. T. Ingold in Perception of the Environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill, explains this separateness by suggesting that humanity has placed itself “on the outside, surrounding the global environment” and that the environment, “now surrounded rather than surrounding – no longer holds any place for human beings.” This “displacement” has its roots in the emergence of agricultural civilizations in different parts of the globe. Previously, in animistic cultures there was an interaction and inter-relationality with the world; the non-human world was filled with articulate subjects able to communicate with humans. Even in the medieval world, organic conceptions of nature in which human beings
saw themselves as a part of a living "Mother Earth" meant that exploitation of the earth's resources was restrained. Literacy and the spread of Christianity meant that the articulate subjectivity that was experienced in nature ceased as oral culture was replaced with the written word. Until the end of the eighteenth century, "man" was formed in the image of God and his finitude was merely a limitation of infinity. "Humanity" had no way of conceptualizing "its" separateness. The discourses of natural history, the analysis of wealth, and general grammar, classified the world in imitation of the divine order of things. By the early nineteenth century these three discourses had become the separate sciences of biology, economics and linguistics. "Man" became the one who was able to "know," and it became possible to say that Man lives, Man labours, and Man speaks. Language itself is located outside of "Nature": rather than being one articulate subject amongst many, including (non-intentional) animals and even objects (insentient things), "Man" has become a unique subject and speaker. Human language has become "the point of intersection between the human subject" and what is known about the rest of the world.

In Judeo/Christian theology the creation of all things is related to naming: God said "Let there be" and then "He named." Benjamin says in On Language as Such: "Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation; it is word and name ... Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator." But the world is not part of this conversation; it remains silent and only speaks through man. Furthermore, Benjamin speaks of the "mute magic of nature," of "mute creation," of the "imperfect language" of nature: "the languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb ... They can communicate to one another only through the more or less material community." However in the creation stories of other cultures, God is not the originator: Aboriginal people (and I am generalizing here: there are of course many different tribal or language groups) have no myth of alienation from nature equivalent to the Fall in Benjamin's account of Genesis. Aboriginal Spirit Ancestors in animal, human or some other shape moved across the land performing various tasks, creating, naming, leaving indications of their presence in different physical forms at particular places. Sometimes they "made themselves" or "turned themselves into," as distinct from created, aspects of the physical environment which then remained enlivened or filled with spiritual presence and social meaning. In this sense, the land itself is semiotic, and can be read like a text by people who were and still are able to understand its language. Further, there is no distinction between external object (the physical world and everything in it) and inner meaning, or between signifier and referent. In the words of Bill Neidje in Story About Feeling: "That tree same thing/ Your body, my
“The Ngarinyin people of the Kimberley region,” and here I quote David Mowaljarli and Jutta Malnic,

say that the whole of Australia is a distinct human body lying on its back, belly up, in the ocean. Inside this body, which they call Bandaiyan, is Wunggud, the Snake, who grows all of Nature on her skin. Bandaiyan is mapped, or imprinted, by what the Ngarinyin call the wunnun system (the sharing and exchange system and Law) which connects all Aboriginal people and which cannot be destroyed other than by Australia being blown to pieces.  

The Law cannot be destroyed, but with white invasion the connection of people with a speaking land was disrupted: if there was a Fall, it happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Paul Carter, in *The Lie of the Land,* explains the connection between the land and the body through natality: “Instead of regarding birth as the first displacement, the first expulsion and ruin, it (was) the primary emplacement, ... the first choreography of the ground.” This *methektic* identification he links to the non-representative principle behind Celtic and Aranda art, “whose spirals and mazes reproduced by an act of concurrent actual production a pattern danced on the ground.” There is a dialectic between group and place, or nature, which takes place in time and for all time. In Arendt’s discussion of natality and the human capacity to embark on something new, she says that to “act and to begin are not the same, but they are closely interconnected.” There is a living interaction between human and non-human worlds in the form of the dance and in painting which is constantly renewing itself, and which has entered the world of western culture in new forms that refer to the past but are enriched by encounters with the modern world.

Anglo-Australian law has no capacity to understand or deal with the fact that in indigenous society, “the person is not conterminous with the body.” The boundaries of the person are not the same as the boundaries of the body: people who have the same “skin,” or social category, share relations and interests, or “sameness”, with each other and with the animal or plant they are linked to. These relationships – with people, animals and country – are “embedded in shared bodily substance” in a way that challenges western notions of sharing or being close to others whether human or non-human. Val Plumwood contrasts this embeddedness, which extends to spirits and bodies being “united in death with the earth from which we came, which grew us and nurtured us, in the same way as those of animals and trees,” with the traditional Christian-rationalist system in which the dead are separated off from both the land and from all non-human life. In death as in life we are “solipsistic hyperbolized” individu-
Many writers, including Deborah Bird Rose whose work I have quoted extensively, give examples of indigenous people whose connection with country (a more specific term than “nature,” implying ownership) has been broken in some way that leads to actual physical suffering or even death. Whether this is understood by white Australians or not, enough evidence has been presented to cause us to ask: what exactly do human rights mean when suffering inflicted on the body of the world is felt in the body of a person? How can justice be “performed,” or, where is justice enacted? Where is the ground to justify law’s legitimacy? If the ground is not human rights, then it must be in the already existent relations, the always-already that Arendt writes of, the social coherence of a people. One way in which to understand “wounded space” is to try to grasp the idea of country, precisely mapped, owned, and traversed by “dreaming tracks” which were used by people for thousands of years: these tracks usually followed water sources and areas where food was plentiful. The tracks were maintained and cared for by people. Irremediable damage was caused to the land itself when indigenous people were physically prevented from this active work of maintenance, when the dances and songs and stories were made separate, torn from, place; when people no longer had legitimate contact, literally through the soles of their feet, with their birth places. The physical degradation of land that followed has been well documented by Judith Wright, Rose, and Marcia Langton amongst others. Rose speaks of events which cannot be assimilated and of ruptured space which can never be mended.

Rose explains that because the boundaries of the person do not end with the boundaries of the body, it “would be a mistake to believe that if other people hold rights in a person’s body, that person is thereby violated.” This statement would be impossible to understand out of context; for example, any discussion of indigenous customary law must come up against the reality of physical violence. In traditional aboriginal society (and it must be remembered that what we see today is sometimes, but not always, a fractured society held together by the remnants of mythic law, in Benjaminian terms) actions which mark the body in some way are not inherently lawless. (Nor are they in Anglo-Australian law.) The body is a site inscribed with the history of the “spirit that became the person” as well as the history of growth, ritual and relationship: the body is marked perhaps with birthmarks, initiation marks and the signs of punishment for wrongdoing. A person’s history is thus visible to all in the group, and sometimes kinship links are reinforced by shared markings. Violence then, in this sense, is not always lawless nor is it irrational.

Violence to country must be understood as a violation of the principle
that a country and its people take care of their own. The lives of people (countrymen) and the life of their country cannot be viewed separately: moral behaviour means that this principle is always observed. It was essential to maintain balance in traditional societies: this is one way of understanding the sense of being within the Law. (In the interests of clarity, the term “Law” for indigenous people refers to mythically and ritually sanctioned standards and practices, and the term “law” refers not to a legal code but to dynamic social process.\textsuperscript{39} See endnotes for further clarification.) Aboriginal society was organized through networks of relationships which actively resist hierarchy: there were no jails, no higher courts, no government. Wrongdoers had to be managed within society in order to maintain social cohesion, and mediated outcomes were sought through negotiation with violence as the last resort. Being within the Law meant being well or fully alive (\textit{punyu} in the Ngarinman language of the Victoria River), and \textit{punyu} could refer to physical, mental, spiritual or social being: the term does not distinguish between country and people. A person who is not within the Law is not healthy and can upset the balance in all domains of life, even to the extent of disturbing the country itself. Hence the necessity to “end trouble”: the trouble-maker is required to be responsible for any harm caused and to face those he or she has harmed. The term “payback” refers to the socially legitimate inflicting of violence on the body of the offender by the person harmed. Rose makes the point that “equivalence between the offence and the return is a matter or rights, and is not necessarily accomplished in physical fact.”\textsuperscript{40}

The body then is the legitimate site of justice; justice is enacted on the body because in Aboriginal thinking the body, the Law and the land are the same thing. Justice is not deferred because it is essential for the balance of the whole society that wrongdoers are dealt with swiftly. However there is a space where justice can be negotiated in order that the good living of life can proceed, and this space is where mediation, confrontation, criticism and resolution all occur. When social cohesion breaks down as it did following white settlement, disorder follows.

Aboriginal customary law was recognized by the Australian Law Reform Commission for the first time in 1986, which does not simply mean that there are two separate laws for two groups of people, rather that there are multiple and contradictory demands that people in each system place upon the other. There are areas of disjunction, the primary one lying “between the Anglo-Australian legal system’s proposition that uniformity and consistency create the principle of equality before the law, and the pluralist vision of mutual recognition between different systems of law.”\textsuperscript{41} This field of difference opens up a space of possibility in which it can be admitted that
one law, “our” law, is necessarily incomplete and can only exist in relation to the other: justice does not reside in either of the two laws, but in the spaces between. Mutual respect is the essential condition for dialogue, in which both parties can not only speak together but listen to each other. Hannah Arendt describes this interactive approach:

The power of judgement rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily … in communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. And this enlarged way of thinking … needs the presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.  

All laws ultimately direct human relations, and all language, while it may be usefully deconstructed to reveal its ideological nature, exists ultimately in some kind of relationship to facts in a material and actual real world: while it is necessary to understand that there is no such thing as absolute justice and that justice is linked to the incalculable, nations as well as individuals must nevertheless have recourse to something called justice (represented by organized bodies) if we are to accept that all actions in the real world have consequences. If there is no agreement about what justice is, several examples will illustrate what justice most definitely is not, and also demonstrates the connection between justice and the land.

One of the world’s largest zinc mines, the McArthur River Mine in the Northern Territory near the Gulf of Carpentaria, was opened in 1993 on traditional Aboriginal land and was until 2006 an underground operation. Last October the Northern Territory government authorized its expansion to open cut, which requires a diversion of five and a half kilometers of the McArthur River. Aboriginal traditional owners challenged this approval on environmental grounds: one of the owners, Mr. Timothy, an elder and a leader in the fight against the expansion of the mine, spoke on television on the day their case opened in March 2007. He said: “We want them to look through our eyes, not through their dollar signs, you know.” Mr. Timothy’s sudden death came two weeks before a Supreme Court judge declared illegal the government’s approval of the mine’s expansion. The government wrote off the judgement as a “narrow technicality” and rushed through legislation which retrospectively validated the expansion. The law was changed only two days before Mr. Timothy’s funeral: this was the greatest insult and the greatest disgrace to Aboriginal people. Barbara McCarthy,
Labor MLA, Arnhem, described it as an act of the “lowest form of disrespect against Indigenous people in this country when a great win had occurred for a senior traditional elder who had just passed away and had not even been buried.” A system of plurality in the law requires that both parties are equal within recognized “difference;” this must include respect for custom, which in any civilized society recognizes formal mourning and expression of grief.

In this case the power of the State to create laws overrides justice, which operates within the law, but because justice itself does not exist except through the actions of judges, justice is in “itself” powerless. A further example of the law overriding justice is evident when one considers that Aboriginal people’s rights under the common law that every other Australian enjoys over their land are significantly impaired under the amendments to Native Title made by the Howard Government: once Aboriginal people have left their traditional lands, forcibly or otherwise, they must prove native title as construed by the High Court, which in practice means that they may in some cases lose their rights to that land.

Another example of this failure of law to “capture” justice is what Marcia Langton calls “environmental racism,” which occurs when conservation organizations threaten what she calls ancient economic systems by demanding the suppression of traditional forms of small-scale hunting and gathering. Governments respond by creating new laws which further restrict the ability of indigenous groups to retain control over their own management of resources: most governments in Australia have effectively banned traditional hunting and gathering, largely because of public opinion about the use of vehicles or guns and other modern technologies, described by Langton as a clash with the ideal of the primitive and pure Aboriginal culture. (However, where native title rights in relation to hunting and gathering have been established, any extinguishment of them requires compensation: native title can also be used as a defence to contravening legislation regulating hunting.) Further, in cases where indigenous people have established wildlife harvesting enterprises or entered into agreement with bioprospecting companies, they receive no benefit from the companies. Langton says: “Such appropriation of natural resources from the indigenous domain is a new form of dispossession.” Fred Chaney has just retired from his position as deputy chairman of the Native Title Tribunal, the body set up to oversee land use agreements reached after the Mabo and Wick High Court rulings. He gave a speech titled “Policy Incoherence in Aboriginal Affairs” in 2006 in which he pointed out that governments “deprecate the lack of economic development on Aboriginal land, yet firmly restrict Native Title outcomes to a bundle of non-economic usable rights.”
The law continually erases and rewrites itself: thus the Law which is a mythic and founding Law contains within it the ghost of justice. It contains the possibility of justice, and also injustice, within itself; it allows for change, for doubling back and beginning again. It is not a relentless straight line or an enclosed circle; rather, it is a spiral or a line that is sometimes broken, sometimes double or curved. It can always amend itself, whether this is for “good” or ill. Perhaps the very ambiguity of the law allows it to be used differently: it can cut, as it were, both ways. Gaps are opened up in the law through interpretation and through the system of appeals to higher courts. Judges have some latitude in their application of the law, which works at its best when Indigenous customary law is considered alongside European law in certain circumstances. Justice may reside in the spaces created in the complexities of negotiation, and in the impossibility of reaching a simple decision, in the need to stay the “hand” of the law in some instances. The deferral of decision, as against the urgent need to decide, may occasionally mean that, in Derrida’s words, “the undecidable remains caught, lodged, as a ghost at least, but an essential ghost, in every decision, in every event of decision.”²⁴ However, the latest Federal intervention, which was announced and then pronounced law with unseemly haste, meant that there was no time for consultation or dialogue with indigenous people: the undecidable, which is justice, needs a gap, a pause, an interruption rather than an intervention.

If justice is incalculable and transcendent, then how is decision to be made? Governments can claim legal exemption from international laws and in fact question the very validity of such laws; they can ratify but not implement an international document; they also thumb their noses at bodies such as the United Nations claiming that these bodies are imperfect – which of course they are – or corrupt, and hence deserve no respect or compliance. Australia has curtailed any involvement in United Nations human rights processes: it has reversed its support for self-determination in The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and lobbied other countries, for example Canada, to take a similar stand. The moral ambiguities in our own law stem from the colony’s flouting of British law and the refusal of the British to enforce their own law, a contradiction that persists in relation to international law, which is often unenforceable. How can a State which was itself founded in violence make a just settlement with a people who were never a State and with whom a treaty was never signed? Ethics, human rights, and international law all contain within them a viewpoint, a structure, an order which imposes itself upon any society based on different principles, but the members of this society desire the same thing as all human beings: the ability to live a life which is good. Derrida says that the
condition of ethics, which is beyond the state, had to produce itself in the state.

The “relation with the other – that is to say, justice” in Emmanuel Levinas’s words, goes beyond notions of equality before the law. In this time (a time which is not unique) of relentless assault by an ideology that has instrumentality at its core, the only ethical stance to take whether it is on questions of environmental degradation or racism, would be one founded upon the possibility of relationship. But ethics imply justice and responsibility, and responsibility, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, is a term “which the language of ordinary morality uses in the most facile way possible by putting it into the service of order.” responsibility in this sense is a calculation. Responsibility when it is not a duty withdraws me “from all orders and from order itself,” it “separates me from myself (from the “me” that is mastery and power, from the free, speaking subject) and reveals the other in place of me, requires that I answer for absence, for passivity. It requires, that is to say, that I answer for the impossibility of being responsible – to which it has already consigned me by holding me accountable and also discounting me altogether.” This is the call to justice, and the call from justice. “I can no longer appeal to any ethics, any experience, any practice whatever – save that of some counter-living, which is to say an unpractice, or (perhaps)” – that word again – “a word of writing.” Or perhaps, silence and listening to the other, or, learning to see through the eyes of the other. For example, the primary ethic expressed in indigenous relationships with the natural world involves responsibilities which have the force of jural principles, quite different to our primarily economic and romantic relationship to “nature.” For Aboriginal people, wisdom “lies in being aware of life systems and in behaving responsibly so as to sustain the created world.” In our society, an ethical approach would include relationships between Indigenous people and their knowledge systems, and the descendents of settlers and their knowledge systems. It would also include, as Deborah Rose says, “our moral engagements with our past and future, and with our ecosystems,” and an acknowledgement that we are all emplaced beings with a responsibility to that place.

Above all, we speak justice without knowing what it means. But how can individuals be trusted to always choose or even recognize justice? This is where the risk always lies. Derrida says this is “what makes the worth of man, of his Dasein and his life … that he contains the potential, the possibility of justice, the avenir of justice, the avenir of his being-just, of his having-to-be just.”

There can be no law without justice, and no justice without law: if we accept this as an impossible conundrum, then we must proceed as if it
were not impossible. We cannot live without law but we must continually question and study law, and yet “the urgency of bringing help to someone upsets all study and imposes itself as application of the Law which always precedes the Law.” A responsibility towards the Other does not come from the Law and cannot be regulated. If, according to Arendt, “there is no original condition that does not include the other,” then everything we do must include this responsibility; we are already the Other to whom the same responsibility is owed. It is interesting to consider Arendt’s position on collective guilt in the light of this thought about responsibility. It is true that “where all are guilty, no one is,” and that despite the best efforts of people who wish to hear a national apology for the treatment of Aboriginal people in the past, such an apology has yet to be given by our head of government. The rift between people is not, as Arendt goes on to say, “healed by being translated into an even less reconcilable conflict between collective innocence and collective guilt.” Here I disagree, not with the statement itself, but with what it leaves out: some people in this country do not feel guilt in relation to past events and accept no personal responsibility. However, many people do feel profound unease and would like to know what, if anything, can be done in the present to redress past injustice. If this were not so, then justice would not be a living thing whose affect can be felt outside the courts. The same people are probably part of the million or so who marched for reconciliation, crossing the Sydney Harbour bridge and filling our city centres. The choice of words is unfortunate and addresses nothing: this is not a problem that can be remedied by “reconciliation.” Reconciliation cannot be “granted” or given; it is a negotiation, and in whose language and under which law should such negotiation begin? Compassion and a positive ability to be moved, along with a desire for justice, are not simply misplaced and “fashionable … white liberal” manifestations of guilt, but are linked to a felt or intuited sense of responsibility in the here-and-now. In Australia, collective guilt has been shifted onto the despised minority, who are expected to bear the burden of shame for us all. There is hypocrisy at work when the leaders of a country continually call for everyone to be treated as “the same”, thereby masking the inequality that exists, and then in certain circumstances remove that “equality.” As Arendt points out, “words can be relied on only if one is sure that their function is to reveal and not to conceal.”

The concept of wounded space demands recognition as a starting point, which means acceptance of the true condition of things. Beginning with Arendt’s proposition that there is no original condition that does not include the other, we must learn to think about otherness, accepting that we are the other, not the indigenous people whose space we entered. But we
exist together now in the same space – a shared space. The country to which Aborigines are so profoundly connected already includes us; we are not separate from it, it encloses us. Even as we think separation, difference and otherness, these are only difficulties of perception and language: it is language, action and the law that separate us. Recognition of the rupture of common space, of the support or ground of a shared life, means that a commitment must be made to a “cultural reconstruction of the land” including acknowledgement of the contribution Aboriginal people have made and continue to make to this society. Respect for indigenous knowledge means admitting that Aboriginal people are entitled to receive economic benefits from the commercial utilization of that knowledge; it also means recognizing the critical role, largely unpaid, of indigenous people in biodiversity conservation. The vast majority of the world’s biodiversity is in land and sea inhabited and used by indigenous people, including Australian Aboriginals, whose culture has helped to preserve what remains of the great variety of remaining life forms. (Over 70% of plant species on the planet remain ‘un-named,’ that is, named only by indigenous people.) Noel Pearson calls for a practical synthesis of human rights and land rights, which includes not just rights but responsibilities, on both sides … Rights should not lead to separatism and segregation, but rights must include rights to ancestral lands, languages, traditions and recognition as the indigenous people of this country.”

There are other indigenous leaders with different perspectives and solutions whose creativity and intelligence could contribute to the debate, but since the dissolution of ATSIC there is no longer any national forum where indigenous voices can be heard.

The land is a witness; events are inscribed on it – the trace of history, the sites of trauma. Indigenous people avoid certain places because the memory of past events is written there, a history that is not written in textbooks but which is nevertheless a preserved history. It is a haunting, an invisible reminder that the land was appropriated by violent means. Maurice Blanchot says in The Writing of the Disaster that the wounded space is “the body animated solely by mortal desire … a subjectivity without any subject,” the body which is already dead and of which no one could ever say I, my body. This is the body in which the burden of meaning, of memory, of conscience, is hidden deep in the Unconscious; where the work of mourning cannot take place. If anything haunts this body, it is silenced; it is silence that becomes the unspeakable, becomes an “unsayable secret.” Nicholas Rand suggests that this silence affects individuals, fami-
lies, social groups and entire nations. The untold secret or denied feeling, the concealed shame of families or the collective repression of historical events damages and disrupts lives. Whatever is “most strange, distant, threatening” reappears in unexpected places, in writing that Derrida calls writing “with ghosts”: “everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other.” 63 “If he [sic] loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost.” To learn how to live we must also learn from ghosts. The ghost of the law is not simply the ghost of past laws, or a haunting by past decisions, wisdoms, mistaken judgements etc. but it is in a sense the law’s other, or the law’s not: the not-said, never-said and never-to-be-said. That which has been repressed in our culture is the haunting or the mourning of the other since, according to Derrida, “only through [the] experience of the other, and of the other as other who can die, leaving in me or in us this memory of the other,” does the ‘me’ or the ‘us’ arise.64 The deeply repressed returns as a “phantom” in conversation or in the text, and whether one knows it or not, phantoms or ghosts can be used or they can use us: they write the other “even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.” 65

Val Plumwood suggests that the problem lies not in silence or repression but in a “kind of (constructed) deafness”66 which is inherent in the colonizing consciousness and which makes it impossible for us to engage in any kind of dialogue with Aboriginal people or the more-than-human world. This deafness, along with a refusal to see the land as owned, led to the practice of naming places in the colony after British ministers or explorers, or of inappropriate naming of places that had prior meaning to the inhabitants. Plumwood sees the process of re-naming as an important contribution towards reconciling the colonizing culture with the indigenous culture.

Things which are hidden, whether buried deep within the archive or erased by re-naming as in the giving of new names to indigenous people and places, reappear in the spaces of writing. “To write with ghosts, however, is to effect a writing practice that admits the unheimlich – the uncanny effect of a certain spacing of which Derrida says ‘it feels itself occupied, in the proper secret … of its inside, by what is most strange, distant, threatening.’”67 This writing practice takes into account the secret (the hidden), the burial and the return.

Kim Scott’s novel Benang: from the heart is at once a lament for what has been damaged, and a becoming or beginning, something new in indigenous writing; it is writing that incorporates the dead, the ghost, and simultaneously breaks open the crypt, sometimes violently. Scott is a
Nyoongar man from Western Australia; *Benang* is both history and not history. Indebted to Aboriginal story-telling techniques including the contrapuntal polyphonic style of group production of story, as well as narrative and non-narrative modernist techniques, this novel ruptures the space of "profound forgetting" that Deborah Bird Rose and Val Plumwood speak about. It is a rupture of style as well as of thought, a laying bare of power relations through an analysis of the bureaucratic mind, the archive and the law – white man’s law – which is hierarchical and organized; and its effect, which has been to overturn and replace any remaining sense of autonomy, community and dignity of a people it has classified as inferior and degraded. Its rules re-classify, destroying tribal cohesion, language groups and families: it also destroys connection by removing people from their country and sending them to places where not only do they have no connection with their own ancestors, their dead, but where they may be actually defying their own law ie., customary law of trespass, proximity to sacred or defiled ground etc. The internal dynamic or pattern of movement in Scott’s book is one of capture, removal, confinement, escape, flight, recapture and so on, with an underlying current of violence and the constant use of force within the law: the broken families counter with movements of their own which evade and resist these relentless lines of force. White authorities continually conceal their true motives through lies and justification, but the response in this book is not anger and violence directed at the oppressors, but a kind of flight, of freedom almost, a refusal of these structures. Scott offers us a different kind of seeing, a different kind of (apparently) random traversal of the land, a flight “back to” rather than away: people go back to country despite the efforts of the authorities to tear them from it.

In summary, I believe it is essential that we understand the importance of recovering a meaningful relationship with the land and its indigenous people, and that we recognize the nature of the wounded space in which we live. If the Law as it operates within the framework of colonization can never be impartial, and if it cannot be challenged, we must nevertheless be prepared to engage in juridico-political battles. We should be prepared to use the means at our disposal, that is, language and writing, and national and international conferences, forums and bodies whose aims are to provide for the possibility of justice. We should aim to correct obvious injustice and imbalance wherever possible, for example, calling for a treaty with indigenous Australians that includes commonwealth compensation on “just terms” for loss of attachment to land. We should call for formal arrangements of indigenous rights, including protection of indigenous knowledge, and for the setting up of a public indigenous institution to replace ATSIC. Queensland has already proposed that there should be Indigenous seats in
parliament: perhaps there should be a national Indigenous parliament.

Above all, the Law should never be “adored in and for itself,” as Blanchot put it, because the law of justice precedes the Law. We have an obligation towards the “Other,” to all the “others,” that does not come from the Law, but from understanding our shared corporeality, the “always already present” that includes the earth which supports all life.

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NOTES


3 Deborah Bird Rose, “Rupture and the Ethics of Care in Colonized Space” Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual (Eds.) Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths, (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1996) pp. 191-262, p. 191


6 Deborah Bird Rose, Indigenous Customary Law and the Courts: post-modern ethics and legal pluralism (North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University 1996) p. 3


8 Langton, “The ‘wild’”, p. 99


10 Wright, The Cry, Quoted p. 28

11 Wright, The Cry, p. 28
13 Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” p. 240
14 Benjamin, Violence, p. 244
15 Wright, The Cry, p. 29
16 The Cry, p. 29
17 Violence, p. 243
18 Violence, p. 243
24 Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” Walter Benjamin: selected writings, p. 68
25 Benjamin, Language, p. 69
26 Language, p. 67
27 Bill Neidje, Story About Feeling (Magabala Books: Broome WA 1989) p. 3
29 Paul Carter, The Lie of The Land (Faber and Faber: London, Boston 1996)
30 Carter, The Lie, p. 84
31 Carter, The Lie, p. 84 Methexis means “one must share in” or “group sharing”: in theatre, the audience participates in, creates and improvises the action of the ritual.
33 Deborah Bird Rose, Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness (Australian Heritage Commission: Canberra 1996) p. 35 and footnotes. The English technical terms are
34 Rose, Indigenous Customary Law, p. 9
35 Val Plumwood, Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason
Rose, *Indigenous*, p. 6 Rose makes it clear that these are her distinctions: Law has its ground of being in sacred order of the cosmos, and law is subject to human mediation and negotiation in daily life.

Rose, p. 8 This is not the place to explore payback and conflict resolution fully: Rose’s discussion paper recommends many relevant texts.


42 Quoted in S Benhabib *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Polity Press: Cambridge UK 1992) pp. 8, 9


44 Langton, “The 'wild'”, p. 80

45 Langton, “The 'wild'”, p. 86

46 Fred Chaney quoted on *The 7.30 Report* ABC television Kerry O’Brien 19/04/2007

47 Derrida, “The Force of Law”, p. 253


50 Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 25

51 *Disaster*, p. 25

52 *Disaster*, p. 25

53 Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, p. 28

54 Rose, *Wild Country*, p. 189

55 Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 289


57 Arendt, *Violence*, p. 65

58 Arendt, *Violence*, p. 66


60 Noel Pearson “Hunt for the Radical Centre” *The Weekend Australian* April 21-22 (Sydney 2007)

61 Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 30

62 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psy-


65 Derrida Specters of Marx, p. 176

66 Plumwood, Decolonizing Nature, pp. 67-8

67 Castricano, Cryptomimesis, p. 29
In a hallway of the London Madame Tussauds, the wax figures which are the chief attraction for most visitors overlap with two of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s photographs of wax subjects from his *Portraits* series. Decorated with old-fashioned flocked wallpaper, the passage contains a number of vintage Tussauds advertisements and newspaper clippings. Few visitors entered the space when I visited the wax museum, since using it meant bypassing the special room devoted to popular singer Kylie Minogue. The two Sugimoto prints, which were unlabelled, hung halfway down the hallway. One is of Queen Elizabeth I, the other of Princess Diana (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). They are somewhat smaller than Sugimoto’s gallery prints, but otherwise appear identical. Seeing them there and recognizing them for what they were, I wondered if I was the only visitor that day aware of their provenance, and this gave me my own thrill of celebrity sighting. The juxtaposition of wax figures and Sugimoto’s portraits highlights not only the contrast
between high art photography and displays meant for mass entertainment, but also the difference between what the wax figures offer, the illusion of proximity to fame, and what the photographs offer, the illusion that the figures have come to life.

Fig. 1: Hiroshi Sugimoto: Elizabeth I, 1999. Gelatin silver print, 58 ¼ x 47 inches (149.2 x 119.4 cm), Negative 839, copyright: Hiroshi Sugimoto
Surprisingly, Sugimoto’s *Portraits* have a much more convincing illusion of life than the waxworks themselves. In fact, they unsettle and disorient the viewer with their lifelike appearances. Even historical figures who lived and died long before the era of photography, for example Elizabeth I, seem to have come back to life, as if they made their way to Sugimoto’s studio to stand before his view camera for a formal portrait (Fig. 1). The waxwork figures in Madame Tussauds are simultaneously hauntingly famil-
iar and disturbingly lifeless. The photographs, on the other hand, give the illusion of live subjects. Yet, on different terms both create an experience of reality testing which is the key to a complex discursive trajectory through which the portraits move, articulating the relationship of celebrity to melancholy and power.

The image of Princess Diana adorning the hall at Madame Tussauds is “Diana, Princess of Wales,” 1999 (Fig. 2). Diana’s mythologization as the “people’s princess,” an almost-commoner who became an almost-queen, would have made her of interest to Madame Tussaud, who started out a housekeeper’s daughter, made her way to Versailles as an artist, and prospered as a businesswoman. The photograph in the hallway is a portrait of the same figure of Diana that was on display when I visited the museum, completed over the course of six months following a two-hour sitting in 1996. At the museum, this figure stood alone, separate from the more regally attired Windsors. Wearing an evening gown, the white top half of which is festooned with pearls and ribbons, Diana bears a rueful expression, almost a grimace. Her sad expression seems to anticipate her untimely death, which occurred two years before the photograph was taken. Because Diana was so frequently photographed, this image reads at first as just another photograph of a famous figure. But spending some time with the image allows the stillness of the figure to transcend the photograph. Putting one’s finger on exactly what gives the image away as a wax figure is difficult; thus the figure gives the illusion of vacillating between the real person and the wax copy.

The photograph of Elizabeth I (Fig. 1) is of a wax figure modeled after a painted portrait attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, Ermine Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (1585). This photograph lacks the automatic authenticity of the portrait of Diana, a familiar subject of photographs. The ermine on Elizabeth’s arm is clearly stuffed, and this detail defeats the reality of the image as a whole, while simultaneously adding a humorous aspect to the wax figure’s fidelity to the painting. At the same time, the viewer’s knowledge that a photograph of Elizabeth I is a temporal impossibility also impedes the illusion of life. Nevertheless the momentary sensation that Elizabeth I has stepped out of time into Sugimoto’s studio persists, if only long enough to be captured on film.

These two photographs were the only Sugimotos I found at Madame Tussauds, but they represent the range of illusory reality in the Portraits series as a whole, from the more evident artificiality of Peter Stuyvesant to the surprisingly convincing Henry V. They invoke photography’s usual indexicality with its referent, and then are unable to quite deliver what is expected: the actual person. The viewer is left in a sort of vacuum in between
reality and falsehood.

Reality and falsehood operate in a different kind of relation at Madame Tussauds, which offers a fantasy in which the gap between the ordinary individual and the celebrity collapses. The wax museum, a form of mass entertainment, provides the illusion that the visitor is not part of the mass but rather the equal of the celebrity. The fact that this fantasy is so appealing to so many (over two million visitors a year at the London Tussauds) demonstrates that there is something at stake in the fantasy the museum offers.  

Cultural theorist P. David Marshall has suggested that celebrity is an empty sign where different types of power converge. The relationship of the ordinary individual to the celebrity demarcates a complex power relationship in the consumer capitalist democracy. It might even be said that the celebrity wax figures at Madame Tussauds articulate in some ways the average citizen's lack of power in a capitalist democracy. Sugimoto's photographs of the Tussauds figures, though they may be viewed by a different audience from that of the wax museum and, as photographs, transform the physical relationship between viewer and figure, also function to remind the viewer that he or she is disempowered and, in fact, a part of mass culture.

Social disempowerment has been analyzed in terms of melancholy by sociologist Wolf Lepenies, who has described melancholy as an expression of protest over loss of power and the ability to act. While the visitors to a Chelsea gallery in which Sugimoto's photographs are on view do not necessarily display melancholy, and it is even less apparent in the behavior of visitors to Madame Tussauds, nevertheless it is possible that it lies buried beneath the socially sanctioned affect particular to each venue. It may be helpful then to consider melancholy as a theoretical construct to be used to analyze the transformation of the wax figure into a photographic image and the subsequent impact of both on the viewer.

Melancholy

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Sigmund Freud distinguishes between the two by observing that while mourning has a specific lost object, the cause of melancholy is often unknown, unnamable. In mourning, the ego goes through a process of reality testing, ascertaining that the lost object is actually lost; reality testing is the work of mourning. In melancholy, where the lost object may not be identified, reality testing cannot proceed successfully.

Reality testing plays a significant role in the viewer's experience of both the wax figures at Tussauds and their appearance in Sugimoto's pho-
tographs, suggesting that in both cases there has been a loss. In order to participate in the fantasy of access to power and celebrity on display in the wax museum, the visitors must suspend disbelief. A form of reality testing takes place constantly as the visitor moves through the exhibit. Wax imitates flesh, but of course does not exactly match it visually. A direct sustained gaze at the wax figures ascertains their artificiality. Visitors must ignore the fact of the wax figures’ immobility, that they are not exact likenesses of the stars, and that some are images of people who are no longer living. In the wax museum, reality testing constantly reminds the viewer that the celebrity before them is not real, reaffirming the visitors’ own non-celebrity status. What is lost remains lost except for split seconds of fantasy facilitated by the realistic effigies of the celebrities.

Because the wax figures are life-sized (although visitors regularly comment that they had no idea certain celebrities were so short) and because they are generally not set off from the group of visitors, the only way to tell at a glance who is real and who is wax is whether or not they are famous, whether or not they move, and in some cases, whether or not they are dressed in everyday clothes. As a visitor to the museum, you know automatically that Jerry Hall and Samuel L. Jackson are wax simply because they are recognizable celebrities. The importance of the connection between a figure’s celebrity and its reality is made evident by the wax figure of a female tourist; posed as if she is photographing the wax figures, her camera is raised to her eye and her face is hidden. After moving out of the way of her camera several times, I finally realized that she was a wax figure, but was nevertheless fooled again by her a couple of times. Because she was not a recognizable celebrity, I assumed that she was real. Tus-sauds played with this aspect of the visit by positioning a staff member costumed as a vampire next to the newly-added figure of Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The staff member was convincingly motionless for long periods of time before lunging at startled visitors with a growl. Between the wax photographer and the “real” vampire, I found myself half expecting one of the celebrity figures to be real as well. The slouching figure of Bob Geldof in the Grand Hall, incongruous in his rumpled casual clothes amongst the luminaries, gave me pause several times. Nevertheless, the process of reality testing grew briefer with each successive figure, until by the end of my visit, it barely occurred at all.

The appearance of the reality of the figures is enhanced by Sugimoto’s portraits of the wax figures, which shift the viewer’s relation to the celebrity significantly. While the wax figures offer the illusion of proximity and equality, the photographs substitute the powerful illusion of life. The act of photography, which seems to bring the figure to life, undermines the wax
museum visitor’s knowledge, reinforced by the stillness of the wax figure, that the figure is actually not the real person. As Nancy Spector describes this phenomenon, “Inverting the logic of photography’s unavoidable alliance with death, its capacity to entomb its subject in a moment that will never recur, Sugimoto gives breath to the wax statues.”

Stillness seems out of place in the three-dimensional wax figures but very much at home in the photograph. The replica of the body of the celebrity creates an illusion of presence; the illusion of the figure’s movement, created by the stop-motion aspect of photography, replaces the illusion of presence. The photographs hide the fact that the figures are immobile.

Sugimoto’s photographs are black and white; the loss of the realistic flesh tones of the wax figures somehow enhances the illusion in the photograph that the wax is indeed flesh. Cultural historian Marina Warner observes that wax “cannot be photographed to resemble its appearance to the naked eye with a flash because the light doesn’t bounce off the waxy surface but soaks into it.”

Even though I knew that the photographs were of wax figures, I nevertheless repeatedly experienced the sensation that they were of living people while viewing them. However, this appearance of life is fleeting; prolonged examination of the photographs reveals subtle clues that the figures portrayed are not real. For example, in the portrait of Winston Churchill, one hand rests on his hip, the other on a cane, but they don’t appear to carry the weight they should in these positions. Disbelief cannot be maintained indefinitely, although it may last significantly longer than in the presence of the wax figures. As reality testing takes place before the photographs there is a sustained sense of the flickering that is present only fleetingly at the wax museum. Even after repeated viewings, the images are still able to fool the eye momentarily. The process of reality testing is never fully accomplished in the presence of the Sugimoto photographs. Of course, all photographs have the potential to impede reality testing by preserving moments that are lost forever; in the Portraits, Sugimoto uses this aspect of photography provocatively.

What is most obviously absent in the wax museum is proximity to the actual celebrities; in the gallery it is the proximity to the wax figures. This chain of loss, represented in different ways, marks a place of social loss. For both viewer groups, this loss is related to lack of access to power. Loss is a large part of what is on view at the wax museum. For the visitor to Madame Tussauds, the process of reality testing is ultimately largely successful, with the wax figures losing their ability to fool the eye over the course of a visit; this visitor is positioned more in a place of mourning. For the gallery visitor, for whom the photographs never completely lose their life-like appearance, the process of reality testing is never completely resolved, and
thus the position, I argue, is more one of melancholy.

Lepenies’s *Melancholy and Society* examines social melancholy as it is expressed by writers of particular classes, a melancholy brought about by their class’s loss of or lack of access to power and the impossibility of action, as opposed to the often unnamable object loss of which Freud writes.\(^\text{14}\) Like the individual melancholic theorized by Freud who was unable to express negative feelings toward a loved one,\(^\text{15}\) the social groups analyzed by Lepenies were unable to either express criticism of existing power structures, or were powerless to effect change. Such melancholy tends to take the form of ennui and a feeling of uselessness.

Lepenies identifies the second rebellion of the Fronde, that of the princes, as an expression of social melancholy, a desperate attempt to escape the futility of powerlessness. In response to this threat, the royal court permitted the nobility a ceremonial form of power to replace the real power to which they had no access; this was accompanied by etiquette of strict affect control.\(^\text{16}\) Lepenies locates another example of social melancholy in the German bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century; despite their increasing economic means, they were unable to wield any political power. They could not act, but could write; instead of the collective affect manifested by the French bourgeoisie, the German bourgeoisie’s ennui and melancholy was expressed by a proliferation of writing on the sentimental, with a focus on subjectivity.\(^\text{17}\) The French aristocracy and the German bourgeoisie displayed what Lepenies described as the “resigned behavior of a social class which was no longer able to influence the real course of events.”\(^\text{18}\) Lepenies distinguishes between the losses represented by aristocratic and bourgeois melancholy: “the latter resulted from a loss of world, the former from having relinquished a world that had never been possessed.”\(^\text{19}\) Both, however, are “cut off from action in terms of acting in the world and influencing that world.”\(^\text{20}\) For both groups, the object loss represented by the impoverishment of the world resulted in ego impoverishment as well.

**Celebrity and Power**

Contemporary Western culture is based on the ideology that the individual is not powerless, as were the French aristocracy and the German bourgeoisie, according to Lepenies. Democratic ideology suggests that all citizens have equal power which they can express either as consumers in the choices they make purchasing goods and services, or as citizens voting on government representation; the mass has the power to effect change.\(^\text{21}\) The individual’s power lies in his or her role as a member of a group. But at
the same time, the populace is a potential mob, irrational, emotional, and potentially threatening to the status quo, a force that must be contained and controlled. For Marshall, "the term celebrity has come to embody the ambiguity of the public forms of subjectivity under capitalism." The celebrity, as well as Madame Tussauds, operates within this conflictual space between the ostensible power of the individual in the democracy, and the individual’s role as part of the mass. Sugimoto’s *Portraits* distill this strange collapsed mélange of celebrity, power, history, and temporality into a few luminous and deceptively simple photographs. In both cases, the actual space occupied by the individual is negotiated via reality testing.

Celebrity glorifies the potential of the individual in the ideal democratic culture, where historical hierarchies have been removed so that personal merit prevails. In a consumer-oriented democracy, according to Marshall, "Celebrity status became aligned with the potentialities of the wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations." Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in their "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" argue that the celebrity’s representation of success is a false motivation offered by the capitalist system, since only a few people actually achieve stardom. At the same time, celebrity has become an increasingly empty sign, with individuals attaining celebrity for dubious reasons. Celebrities are often not heroic figures, but individuals whose notoriety has been capitalized on. The celebrity represents both individual social success and pure image devoid of meaning.

This ambiguity is reflected by the way in which celebrity, as represented in the media, and at Tussauds, can encompass figures from multiple fields, such as politics, sports, or entertainment. As Marshall points out, in the contemporary public sphere, divisions exist between different types of players: politicians are made to seem distinctly different from entertainment figures; businesspeople are distinguished from sports stars. And yet in the mediated representation of this panoply of figures, they begin to blend together. Film stars ... share the stage with politicians like George Bush; Gorbachev appears in a film by Wenders; Michael Jackson hangs out on the White House lawn with Ronald Reagan; Nelson Mandela fills an entire issue of *Vogue*. The celebrity is a category that identifies these slippages in identification and differentiation.

Marshall goes on to note that these slippages result in shifting representations of power:

in contemporary culture there is a convergence in the source of power between the political leader and other forms of celebrity. Both
are forms of subjectivity that are sanctioned by the culture and enter the symbolic realm of providing meaning and significance for the culture. The categorical distinction of forms of power is dissolving in favor of a unified system of celebrity status.

The power wielded by a celebrity may be fleeting; in Western culture, when it is sometimes hard to say exactly who wields power, celebrities are personifications of power, made all the more potent because a real person inhabits the sign.

Celebrities represent a sort of ego ideal which the non-celebrity longs to equal, a role model for one’s own potential in society. At the same time, they represent the non-celebrity’s failure to capitalize on culture’s ostensibly endless possibilities for advancement and success. They are a reminder of the non-celebrity’s shortcomings, of their relative cultural unimportance and role as part of mass culture. The wax figures at Madame Tussauds confront the visitor with his or her longing for celebrity and power while they simultaneously remind the visitor of its impossibility.

Marshall’s description of the confluence of different types of celebrity is identical to what happens in the wax museum, except that the wax museum includes anachronistic historical blending. There visitors encounter life-sized, three-dimensional, realistic portraits of individuals who have attained celebrity. With the illusion of meeting a celebrity in person, of physical proximity to this loaded sign, the wax museum visitor embodies an at times seemingly euphoric experience. Like a child who jubilantly but mistakenly recognizes the potential for a unified self in Lacan’s mirror stage, the wax museum visitor falsely recognizes in the wax figure of the celebrity his or her own possibility for success.

History of the Wax Museum

Madame Tussauds is a remarkably long-running institution, with roots in the period just prior to the French Revolution. In 1766, the Prince de Conti invited Philippe Curtius, a Berne doctor originally renowned for his wax anatomical figures and subsequently for his wax portraits, to Paris. Public interest in his wax portraits inspired Curtius to creating a display of wax figures in 1770. Eventually he trained his housekeeper’s daughter, Marie Gresholtz, the future Madame Tussaud, in the art of wax portraiture.

Tussaud’s talent and Curtius’s affiliation with the aristocracy resulted in her invitation to Versailles to teach art to Madame Elisabeth, the sister of Louis XVI. Tussaud lived at Versailles for nine years. Curtius, meanwhile, began to associate with the Jacobins, and participated in the storming of
the Bastille. The revolutionaries made use of Curtius’s skill by commissioning portraits of heroes and martyrs. As the revolution progressed, Tussaud, threatened by her association with the court, was imprisoned in 1794, and was so close to being executed that her hair was cut in preparation for the guillotine. Curtius’s influence and her skill with wax saved her; subsequently she found herself at the graveside of many of those with whom she had lived at Versailles, making wax impressions of their decapitated heads. The Chamber of Horrors at the museum in London includes a tableau of Tussaud searching through a pile of bodies at the cemetery of La Madeleine for the head of Marie Antoinette so that she may make a wax cast of her face. She became the owner of the wax museum when Curtius died in 1794, the same year that she was nearly guillotined.

The wax museum that is her legacy is today a tourist attraction profitably managed by a large corporation. Its revenue is based, in a way, on the commercialization of Tussaud’s personal experience as a witness to the vicissitudes of power. Madame Tussauds capitalizes on the ordinary visitor’s lack of access to power by creating a mirage of it.

The Wax Museum’s Illusion of Proximity

Eighteenth-century wax museum visitors longed to see what famous people looked like. Today, representations of the famous proliferate throughout our culture; since it is no longer necessary to visit a wax museum to see what a well-known person looks like, the function of the still very popular wax museum has changed. Celebrity operates on a paradox around availability: images of the famous are everywhere, but the celebrity him- or herself is someone the average person will more than likely never meet. Madame Tussauds intervenes in this paradox with the pretense of making the celebrity available. Clearly, this illusion provides a thrill lacking in the usual representations of celebrities found in film, photography, and on television.

In the wax museum, the visitor experiences illusory proximity to the celebrity impossible in reality, either because of the individual’s social status or because the celebrity is deceased. “Who will you have a close encounter with today?” asks the cover of the souvenir guide; the back cover depicts anonymous visitors literally nose to nose with celebrities. Warner’s description of this nearness to the celebrity vividly captures the atmosphere of the museum:

The sense of involvement with a simulacrum, a wax figure, overrides its actual fakery ... The fantasy is stimulated by the public’s proximity
to the stars, by the possibility of touching or being photographed with them … the figures stand at ground level, as if mingling with the crowd.  

As Warner points out, the mixing of visitors and wax figures at the same level creates not just an illusion of availability and proximity but also one of equality. Visitors may stand in a group with Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama, or perch on a sofa with the Beatles in their Sergeant Pepper’s garb; such access is impossible outside the museum. That impossibility is due to the visitor’s lack of cultural and political power. The equality on which democracy is founded is problematized in the wax museum; there the visitor comes face to face with his or her own social limitations.

Unlike traditional museums, which present artifacts behind glass or velvet ropes, Tussauds promotes physical contact with the figures: “visitors to Madame Tussauds often get quite affectionate with the figures, touching their hair, even hugging and kissing them.” In New York, for example, the wax figure of Brad Pitt is frequently the subject of touch-ups to remove lipstick marks left by visitors’ kisses. Damage caused by such contact is expected; every morning at 7:30 a team assesses all the figures for problems like broken fingers or damaged hair and makes any necessary repairs before the museum opens for the day.

Photography plays an important role in the fostering of the illusions of nearness and equality. Several kiosks in the museum sell disposable cameras. The tableau of the royal family in the Grand Hall is attended by a photographer dressed in Elizabethan attire who gives visitors costume crowns to wear as they stand with the Windsors; a tableau of Henry VIII and his wives includes a vacant medieval-style chair so that visitors may be photographed in their company. Having photographs of the experience to look at afterward is a clichéd element of the tourist stereotype, but it plays an important role in the visitor’s experience of Madame Tussauds. Photographic commemoration of the encounter with the stars creates an image in which not just the figure of the star but oneself is permanently frozen, further encouraging the illusion of proximity. However, because of the difficulty of photographing wax, as noted by Warner, such photographs reinforce the falsity of the figures.

The first space the visitor enters in the London Madame Tussauds is called “the Garden Party.” In this room, lit as if an evening party is underway in a private garden, visitors mill about wax figures of celebrities such as Whoopi Goldberg, Susan Sarandon, and Sarah Ferguson. The figures are arranged in pairs, as if in conversation. It is easy for a visitor to stand between two such figures to have his or her picture taken with them. Subsequent rooms explore different settings for proximity to the famous.
“Superstars and Legends” room features a grandly curving staircase, with smiling celebrities descending as if to a theater stage. Other stars mill about the room, with separate vignettes provided for some, like Michael Jackson in a pose from his “Thriller” video, and Marilyn Monroe posed over a vent with her skirt blowing, from the movie *The Seven Year Itch*. In the huge Grand Hall, historical figures are grouped together, with clusters of current celebrities scattered throughout the room. At the far end of the Grand Hall stood a mock United Nations podium with George W. Bush on one side and Tony Blair on the other. The visitor’s spot was between them, just behind the podium, where a video camera projected the image of all three onto a huge screen behind them.

Today, the political and historical figures appear to be of far less interest to the crowd than the figures from the entertainment world. The wax museum has become an homage to the celebrity. Historical significance carries less weight than the new and the now. If politics and celebrity merge, as in the case of Rudy Giuliani, then political figures may match entertainers in popularity. When Giuliani became a heroic figure after the September 11th terrorist attacks, his wax figure at the New York Tussauds was so popular that its head had to be repainted on a weekly basis, presumably damaged by the touches of fans. The museum keeps its Voltaire and its Ben Franklin on display, but does not appear to add to its stores of historical figures as much as to its collection of currently popular celebrities.

*Sugimoto’s Portraits*

Unlike the typical visitor, Sugimoto eschews figures from contemporary popular culture, focusing his lens instead on significant historical figures, important figures from art and literature, and members of royalty. These figures occupy celebrity not because of the notoriety which accounts for so much present-day fame, but for more traditional reasons: accomplishment or aristocratic birth. In the *Portraits*, they become not just another face in the crowd, but imposing and heroic portraits of important people. They no longer fraternize with the viewer on the viewer’s level. Set apart, monumentalized in flawless, perfectly lit large-scale photographs, the wax figures radiate with vitality denied them in the typical Tussauds tourist snapshot.

Sugimoto removes the figures from the wax museum setting and shoots them like formal studio portraits, each in a ¾ length pose. Because they are so uniformly photographed and presented, with identical black backdrops and simple black frames, there is a sort of mournfulness to their
ubiquity. Richard III, Oscar Wilde and Salvador Dalí occupy the same physical and chronological space. The realistic appearance of figures like Richard III, who died long before the era of photography, challenges the viewer’s knowledge that no such photograph of them could exist. Yet there they are, almost breathing. Reality testing struggles under this illusion.

Because of their interchangeable, placeless settings, the figures share a sort of desolation. In the wax museum, the mingling of figures from different historical epochs adds to the visitor’s feeling of equality; in the photographs, the identical setting for all the portraits creates a sense of futility. The precise temporality in which each individual had power has passed. Instead of imparting a sense of posterity, as traditional portraits may, they are steeped with loss, the loss of power and the ability to act. They become imbued with melancholy, and even with boredom.

Affect Control

At the time of Tussaud’s rise to prominence as a sculptor in wax – the time of Louis XIV – and in Germany of the 18th century, the loss of or lack of access to power led to feelings that were perceived as potential threats to the status quo. The control of affect was one way to minimize the risk posed by boredom and melancholy. In contemporary Western culture, melancholy is pathologized as depression, and is stigmatized. Forms of entertainment such as the wax museum may serve to prevent melancholy, and to distract people from their powerlessness.

Seeing the wax figures in Sugimoto’s portraits at a gallery is a vastly different experience from viewing them at Madame Tussauds. Sugimoto’s photographs, while popular, collected by museums and the subject of numerous books, appeal to a somewhat narrow art audience. Unlike the Tussauds visitor, the gallery visitors may disdain what Marshall refers to as celebrity’s “vulgar association with consumer culture,” and perhaps are more highly educated. This disdain marks a class or consumer group separation. Without specific demographic information about the typical visitor to Madame Tussauds or to a high-end contemporary art gallery, I can only speculate about this separation. However, it appears that the person who would typically visit a commercial gallery is more than likely someone who would only visit Madame Tussauds as a kitsch experience. Sugimoto himself notes that “I’ve visited Tussauds several times, but always with my work in mind.” Tussauds is perceived as a commercial business, a trafficker in mass culture, selling souvenirs in a shop at the end of the tour.

Loud music and videos of famous people play for those in line, gearing
up the visitors for their encounter with stars, and creating a mood of excitement and anticipation. Mourning and melancholy may be felt momentarily in the wax museum, but are as out of place there as in the French court, where a complex web of etiquette forbade melancholy.45 People generally go to the museum as part of a group, and the atmosphere is one of pleasure and play. The wax museum visitor is in a setting from which melancholy has been banished. Many of the wax figures, especially contemporary celebrities, appear to express pleasure themselves, and are presented with the perfect toothy smiles associated with stars.46 The usual museum rules do not apply, and an informal mood prevails. When I visited Madame Tussauds, visitors tended to laugh loudly, to exclaim over sightings of “stars,” to bump into each other as they meandered through the crowd. They happily posed with the wax figures, throwing an arm around their necks or waists, or pretending to kiss them.

The visitor to the wax museum is a consumer of mass culture who pays to participate in the fantasy of being the equal of the celebrity.47 In the wax museum, the usual distance from celebrity is illusionistically removed so that the visitor can experience the thrill of proximity to the type of power embodied in the sign of the celebrity. The purported equality of the democratic state is made available to the consumer who can pay the high entry fee. The visitor to Madame Tussauds can indulge in the fantasy of individuality and the possibility of success promoted by capitalism. Thus the wax museum visitor, by indulging in this fantasy, reinforces that he or she is indeed a part of the mass.

At the Chelsea art gallery, by comparison, behavior is muted, and lone visitors are not uncommon. There is a greater rigidity in the gallery, with very different unwritten rules of control of affect and behavior than in the wax museum. The illusion of access to power is created not by proximity to wax figures of famous people, but by the gallery visitor’s own social positioning as part of a small educated audience who can appreciate the intellectual complexities of contemporary art, or perhaps even as a potential collector. However, for most gallery visitors, the art is prohibitively priced; prices for the Sugimoto photographs, for example, currently range from $10,000 for a small photograph from the Diorama series to $65,000 for one of the portraits.48 Furthermore, the gallery visitor is in a culturally elite commercial space where entry is free, as opposed to the high cost of tickets to Madame Tussauds. Anyone may enter the gallery, but must know which one to go to in the first place. In the gallery, the elite status of the viewer of the Sugimoto photographs appears to be reinforced; ultimately, however, it is revealed to be a fallacy in the following ways.

The “close encounter” with the celebrity advertised by Madame Tus-
sauds is not possible, since the viewer is looking at photographs; the gallery visitor is more likely to see an actual celebrity strolling through Chelsea. Instead, the magic of Madame Tussauds is filtered through the medium of the photograph and by Sugimoto’s choice of portrait subjects. Their enforced equality in the identically formatted shots levels their achievements. Their fluctuating lifelike-ness, instead of adding to the thrill of nearness to fame, is a subtle indicator that they are really wax figures from a kitschy tourist enterprise. The viewer’s appreciation of them is constantly tied back to commercialism.

Unlike Pop art which appropriates mass culture (for example Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans), Sugimoto’s photographs of the wax figures draw the viewer into mass culture in a more subtle way. The viewer is less able to take a distanced, ironic look at mass culture, as is the case with Pop art; the photographs reiterate the viewer’s position in mass culture with their sense of loss. They remind the gallery visitor that he or she is also one of the mass, of the involuntary disburdenment of power never possessed. The false power of the art connoisseur replaces any actual social power. The gallery visitor’s elite cultural status, seemingly validated by the gallery experience, is as illusory as is the wax museum visitor’s access to celebrity.

The visitor to Tussaud’s goes home with a collection of photographs in which most of the realistic appearance of the wax figures has been diminished. A nostalgic look back at the photographs will confirm the falseness of the figures, completing the process of reality testing in operation at the museum. The gallery visitor, in contrast, leaves, perhaps with a catalog of the show in which the figures’ illusion of life persists, or else with a confirmed sense of cultural eliteness; reality testing is not forced to any conclusion.

**Conclusion**

My recognition of the anonymous Sugimotos at Madame Tussauds was exciting; it reinforced my sense of myself as a knowledgeable person, a scholar of art history. At the same time my excitement was based on my recognizing them in an unlikely place, Madame Tussauds; my recognition of the photographs was thus based on my participation in a mass culture consumer enterprise, which I was enjoying, and not just from a distanced, ironic vantage. Spotting celebrities in the form of the two Sugimoto photographs, I was re-inserted immediately into mass culture with the pleasing experience of recognition of “stars.”

Reality testing, the work of mourning which is never completed in the
case of melancholy, plays a role in the experience of both the visitor to Tussauds and the viewer of Sugimoto’s *Portraits*. Lepenies’s theorization of social melancholy in relation to power provides a way to theorize the losses associated with both, as well as the significance of affect control in each venue. The Tussauds visitor suspends disbelief in a high-energy, playful setting in which the illusion of celebrity gradually gives way to a gradual relinquishing, for the most part, of the illusion of proximity to the powerful and famous. The viewer of Sugimoto’s waxworks portraits, in contrast, in a more subdued gallery, remains trapped within the photographs’ astonishing vacillation between reality and falsehood. Yet the celebrity’s symbolization of the potential for success remains a false promise for both sets of viewers. Sugimoto’s elegantly conceived and at times staggeringly lifelike *Portraits* provide a powerful counterpoint to the kitschy Madame Tussauds, bringing to light the roles played by melancholy, reality testing, and affect control in relation to the actual wax effigies and his images of them.

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**NOTES**


2 Dr. Rolf-E. Breuer, “Forward,” *Sugimoto Portraits*, p. 7, writes, “… the persons represented in the works seem much more alive than the actual figures in the wax museums of London, Amsterdam, Tokyo.” Dr. Breuer is the Spokesman of the Board of Managing Directors of Deutsche Bank, which works in partnership with the Solomon R. Guggenheim foundation in support of the visual arts. The Deutsche Bank supported the commission of which these photographs are a product. That the introduction to the catalog of the *Portraits* series is written by a bank representative is of interest in relation to this paper’s discussion of power and consumer culture. For more on the commissioning of the *Portraits* by the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, see Nancy Spector, “Reinventing Realism,” *Sugimoto Portraits*, p. 10.

3 Jo Grant, *Madame Tussauds London Souvenir Guide: Who Will You Have a Close*
Encounter with?, n.d., n. p., p. 35.


6 Freud, “Mourning,” p. 244.


8 I spoke with a staff member who stated that even though he had worked at Tussauds for a couple of years, the figure of the photographer still fooled him.

9 It is important to distinguish between two versions of Sugimoto’s waxwork portraits. The photographs discussed in this paper are part of the series called *Portraits*, in which Sugimoto isolates the wax figures from their surroundings and photographs them against a dark backdrop. In an earlier series called *Wax Museums*, Sugimoto photographed the figures in situ; in these images the illusion of life is lessened. See Krens, “Acknowledgements,” p. 8.


12 I first saw the *Portraits* at an exhibit at Sonnabend Gallery on West 22nd St. in New York’s Chelsea art district.

13 Sugimoto’s play with photography is at work in particular in this piece: the wax portrait is based on a famous photograph of Churchill by Yousuf Karsh (1941).


15 Freud observes that the melancholic’s relentless self-criticisms are often “hardly applicable to the patient himself,” but that they are more appropriate descriptions of “someone the patient loves or has loved or should love...the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which has been shifted away from it onto the patient’s own ego.” Such criticism toward the love object was for some reason impossible to express, and the patient’s self-criticism is a result of “avoid[ing] the need to express [their] hostility to him openly.” Freud, “Mourning,” pp. 248-51.


Some accounts say that Marie was Curtius’s niece, and that she and her mother joined Curtius’s household after the death of her father; see Warner, “Waxworks.”


Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 3.


Gliatto, “Hot Wax,” p. 142. It is tempting to think of these kisses in terms of reversal of the fairy tales of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, in which a kiss from the handsome prince revives the sleeping princess.

Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 28.


He made portraits of Mae West, Jean Harlow, and the Chamber of Horrors as part of the *Wax Museums* series.


I visited Madame Tussauds twice in the course of research for this paper. When I mentioned these visits to students in my program, describing how much fun I’d
had, many expressed undisguised disdain for Tussauds.


46 The wax figures are not made from casts because you cannot cast a smile, since the eyes and mouth must be closed during the casting process. A face cast with eyes and mouth closed often looks like a death mask, thus melancholic.

47 Currently $29.00 for an adult at the New York Madame Tussauds; 18.5.08, [http://www.nycwax.com/openingtimes.htm](http://www.nycwax.com/openingtimes.htm).

48 According to Sonnabend Gallery, December 5, 2002. Since that time Sugimoto’s standing in the art world and collectibility have skyrocketed, no doubt along with his prices.
Concrete Containment in Late Capitalism, Mysticism, the Marquis de Sade, and Phenomenological Anthropology

Apple Igrek

Georges Bataille is known for being complex and multifaceted: influenced by Christian mystics as well as Hegelians and Marxists, his work is also linked with that of the surrealists and existentialists of his own mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century France as well as the post-structuralists – in particular the \textit{Tel Quel} collaboraters – who followed in his wake. It would be astonishing, then, if Bataille’s thinking were \textit{not} conflated with precisely those movements and those ideas with which he has so much in common, despite the fact that we should refuse to expect this. Much of Bataille’s work was devoted to the ambivalent overlapping of transgression and its reified containment, and this in part explains why such a large number of his interpreters fall prey to reducing the former category to the latter. This article is therefore an attempt to disentangle, to whatever extent possible, the transgressive from the contained. I will do this on four accounts: postmodern economics, mystical union, sexual degradation, and historical dialectics.
Michael Richardson has proposed that it is today’s consumer society, as opposed to the Aztec rituals which Bataille studied, that embodies a principle of extreme waste.\(^1\) Consumption, in the early stages of capitalism, was subordinated to the accumulation and rationalization of wealth. The renewal of profit and its constant reinvestment in the productive apparatus is the ultimate calling for the ascetic bourgeoisie. This implies a worldly activity which eradicates pleasure, extravagance, and irrational spontaneity: “In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudæmonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture.”\(^2\) Late capitalism, however, is no longer restrained by the values of thrift or self-control. This is true on several fronts: the indeterminacy of need, the spectacle of waste, and the inherent gambling of supply-side economics. For the commodity in its abundance, according to Guy Debord, use-value has ceased to be an issue.\(^3\) We do not create products to satisfy our needs; we create products to create the need for those products. An absolute reversal in the restricted economy of bourgeois capitalism has given rise to the renewal and perpetual justification of need in its ongoing destruction. The renewal of need is thus a metaphysical crisis with no end. But this at least supports an economy of chance which dismantles the opposition between luxury and non-luxury: “Clearly, it is only in a regime of luxury, where everything is superfluous, that demand cannot be assigned and becomes open to possibilities that are less and less predictable.”\(^4\) It might therefore be said that post-industrial capitalism has finally turned away from its Protestant beginnings. Weber’s analysis cannot be applied to a society which is no longer dominated by utility, prudence, or self-restraint. Bataille’s critique, that man has been reduced to an objective *thing*, is equally irrelevant. Most troubling of all, an anti-bourgeois defense of capitalism rests squarely on Bataillean principles: waste, expenditure, unpredictability, potlatch, and risk-taking.\(^5\)

The above assessment is ultimately incorrect. Goux distinguishes himself from Bataille by claiming that political economy has *always* served to undermine the utility of goods. But if this is true, then Bataille’s general economics should apply evenly, except for historical adjustments, to all stages of capitalism. We should not say that Bataille’s analysis falls short at one stage but not another if anti-bourgeois economics is nothing new. Furthermore, it is simply false to claim that Bataille was oblivious to the radical denormativation of use-value in classical political economy. Besides contradicting Bataille’s statements on early capitalism in the *Accursed Share*, Goux’s thesis neglects the fundamental premise of general
economics, that mankind’s economic activity necessarily pursues unlimited ends. The question isn’t so much whether we squander, but how we squander. We might also expect, if Bataille subscribed to an absolute division between the medieval and capitalist economies, that he would portray the religious works of the Middle Ages as devoid of all calculation. But however the glory of God was displayed in the Roman Church, a supernatural efficacy was presupposed. Indeed, the Protestant critique focused precisely on the value of ceremony, ritual, confession, aesthetics, good deeds, and superstition. The ensuing transformation in the regulation of conduct therefore had much less to do with an introduction to rational utility than with replacing one form of control with another: “It meant the repudiation of a control which was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice, and hardly more than formal, in favour of a regulation of the whole of conduct which, penetrating to all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.”

In all times excess and the management of excess have coexisted. But we should be careful to conclude that one is equivalent to the other from an economic standpoint. Jean-Joseph Goux argues that political economy, and especially postmodern culture, has erased the distinction between the sacred and the profane: “If one remains on strictly economic ground, it is in truth impossible to separate productive consumption from unproductive squandering. Ethical criteria alone could claim to make this distinction.” This assumes that the alienation of mankind has finally completed itself. Bataille, however, would never accept this position. Even as he remains on the economic ground which he interrogates, Bataille affirms that the totalizing domination of modern society, the reduction of mankind to a technical activity, is less than complete. Should we now believe, in a developed capitalist economy, that the rational administration of social life has been superseded by unlimited, uncontrolled expenditure?

Only if we assume that the total commodity, or the total spectacle, is the final realization of Bataille’s immediacy. Goux himself suggests otherwise when he uses phrases like “abstract aestheticization” and “ideology of consumption.” Power is obviously at stake here, and this works against his claim that the postmodern spectacle is a Bataillean transgression of use-value. Transgression, for Bataille, presupposes a limit to be crossed. It is a lived experience in which utility and its violation are in constant tension; they are the maintained tension which Hollier speaks of in his essay “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille.” This tension is itself the result of a hostile relationship to nature, and for this reason it cannot be equated with a fantasy of experience which lifts all prohibitions. If ours is
an age of depthless images, through which the Other is wholly produced, and the world and the self are fully assimilated, then we live without any surpassing of limits, prohibitions, or obstacles. This is why, in his conclusion to “Expenditure and the General Economy,” Michael Richardson argues that Bataille’s theory of transgression cannot be reduced to an alienating spectacle of waste: “In point of fact, capitalism does not escape the logic of Bataille’s dialectic: it does spend and it spends quite as uselessly, quite as prodigally as any other society. What is missing from capitalism is not the fact of expenditure but any sense of a joyous surpassing of limits.” To the extent that we are drawn to a seductive mingling of opposites, by virtue of which the simulacrum of violence puts an end to violence, a vital prohibition remains intact. We lose ourselves in the commodity, but a calculating power is still at work; for we do not lose ourselves in the immanence of others. We do not acknowledge, in the production of all things, the passions which unite us in death and dying. If political economy has always encouraged loneliness and isolation, then we cannot argue that Bataille’s expenditure is the endorsement of an ahistorical, post-bourgeois aestheticization of social life. This is why Roger Caillois, with whom Bataille collaborated, distinguished various forms of excess expenditure.

One form of self-release that cannot be reduced to a simple individuality is the mystical point of communication. In this regard, Bataille is fond of quoting the evangelical law: “Man must die that he may live.” It is not our attachment to the self which raises us to the heights of mystical union with God. We are transformed in God, we are in solitude with God, to the extent that we are in submission to His will. We must therefore abandon ourselves to the will of God: “We can ascertain if we are in the right spiritual state by whether we would have bliss and joy in abandoning and taking leave of our own natural will and in going out of ourselves entirely in all those things which God wills us to endure.” This Eckhartian doctrine requires an absolute unity of the will. It is by the desires of the flesh, as opposed to the highest powers of the soul, that we are distracted from the divine will of God. In place of these desires we ought to submit to God and love one thing only: His eternal, uncreated goodness. As long as we are motivated by the desires of the flesh, instead of the will of God, we are necessarily divided against ourselves. Hence we are tempted by worldly things even as our essence is constituted by the unchanging love of God. It is unthinkable, then, that we might restore ourselves to God without transcending finite limitations and desires. The will of the flesh, which is given to a multiplicity of transitory, external things, cannot be reconciled to a uni-
fied truth. When we are consoled by God, when we are poor in spirit, we are likewise transformed by His infinite goodness. That is to say, we are necessarily taken outside of ourselves beyond space and time: "Where is my final goal, toward which I should ascend? It is beyond all place." To the extent that we are determined by creatures, from which all suffering arises, it is impossible to surrender ourselves to an unbegotten-begetting of love. Temporal goods are merely a distraction to this magnificence and beatitude of God. Accordingly, then, the mystics advise that we should not concern ourselves with self-interest but become empty so that we might ascend to His overflowing goodness. As for Silesius, we die so that we may truly live: "Because through death alone we become liberated, I say that it is the best of all the things created."

God, in weakness, is more powerful than death. Christ upon the cross is the weakness that we should bear within ourselves. It is not so much that the mystics despise life, but in transcending the self to the point of suffering they are bound to God. The Christian mystic suffers for righteousness’ sake, which is to say that the meaning of suffering is transformed: suffering for the sake of God is to enter into an exalted state of bliss. Suffering is the will of God, but the will of God remains unaffected by external loss. Detachment from external loss, from the misfortunes of this world, is to will suffering without suffering. As much as Bataille was influenced by Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, Mauss, and the Marquis de Sade, it would be wrong to suggest that his various criticisms of Christian mysticism were unilateral, abstract, or one-sided. His views, to the end, were deeply informed by Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, and Saint John of the Cross. As Peter Tracey Connor has indicated, many of Georges Bataille’s terms have been appropriated from the mystics: the point, abyss, desert, ecstasy, intoxication, nudity, laying bare, incandescence, dramatization, abandonment, meditation. The will to suffering is likewise an important aspect to all of Bataille’s thinking: "If one proceeds right to the end, one must efface oneself, undergo solitude, suffer severely from it, renounce being recognized: to be as though absent, insane over this, to undergo things without will and without hope, to be elsewhere." The will is taken to the limit of suffering which abolishes precisely that which enables this suffering: the will to power ultimately destroys itself. The subject is overcome and affected by its experience, by its absorption into non-knowledge. In this process the cohesion of knowledge is torn apart: the human intellectual apparatus cannot assimilate, subdue, or explain a shattering of the individual which is pure ecstasy, i.e., the point of suffering which is indistinguishable from divine love. Bataille therefore shares with mystics such as Pseudo-
Dionysius a will to suffering, a will to self-destruction, and a will which cannot be recognized or apprehended by the human intellect: “For the truth is that everything divine and even everything revealed to us is known only by way of whatever share of them is granted. Their actual nature, what they are ultimately in their own source and ground, is beyond all intellect and all being and all knowledge.”

There is, nonetheless, a knowable horizon. The seal of God is complete goodness, and as such is the supreme cause of all things. This implies a real existence. It is possible that the reality of God transcends every category of being, but this is not to say that God is equivalent to non-being. By creating all things it is inevitable that God cannot be explained in terms of being or non-being, but only as a kind of superabundance which is infinitely good. For this reason the passing things of this earth should not affect us. The goodness of God is beyond space and time, but it is no less a supreme power which consoles us in everything: pain, affliction, disappointment, emotional distress, and hardship. We are the creatures of God, we belong to God, and we participate in His goodness whenever we abandon ourselves to his unchanging will. Bataille, as might be expected, will argue that the unknown has been surreptitiously linked to the known. A fundamental identification has likewise been formed, and the self is demolished in order to be reconstituted on a higher level; that of timeless perfection. In this respect inner experience and mystical experience diverge: the latter is a category of thought or subjectivity which ultimately satisfies our will to knowledge.

One experience, as opposed to the other, provides us with a calculated answer to passion, a hidden obstacle to the unknowable depths of nature and ourselves: “By inner experience I understand that which one usually calls mystical experience: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of confessional experience, to which one has had to adhere up to now, than of an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatever. This is why I don’t like the word mystical.”

The difference formulated here isn’t merely epistemic. The good person who participates in the eternal reproduction of goodness is emptied of creatures and filled with a pure light. In this way the will of man and the will of God are united in a timeless fashion, distinct from the internal struggles of flesh, embodiment, temptation, and suffering. The mystical experience is divine agony, undoubtedly, but is moreover the relinquishment of self to the point of an absolute separation between good and evil. All of the evils of this world do not reach or penetrate the divine heavens. God does not suffer. God is not afflicted by pain or evil, but eliminates fear and anguish
in His followers. For this reason Bataille’s theory of transgression should not be confused with a transcendence of being which is strictly demarcated from worldly imperfection. The sacred realm, for Bataille, is not distinct from that which horrifies us. Hypostatizing the good as a transcendental power is a calculated renunciation of self: “At some moment or another I must either abandon myself to chance or keep myself under control, like the religious vowed to continence. The intervention of will, the decision to keep clear of death, sin, and spiritual anguish, makes nonsense of the free play of indifference and renunciation. Without such free play, the present instant is subordinated to preoccupation with the time to come.”

The Marquis de Sade’s philosophy is dominated by a single principle: *affirm sovereignty*. There are no moral limits to sovereignty because all limits, from a demythologized perspective, are illusory. It might therefore be argued that sovereignty is the overcoming of boundaries, especially those which have themselves been determined by human weakness. Morality, religion, and social regulation are each derived from the human disposition which cowers before Nature. Their inventions are purely fantastic, and the sovereign individual seeks to undermine them at every opportunity. It should come as no surprise, then, to observe the most extraordinary tastes put on display and defended in the writings of de Sade. For every desire arises from the inner constitution of an individual person, from a combination of the senses and the imagination. To satisfy one’s desire is a purely subjective phenomenon; it is the fulfillment of those drives and impulses which have been provided to us by Nature.

In a certain sense, sovereign pleasure is nothing else than the consummation of desire regardless of moral restrictions. But the libertine is not interested in *all* pleasures: he seeks out only the depraved, immoderate, horrific ones: “If ’tis the filthy thing which pleases in the lubricious act, then certainly the more filthy the thing, the more it should please, and it is surely much filthier in the corrupted than in the intact and perfect object.”

It follows from this that nothing is so degrading or repulsive that it might hinder a sovereign’s taste for criminal passion. There are absolutely no boundaries to pleasure. It is not uncommon for the Sadean hero to drink urine, swallow excrement, or have his anus sewn tight with a sharp needle and spool of cobbler’s thread. The filthiest sexual acts are recommended, profanation is ineluctable, and the infliction of pain, to either victim or libertine, is omnipresent. We mustn’t suppose that these aberrations in taste are intrinsically vile, for they depend upon our individual constitutions, our faculties and affections, which are themselves perfectly natural. It is likewise a fallacy to infer moral consequences from the majority perspective: if an object is found to be disagreeable to the largest number of peo-
ple, and it is only a few individuals who are attracted to it, this tells us nothing about its inherent goodness. In the Marquis’s universe, everything is permitted. The rightness of an action is made acceptable by its very existence: there is not a single thing, object, or action which is contrary to Nature. But are we thus any closer to explaining why it is that the libertine is attracted to crime, murder, rape, and all things repulsive? This question leads us to the heart of sovereign debauchery and what Jean Paulhan has described as the Marquis de Sade’s inexplicable secret.

The secret – if I may say so – is that the Marquis is a masochist. What is broached here is a point of convergence: the laws of pleasure ultimately yield to a cessation of feeling, to an absolute egoism which is unrestrained in its destruction of limits. Insofar as the ego is its own concrete limit, it must be destroyed. Absolute egoism is just that process of negation enjoined by the sovereign attitude: “[I]t is the act of a soul which, having destroyed everything within itself, has accumulated an immense strength which will completely identify itself with the act of a total destruction which it prepares.” This act or process of annihilation culminates in a philosophy of indifference. It is, perhaps, the attitude of indifference which finally realizes the sadistic impulse: the victim’s torment coincides exactly with the voluptuary’s pleasure. To the extent that sadistic crimes take pleasure in absolute egoism, in the confines or freedom of solitude, it is essential that the sovereignty of pleasure remains numb to the suffering of others. The libertine affirms a perpetual state of warfare in which all of us are born “isolated, envious, cruel, and despotic.”

Under these conditions it would be impossible, without a lessening of pleasure, to have empathy for those who are tortured and persecuted. A moral deception, such as guilt or human solidarity, is a mediated comfort which lacks the intensity of crime, blasphemy, and erotic cruelties. The scream of a victim only proves her abject isolation in a world of disorder. The pain, however, is not unbearable. As Roland Barthes writes in Sade, Fourier, Loyola: “The scream is the victim’s mark: she makes herself a victim because she chooses to scream; if, under the same vexation, she were to ejaculate, she would cease to be a victim, would be transformed into a libertine.” This explains why the victim’s frenzy is necessarily conjoined to the criminal’s: they are each reacting, albeit differently, to the same monstrosity of a world. The sovereign embraces that which most of us, as victims, decry. To the extent that absolute egoism is a mode of apathy which embraces the isolation of all individuals, it will always be viewed as a principle of sadistic violence by those who are its victims. But how is it that sadism merges with masochism? And why is such a phenomenon, at least for the Marquis de Sade, dependent upon a
dialectical relation with abject eroticism?

It is certain that the Sadean hero is self-centered. It is equally certain that his heroes exceed, or attempt to exceed, the preliminary demarcations of self-centeredness by an explosion of barriers. Absolute egoism is the rationalistic method to such an explosion. This entails the destruction of empathy, for every moral affection is a consequence of weakness. Individuality is affirmed to the point of breaking off all mediated ties with others, and sexuality is viewed as sadistic in precisely this manner. What is essential is the meaning of pleasure qua criminal: it is its rationality which counts for everything. The transformation of the self in this process of becoming sovereign indicates a denial of others as well as oneself: the sadistic voluptuary eliminates every feeling which is a sign of losing control or being affected from the outside. “Never in his stories does sensual pleasure appear as self-forgetfulness, swooning, or abandon,” writes Simone de Beauvoir. “The male aggression of the Sadean hero is never softened by the usual transformation of the body into flesh. He never for an instant loses himself in his animal nature; he remains so lucid, so cerebral, that philosophic discourse, far from dampening his ardor, acts as an aphrodisiac.”

The absence of shared pleasures in the Sadean network of eroticism is the direct result of this rationalized self-control. The autonomy of the self-enclosed subject obviates any kind of debauchery which is vulnerable to outside affections: every point of contact with the other is a manifestation of strength, superiority, and dominance. Such dominance, however, is exercised over the sovereign as much as the victim. Despite the fact that neither of them share in common pleasures or experiences, they are equally determined by a systematic exploitation of the emotions. The inside is transformed into something dead, unfeeling, and criminal. While the victim’s scream is one response to such a horrifying situation, the sovereign’s ejaculation is another.

This implies that the sovereign undergoes the same torture as the victim, and that his cruelest pleasures are fundamentally sadomasochistic. The one who is powerful is set ablaze by an impersonal crime: we are all victims of Nature, but the affirmation of sovereignty transforms a passive sacrifice into the rationality of pleasure. To the extent that pleasure is derived from pain, from the affirmation of solitude, it is impossible to separate an erotic charge from its abject, impersonal circumstances. The form of crime is dialectically related to that which it overcomes and subsumes. If passion is the epitome of crime, it shows its defiance by an affirmation of the aged, ugly, hideous, foul, and detestable. The difference between moralists and voluptuaries, then, is structured by their respective constitutions: the former are attracted to moral pleasures while “the opposite is the
case for vigorous spirits who are far more delighted by powerful shocks imparted to what surrounds them than they would be by the delicate impressions the feeble creatures by whom they are surrounded inevitably prefer.”

At the pinnacle of crime the libertine becomes insensitive to all shocks. When this stage has been reached there is nothing to fear: the greatest sensual satisfactions are contingent upon radical transformations of being. To be enslaved is to act according to the impulsions of fear; to be liberated is to overcome every anxious state, to affirm the perpetual motion of Nature which culminates, for each of us, in the absurdity of death.

The denial of humanity implicit in our most destructive instincts is shared by the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille. A fear of death may prevent us from seeing any validity or universality in these instincts, but we are no less implicated by their devastating consequences. A total destruction of human limitations is foreshadowed by our own existence, and in this regard humanity is haunted by its inexorable disappearance. The Sadean lawbreaker is enticed by the obliteration of social barriers, and thus, paradoxically, affirms his own death. In this way a practice of indifference toward death, as well as any transformation of being, is conceived as a political weapon. The sovereign attains freedom by transcending his concrete relations with others. For Bataille, however, this transcendence cannot be self-consciously realized. We are apathetic, in a variety of senses, but we are also human, which is to say that we are necessarily anxious:

The figure of de Sade is certainly unsympathetic to people moved by need and by fear. The sympathies and the dreads – the cowardice too, one must add – which determine men’s usual behaviour are diametrically opposed to the passions responsible for the sovereignty of the voluptuary. But this sovereignty is significant because of our wretchedness, and one would be mistaken not to see in the reactions of an anxious man – an affectionate and cowardly man – an immutable necessity; to put it precisely, pleasure itself demands dread as a proper reaction.

Sovereignty is therefore marked by failure. We do not transgress the law without first giving it an objective content, and it is just this content which is motivated by fear and disgust. To overcome fear is to acknowledge its real negativity, which implies, at least for Kojève, a dynamic notion of history.

Kojève’s reading of Hegel emphasizes the result of self-consciousness as a revelation of being which cannot be predetermined. This revelation is a synthesis of space and time, nature and history. On this model, history is founded upon the notion that spirit is nothingness: the subject is a temporal
nonbeing which is itself the nihilation of space, nature, and being. Hence, the revelation of being is mediated by its absence: history is a dynamic process of sublimating that which does not exist. Human desire is not a thing; it is a non-natural object which transcends the given reality of nature. But for self-consciousness to realize itself as a permanent lack of being, as a completely free individual to be recognized by others, it must first of all risk its biological existence in a life and death struggle. It is only through this struggle that immediate self-consciousness overcomes itself and experiences the fear of death in a humanizing fashion. For Kojève,

Man became a Slave because he feared death. To be sure, on the one hand this fear reveals his dependence with respect to Nature and thus justifies his dependence with respect to the Master, who *dominates* Nature. But on the other hand, this same fear ... has a positive value, which conditions the Slave’s *superiority* to the Master. Through animal fear of death the Slave experienced the dread or the Terror of Nothingness, of his nothingness.

Servile consciousness, in other words, is the beginning of actualized freedom. After having glimpsed his nothingness, the slave channels his fear into the concrete action of work. It is by means of this concrete action that the slave is able to understand himself in relation to others. Knowledge and action are therefore historically situated: the transformation of subjective certainty into human reality depends upon the concrete negations of both space and time. Although it is true that nothingness is at the basis of history and time, self-consciousness, or spirit, is realized through its objective determinations. By working on nature, self-consciousness reflects itself outside of itself in a historical progression which ultimately yields universal recognition. This final stage of absolute knowledge, which is perforce real and concrete, is a maintained form of nothingness, that is to say, of freedom. It is born from desire and reflected in work. But to the extent that work is work for another, in conformity to an idea which is hostile to the worker, the end of history which finally surpasses work cannot be predetermined.

For Kojève, human desire is structured by a value which raises it above simple, undivided immediacy. Freedom, the object of human desire, is mediated through action. The first action which distinguishes human nothingness from biological necessity is the fight for recognition. It is precisely this fight which marks the advent of deliberate evolution, that is to say, of historical self-consciousness. The project of human desire is thus conditioned by risk, confrontation, and struggle: “In other words, man’s hu-
manity ‘comes to light’ only if he risks his (animal) life for the sake of his human Desire.” Without a doubt, this risk of immediate life for human life is teleological: it is done for the sake of creating something new, something which doesn’t yet exist. Man’s humanity is developed by an action which is itself the annihilation of present being in favor of future being. The fight for recognition, in this case, desires a fundamental substitution of values whereby animal life is subordinated to the establishment of autonomous existence. The risk, nevertheless, is real. It may also be intentional, but for exactly this reason it is related to an ideal: the teleological action which determines the risk is based upon a future goal which has yet to be created, and therefore cannot be said to exist in a predetermined fashion. For Kojève, since “Spirit is the identity of Being and the Subject, one can deduce from it the earlier opposition of the two and the process that overcomes that opposition. But starting with the initial opposition, one can deduce neither its being finally overcome, nor the process that leads to it.”

The future is a phenomenological opening only to those who desire it, to those who seek to change the world. It is the result of a dialectical, historical negation (or set of negations), as opposed to being a given reality. The revelation of being therefore presupposes the very time which it supersedes. As a monument to its historical past, the reconciliation of space and time preserves their opposition: it is the concrete realization of nothingness which is embedded in nature, or static being. The overcoming of time is concrete, which is to say that it maintains exactly that which it annihilates: the destructive, unforeseeable consequences of history. If these consequences were fully determined in advance, from the beginning, then space and time could never be reconciled, for they would not have been opposed to one another. It is thus only by risking his life, by opposing himself to his natural, immediate instincts, that man achieves self-awareness and rises above “mere animal sentiment of self.”

Kojève’s phenomenological anthropology is one of action, history, and desire. It is a theory of dynamic change motivated by existential nothingness. Self-consciousness is no longer based upon a model of the understanding which is passively taken up by its object of contemplation. To the contrary, human desire is an action which creates itself in opposition to the given reality of being: “[I]n order to realize itself, Desire must be related to a reality; but it cannot be related to it in a positive manner. Hence it must be related to it negatively. Therefore Desire is necessarily the Desire to negate the real or present given.” Human desire is a transformative absence, which is to say that it is related to being as the negation of being. For Kojève, the presence of absence is only realized to the extent that it re-
lates itself to its other, to that which serves as an obstacle to human self-consciousness. There is no time without space. There is no self-consciousness without the immediacy of being which is negated, transformed, and sublimated via work. Time exists for us, that is to say, by means of an action which creates the future, past, and present. It is for this reason that Kojève argues that the real endures in time as its own remembrance: “[T]he historical movement arises from the Future and passes through the Past in order to realize itself in the Present or as temporal Present.” To negate the real is to preserve it as memory. The actualization of time is the result of a humanizing process: man creates the future by transforming a given-reality into a recognizable concept, meaning, or essence. But at the end of history man’s concept of himself, and concept of the world, is finally completed: the abstraction of meaning from concrete reality is no longer determined by human negativity. Henceforth it is the comprehension of negativity which surpasses negativity. One might therefore contend that post-historical consciousness has regressed to the passive, contemplative stage of understanding; but in fact there is a critical difference between the first and last stages of human desire: the abstraction of meaning which completes history presupposes the radical negativity which it overcomes. All action is the remembrance of a thing which ceases to be a thing: it is the transformation of being, or given-reality, into the real past. The object of post-historical consciousness is therefore a process of absorbing and assimilating historical action. The eternal truth is the absorption of history.

Nevertheless, a subterfuge remains and resides in the fact that post-historical negativity is useless. The free activity which is a kind of destruction without destruction, or negation without negation, is the abiding recollection of nothingness. It is the remembrance of time. But this implies a collapse of the past and present into a constant, unrelenting awareness of one’s own mortality. Hence the subterfuge: “In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being.” Perpetual awareness of dialectical finitude is either a subterfuge or it requires one: it is merely an abstract ruse to the extent that it claims to exist as both consciousness and the death of consciousness. It is more than a ruse if it is not simply the consciousness or philosophy of death, but likewise the negativity which exceeds itself as the necessity for useless action, a necessity which is better described as a “malaise” when it reconciles truth and desire.
The malaise that afflicts us at the end of history, when all things have been finished or performed, can only be explained by the urgent need to act even in a world which is fully assimilated to our humanizing, collective desires. We are not satisfied by satisfaction alone. The man of recognized negativity, who has everything to lose, will subject his negativity once more to the unforeseeable possibilities of death and nothingness: “Thus, once again, he discovers something “to do” in a world where, from the point of view of actions, nothing is done anymore. And what he has “to do” is to satisfy the portion of existence that is freed from doing.”62 It may be true that the past is formed by the future and thereby determines the real quality of the real present. The present, however, is no less revealing than the past: at each and every step it is the manifestation of time as a dialectical result.64 Bataille writes that Hegel “did not know to what extent he was right,” which means in this context that the real present, including that of post-historical consciousness, is conditioned by the very negativity from which it is derived.65 There is no limit, human or otherwise, to the overcoming of man in favor of space, nature, and being. In every way possible the life and death of mankind will be forgotten, and at the end of history the revelation of being, or the coming together of space and time, will occur at precisely the moment when it is released from time altogether.

Inasmuch as sensuality and prohibition, luxury and non-luxury, are categories of human existence which cannot be separated, which necessarily overlap, there is a nearly invisible line which unites and distinguishes them. This does not imply, however, that transgression is fully explained by the historical context from which it arises. We are torn by the sensuality of a moment which amplifies self-identity to the point of overcoming itself: “I matter insofar as I am in the world, not as a stranger in closure and self-isolation, but as a particle of energy blending into the light. Thus I see that if I am to live, it is on the following tragic condition: that, relinquishing this life of mine, I give myself to that which knows nothing of me, to that which is exterior to myself.”66 Bataille’s thought is counter-intuitive to those post-structuralists who privilege the reversibility of social categories by deconstructing the myth of an absolute outside.67 By positing an exterior world indifferent to the exigencies of human action, and which can be used to consolidate the foundations of autonomous subjectivity, it would appear that Bataille has foreclosed the possibility of a politically informed critique of self-identity.68 In his writing, however, it is precisely the tragic condition of self-sacrifice which opens up the self to its own impossibility, to its inexorable overcoming. The metaphysics of death, for Bataille, ensures the precariousness of self-identity which is never complete, never still, never
closed. I have elaborated four strategies of containment in relation to this precariousness, none of which should be confused with Bataillean principles of loss, expenditure, or excess. The basic form of containment, in each of the four strategies, is constituted by a leveling down of the outside world to an objectified presence. But this is not to argue, in conclusion, that Bataillean transgression is merely negative or reactive. It is opposed to the processes of containment on a singular condition, and this condition is fulfilled in the affirmation of energy which can never be reduced to a closed economy of signs. It is impossible to affirm transgression apart from its prohibitions, apart from the very categories of reactionary politics which it seeks to rupture, but it is equally impossible to affirm values without likewise affirming their unequivocal dissolution. Transgression is precisely this affirmation.

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NOTES

6 Located in the second section of part four: “The Bourgeois World.”
8 Bataille, The Accursed Share, p. 120.
11 This is also why, once again, he refuses to long for a bygone medieval world of
I am not here intimating that the Calvinist work ethic is still the defining feature of capitalism. Goux is right: Benjamin Franklin’s purity of spirit no longer prevails. But he misses a subtle point: the corpulent desires of our culture, and that of many cultures, are dominated by excess and waste in a specific manner. Our grand spectacle of waste is an appropriation; it is today’s version of a thing, an object, or an absolute God. Certainly, then, play and work coincide in a unique historical moment; but it is also valid that nonproductive expenditure, generally speaking, exceeds all of its concrete historical instantiations, thereby indicating that play cannot be reduced to its objectifications.


I speak as if there were a single power structure. This idea may stem from Debord’s way of putting the point, since his is an argument of dialectics and ideology. I am more inclined to accept a Foucaultian notion of power which rejects the language of ideology, but I use Goux’s voice for the sake of argument.


Richardson, Georges Bataille, p. 95. Although Richardson’s conclusion is technically correct, it doesn’t follow from his own premises. He claims that Bataille should have a fitting response to advanced capitalism, but fails to make this response since he posits the generation of energy and excess independently of work. It’s true that there is a mode of primary excess stipulated in the text, but this is never perceived as ahistorical for humans. His reading of Bataille, on this score, is a gross mischaracterization.

Baudrillard, Screened Out, p. 93.

Bataille writes that we cannot overcome our intrinsic isolation; but this isn’t to suggest that all communication takes the form of a purely simulated exchange of signs.


25. Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, pp. 68-9: “If you wish to be filled with God and divine joy, then you must pour the creatures out of yourself.”


28. We can see, in this formulation, the convergence of many elements. In his thinking on inner experience Bataille is reworking all of the influences which were designated above: sacrifice in Mauss, death in the Marquis, the will to power in Nietzsche, and so on.


30. Bataille formulates this criticism not only in relation to neoplatonic mystics, but also those who stress the sensuous aspects of fusion (*Inner Experience*, p. 5).

31. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 3; OC, V: 15. The language deployed here seems to indicate that Bataille is referring only to Catholic mysticism; but I think his general point is applicable to any form of self-release or transcendence which equates that experience with a higher, indisputable authority.

32. This elucidates why we are consoled by God: his reality is a full presence of being. Evil is the absence of being, and therefore we only suffer to the degree that we are removed from goodness.


40. Simone de Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?” in eds. Austryn Wainhouse and
Richard Seaver, *The 120 Days of Sodom* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 21. Because she further argues that the opacity of experience disappears once it is intellectualized, Bataille would disagree that there is such a strict division between representation and its other, as if the anger of one moment is divorced from its positional representation in another.

41 Sade, *Justine*, p. 661.

42 This brings us back to the question of simulated values in a post-industrial society: is it too much to say that postmodern consumption is a thoroughly sadistic practice? By cultivating indifference toward the suffering of others, by mediating our exchanges according to rules of separation implicit in our excess commodities, are we not ourselves entirely sadomasochistic? Or is the ubiquity of the spectacle only a shadow of a deeper violence which ruptures history by implicating rationalistic sadism in its excluded other: trepidation, fearfulness, and panic?


44 Blanchot and de Beauvoir have cited this fact as one reason for the endless repetition in de Sade's texts: criminal voluptuaries are never satisfied; every crime deserves another.

45 According to this scenario man's lack of being only fulfills itself at the end of history, when man is no longer man.


47 That is to say, knowledge is arrived at through a historical praxis, i.e., through work.

48 Bataille's use of the term 'nothingness' is not exactly the same as Kojeve's. Static being, for Bataille, is a kind of nothingness because it exists without meaning. Time is the annihilation of being and consequently the creation of limits, definition, and meaning. But since all of these limits are ultimately sacrificed to nothingness, the distinction that arises between the value of freedom and the meaninglessness of being is scarcely recognizable.

49 It is important to keep in mind that this is Kojève's reading of Hegel. Marx Wartofsky was the first to warn me of its idiosyncratic blending of the master/slave dialectic, realism, atheism, existentialist freedom, anthropology, death, post-historical animalism, and Marxist revolution.


51 This helps us to clarify a distinction between the Divine Marquis and Hegelian dialectics. The mastery of death, in the former, is attained without fear, without a genuine risk. In dialectical recuperation, however, mastery comes into being – not through a mechanical repetition of discourse and discursive acts – but through a
progressive repetition which is only progressive to the degree that it confronts real, objective opposition to its subjective certainty.


56 This order is important as a counterpoint to linear temporality (p. 134).


58 This final stage of post-historical consciousness is described by Kojève as “Man’s perfect understanding of his death (p. 258).” It would thus appear to us that for Kojève a complete understanding of one’s being is equivalent to a paradoxical memory of death.

59 Such negativity is the freedom which post-historical mankind enjoys in the realms of art, love, and play (p.158n6). The disappearance of man properly so-called, for Kojève, is influenced by Marx’s distinction between the realms of necessity and freedom (p.158n6).


61 Bataille’s 1937 letter to Kojève, composed in response to a lecture given at the College of Sociology, is thus an important contribution to understanding some of the causes of boredom, apathy, malaise, and the role of art in rupturing “recognized negativity.”


64 The point being that every result is a concrete reality which is, qua reality, susceptible to further movements of change, historicity, and violent dismemberment.

65 Keep in mind that Bataille’s scrutiny of Hegel is heavily influenced by Kojève’s lectures.


67 I am thinking here of Mark C. Taylor, Baudrillard, and Butler.
Butler's remarks are trenchant and insightful on this point: the outside becomes inscribed within certain power relations underpinning the fragmented conditions of autonomy installed as natural, legitimate, and unified.
“Edging Back Into Awareness”; How Late it Was, How Late, Form, and the Utopian Demand

**Dougal McNeill**

You taught me language, and my profit on't

Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you

For learning me your language!

No-one manages openings quite like James Kelman. Here is our point of entry into How Late It Was, How Late, this essay's case study:

Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then other
words...His feet were back in view. He studied them; he was wearing an auld pair of trainer shoes for fuck sake where had they come from he had never seen them afore man auld fucking trainer shoes. The laces werenay even tied! Where were his leathers? A new pair of leathers man he got them a fortnight ago and now here they were fucking missing man know what I’m saying, somebody must have blagged them, miserable bastards, what chance ye got.\(^1\)

This is Sammy Samuels, an out-of-work builder’s labourer recovering from a big night, and about to receive a blinding beating from the Glasgow police. *How Late is Was, How Late* is the record of his journey of survival through the de-industralised and blighted landscape of a Scotland damaged by Thatcherism. Its one of the great novels of the 1990s and, on my first encounter with it, I read Kelman’s style as a sort of bravura recreation of modernist stream-of-consciousness. But, on closer inspection, *How Late it Was, How Late* reveals itself as having a narrator quite distinct from Sammy himself:

Okay, cutting a long story short here cause Sammy’s head was getting into a state and what was coming out wasnay always very good. The guy was fuckt I mean put it that way, he was fuckt, so there’s nay sense prolonging it. If ye’re wanting to play fair: alright? Let it go, fucking let it go, just let it go, a wee bit of privacy, know what I’m talking about, ye give a guy a break, fuck sake, sometimes its best just accepting that. (51)

Who is speaking here? This is a question with political consequences, and yet critics offer strategically vague evasions. For Liam McIlvanney "Kelman’s novels are first person narratives told in the third person"\(^2\) while, for Cairns Craig, this is an example of a “narrative voice hovering between that of the character and that of the narrator.”\(^3\)

Kelman is himself a committed and active socialist, and his novels have long concerned themselves with working-class themes, and so it is no wonder that he has attracted a left-wing readership. This narrative dilemma or confusion has an added political charge and import for these socialist readers because, in its searing and endless negativity, Kelman’s work seems to set limits on the imagination and to repudiate alternatives or possibilities for opposition: “folk take a battering but, they do; they get born and they get brought up and they get fuckt. That’s the story; the cot to the fucking funeral pyre” (11). *How Late it Was, How Late* takes class and class relations as its organising theme and raw material: if, in doing so, it succeeds only at the cost of denying any possibility of social transformation or break then this is bitter organisation indeed. Many readers find Kelman’s
writing a bleak option, “possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism taken to its extreme”⁴ where “there is no hope of transformation: there is no sustenance in community.”⁵ On this reading, How Late it Was, How Late, is not a politically inspirational or valuable work, but merely another record of the depressing small-change of the present.

One solution to this dilemma is to harness the novel’s political energies by focussing instead on its realism, and on the sort of reliable information it produces about the effects of neo-liberalism and unemployment. But the novel itself, throughout and amongst its draining negativity, insists on a focus on social transformation and the need for breaks, and radical breaks at that. Sammy is, at times, no mean dialectician:

So what Sammy was feeling was the opposite of the opposite, in other words, he fucking was hemmed in man know what I’m saying, hemmed in: and it was gonny get worse, afore it got better; that was a certainty, it was gony get worse. His entire approach had to be changed. The whole set-up. Everything. (133)

I want to argue for a shift in focus around Kelman by arguing in this essay that this need – “feeling the opposite of the opposite” – can be used a spring-board to turn the very negativity of How Late it Was, How Late towards politically emancipatory and positive ends. The idea of the Utopian demand suggests ways that Kelman’s alleged pessimism can be tranformed from a problem into the outline of a solution. Scholarship around Kelman is currently at an impasse, where his novels are either read at ever-increasing levels of philosophical abstraction – and thus removed from the promise of political intervention – or pressed into the service of an ideology quite alien to that of his own political energies, that of a de-classed Scottish nationalism. Reading this great realist for his Utopian demands was suggested to me by the programmatic intervention of Archaeologies of the Future. “Utopia can serve the negative purpose,” Jameson argues, “of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment ... therefore the best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively.” “The Utopian remedy,” in his scheme, “must at first be a fundamentally negative one ... diagnostic interventions [are] maps and plans to be read negatively.”⁶ Kelman’s voice, and the political responsibilities he associates with it, are an instance of the Utopian remedy, where the very negative and hopeless initial reactions it produces in us are, in turn, spurs to consider deeper social implications.
Edging Back Into Awareness

The dominant mode for approaching Kelman at the moment is the philosophical, and the most interesting recent scholarship examines How Late it Was, How Late against a background of existentialism and the various philosophical questions around subjectivity raised by his characters and their dilemmas. This work is important, and certainly puts paid to the lies of literary journalism that paint Kelman as some sort of “illiterate savage,” but there is a danger that, in pursuing the argument at such a level of abstraction, vital energies in Kelman’s realism will be lost. One aims to rise from the abstract to the concrete, and so much of the concentrated political context of Glasgow in How Late it Was, How Late is skipped over by critics anxious to reach the novel’s philosophical crux; I can’t help but suspect there is an element of ideological repression at work. Sammy is scornful of “the gentry…at Ibrox Park” (67), is recommended a blind charity “out the Gallowgate…nay offense – if you’re a Tim I mean” (92) and associates with “Tam Roberts, the political” (168); in other words, How Late it Was, How Late is studded with reminders of sectarianism, something too many are in a hurry to forget. This is, to put it another way, not a novel about subjects thrown into Being, but much more about determinate political subjects thrown up against the barriers of sectarianism, anti-Catholic bigotry and the rest of that dense web which is Glasgow political life. It is, in Auerbach’s neat phrase, “fraught with background,” a background too quick a turn to the philosophical threatens to lose.

It would be false to take the philosophical reading as a complete retreat from the text’s political potential, though. Cairns Craig and others have used these philosophical investigations as a starting point for constructing a politics out of How Late it Was, How Late. Kelman’s “working class characters…are the sites,” Craig suggests, “not of a social – a class – conflict, but of an existential awareness from which most human beings are insulated by their society.” “The isolation of Kelman’s characters, in other words,” he continues in a recent essay, “replicates the isolation of the Cartesian/Kantian ego, but the linguistic structure and invocation of ‘you’ implies an entirely different conception of the self as always in relation with the Other.”

Craig’s readings are richly rewarding but, finally, this argument must be considered unacceptable. Firstly, “existential awareness,” for those of us who agree with Jameson that “social collectivity [is] the crucial centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalisation,”
must be connected with some sort of narrative of collective transformation or wider social and historical awareness if it is not to be mere utopian compensation (of the old-fashioned, mystical-compensatory, bad kind). More worryingly, though, Craig's suggestion that Kelman can produce an "entirely different conception of the self" – that these texts imply imagined communities populated by subjects of a new and post-Cartesian/Kantian kind – resolutely excludes half the human race. Kelman's fictional worlds are thoroughly male affairs, and any utopian constructions out of these worlds will exclude women quite completely, something that ought to give us pause for thought at the very least.  

**Utopian Programmes**

The philosophical reading is, then, necessary but insufficient; scholars as attentive as Gardiner and Hames uncover material and concerns for future investigation but the socialist reader, like Forster’s India, is forced to say “not here” and “not yet.” Other dilemmas still confront us. The most dominant of these, and the reading currently most active in inhibiting the political energies of the text from being released, is the nationalist case. More often asserted than argued, the nationalist case assumes that, because Kelman is Scottish and a writer, he must therefore be allied as a Scottish writer to the cause of Scottishness. Kelman himself has done more than enough to try and discredit this view (“it isn’t a nationalist point I’m making; I’m a socialist, and I’m talking about class”) but the nationalist case, travelling as it is with the stream of recent political trends, continues.

There is nothing in *How Late it Was, How Late*, though, to suggest much affinity with the ideologues of Scottish nationhood; indeed, the most constant cultural referents are to working life and music more than any putative unified Scottish culture, and Sammy’s primary alienations are all structured around the logic of class. Not only are Sammy’s experiences unlikely to be familiar to residents of Bearsden or Milngavie, nationalist readings also miss the extent to which the language Kelman insists on is a class language.

Still, as Sammy himself is well aware, a story cannot escape its setting or the context of its readers’ political world:

Funny how ye telt a story to make a point and ye fail, ye fail, a total disaster. Not only do ye no make yer point it winds up the exact fucking opposite man, the exact fucking opposite. That isnay a
misunderstanding it’s a total...plus some folk, they’re never happy unless they’re giving ye a sharp fucking talking to...some of these other cunts man they think they know and they fucking don’t. (17)

This “total disaster” points to where the How Late it Was, How Late's political energies are at their most productive: in Kelman’s demand for a working-class narrative voice.

A Stick of Dynamite: the Utopian Demand

Once the police have seized him, Sammy realizes how important making sense of his own life has become. He needs a story:

That was for him but no for the sodjers. It was him needed it, the story. Once it was there solid in that fucking nut of his then fine, it was alright; a stick of dynamite man that was what they would fucking need. Other stuff he could let slip, it didnay matter. Know what I’m saying, once the solid stuff was there, he could let slip the other stuff. (25)

This is a novel conscious of the importance of narrative and narrative forms, and of the political implications surrounding who structures and controls these forms: “there’s a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody, know what I’m talking about, being somebody?” (241) Kelman has outlined a whole writerly methodology to attempt to recognise and overcome this problem: “in prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities.”

“...I wanted to write as one of my own people”, he writes, “I wanted to write and remain a member of my own community.”

This commitment helps explain the narrative dilemma I opened this essay with; far from being a variation on modernist stream of consciousness, How Late it Was, How Late has a conventionally third-person omniscient narrator, but one in solidarity with his subject and characters: “then they turned a corner into the back close. But ye’re as well drawing a curtain here, nay point prolonging the agony.” (6) This solidarity is more than Auerbach’s “concrete vigour of the venacular” and marks out areas for real literary innovation and inventiveness in the realist tradition. But it is the eloquent ugliness of the book – its much-noted obscentities, repetitions and borrowings – that mark this as a utopian demand. Kelman’s
desire to write and remain a member of his community – he was for many years a construction worker before getting the chance to write full-time – is as much an organising question for his works as it is a statement of achievement. The Adorno of *Aesthetic Theory* suggests a way to approach this problem:

If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions...Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when art’s other is used as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference. Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogenous to it, its autonomy eludes it.¹⁸

What is heterogenous to the artwork here is the working class community and its own possibilities for expression and organisation; in answering the challenge to write a narrative that rejects “methods of exclusion” Kelman in turn produces a work which questions what an art of working-class expression (“art’s other”) might look or sound like. The formal and political advances this method offers for realism are thrown into relief when we consider Kelman against his predecessors. Dickens and Lawrence wrote their narratives in standard English and reserved ‘dialect’ or ‘class’ speech (as if standard English is not itself always already a ‘class’ speech so ingrained we no longer hear it) for moments bracketed off in quotation: Stephen Blackpool and Mellors ‘authenticate’ the very texts they are internally distanced from. In the Scottish context, Hugh MacDiarmid took the rather odd option of striving for realism by making up and then using a language nobody actually spoke, and dotting it with apologetic apostrophes – “a triumph o’ discord shairly” – every time it departed from standard spelling. Against this backdrop one can see how *How Late it Was, How Late*’s stylistic organisation truly becomes a question, in Adorno’s phrase, when it raises for the reader, with a shock, the very impossibility of the sort of community self-expression Kelman makes so central to his aims. Whatever *How Late It Was, How Late*’s aesthetic achievements, it remains a record of failure, as Sammy not only fails to narrate his own story but finds himself at the mercies of the state and its police. Sammy survives, but only just, and his struggle is one always on the edges of inarticulate incomprehension (“the trouble is most cunts arenay able to think. Including Sammy, let’s be honest, a bit of honesty” 288). Kelman cannot write and stay a member of his (working-class) community precisely because, for socialists like himself, the working class lack control of the means of
communication and expression as much as they lack control of the means of production. Stephen Dedalus recognised what implications this subjugation has for language and speech:

The language which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. 19

Following this, *How Late it Was, How Late*, is, by its own author's ambitions, a failure, a carefully recorded story of “unrest of spirit.”

What, then, of the Utopian demand? Kelman’s demand suggested to me the discussion of full employment in *Archaeologies of the Future*. In the leftist demand for full employment, Jameson explains,

The Utopianism of the demand becomes circular, for it is also clear, not only that the establishment of full employment would transform the system, but also that the system would already have to have been transformed, in advance, in order for full employment to be established. I would not call this a vicious circle, exactly; but it certainly reveals the space of a Utopian leap, between our empirical present and the Utopian arrangement of this imaginary future.

The employment demand, furthermore,

Returns upon our present to play a diagnostic and a critical-substantive role: to foreground full employment in this way, as the fundamental Utopian requirement, then allows us to return to concrete circumstances and situations and to read their dark spots and pathological dimensions as so many symptoms and effects of unemployment. 20

The demand for a working-class voice and speech carries out a similar diagnostic task in the field of communication. *How Late it Was, How Late* is, undeniably, Sammy’s narrative, but it is equally a narrative of inexpressive and caged un-expressiveness. The narrative stresses its typicality and unexceptional status (“its no as if he was fucking special but man I mean he wasnay earmarked for nay fucking glory” 115) in order to underline its tensions and limits; Sammy’s constant swearing shows the limits of his language, the limits of control and expressiveness he has over his language and his life. They are, in Joyce’s phrase, “so familiar and so foreign” because of the alienated and dislocated position of the
unemployed worker in society. Sammy’s is a record of what Jameson identifies as the “psychic misery involved in chronic unemployment, the demoralization, the morbid effects of boredom and the waste of vital energies and the absence of productivity.” A narrative of psychic misery and demoralization will not register the shock – and the urgency – of its material unless it fails: the unalienated jobless worker able to find meaning through self-expression is a utopia of a quite different kind. Sammy’s tale is the tale of a break-down and, as such, itself starts to fracture and breakdown. His language, under the strain of the Utopian demand, staggers under its own ambitions and materials. This novel is a record of that position, but it cannot be a solution to it. *How Late it Was, How Late* is alive to these tensions, and ends not with Sammy’s transformation but with his escape, to England: “then the door slammed shut and that was him, out of sight.”

Kelman demands a narrative voice and a prose that eliminates the distance between author and character and, as part of this, demands a writing that keeps him part of his own community. But this is a community, whatever local rebellions and subversions doubtless exist, currently unable to express itself other than in the language provided for it by the ruling order and structure. In failing to carry out its own tasks, *How Late, It Was, How Late* demonstrates these tasks’ necessity and vitality. “Utopian circularity,” Jameson contends, “becomes both a political vision and programme, and a critical and diagnostic instrument.” We need a working-class literature and working-class expression from authors still loyal to their communities of production precisely because we cannot have these things; working out why we cannot, and what social forces and structures inhibit our expressiveness and control of communication is spurred on by this realisation – as a “diagnostic instrument” – and by its implications. Sammy’s swearing anger runs up against those very forces preventing the sort of expression *How Late It Was, How Late* presents itself as:

Mister Samuels, I have people waiting to see me.

Christ sake!

I find your language offensive.

Do ye. Ah well fuck ye then. Fuck ye! Sammy crumpled the prescription and flung it at him: Stick that up yer fucking arse!

Yes good morning.

Ya fucking eedjit! Sammy stood there. He started smiling, then
stopped it. Fucking bastard!

Yes, thank you.

Fucking thank you ya bastard. Sammy grasped at the desk; there were papers there and he skited them; he turned and headed to where he thought the door was but banged into something that fell and he stumbled, tried to right himself but couldnay fucking manage it and over he went, clattering into something sharp and solid and he cried out. (225 – 226)

That “something sharp” is more than “our minds’ invisible limits” but is rather a reminder of concrete limits, of institutions, power and direct, class control. “Something sharp and solid” is the reason both why there can be no working-class cultural independence and communication and why, at the same time, we have to tirelessly demand it and seek it out.

*How Late it Was, How Late* stages these debates, a utopian vocation all of its own in these de-politicised and culturally homogenous times. My own tradition has always been insistent on this point:

It is fundamentally incorrect to contrast bourgeois culture and bourgeois art and proletarian culture and proletarian art. The latter will never exist, because the proletarian regime is temporary and transient. The historic significance and the moral grandeur of the proletarian revolution consist in the fact that it is laying the foundations of a culture which is above classes and which will be the first culture that is truly human.

That one can find, in a novel of the neo-liberal 90s, a debate being staged that allows this, the forgotten or well-nigh totally repressed tradition of cultural activism, to be cited and brought back to light; this is an instance of the debate *How Late it Was, How Late* initiates and acts as an example of its Utopian drive and demand. Kelman’s Utopian demand is both for a workers’ language and for a place (Utopia, or, as Jameson uses the term, socialism itself) where such a human language can be realised. As such an investigation, this novel plays its part in helping us to “get back fucking into condition…[to] map out the journey man map out the journey.” (80)
NOTES

1 James Kelman, How Late It Was, How Late (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), p. 1. All further references to this text are contained in the body of the essay.


10 Craig, “Beyond Reason”, p. 274.


12 I owe this point to Carole Jones, suggested in conversation after her “Seeking Disappearance: Body Trouble in James Kelman’s How Late it Was, How Late”, Men and Madness, Manchester Metropolitan University, 29 June, 2007.

13 See, as a chemically pure example, Dietmar Böhnke, Kelman Writes Back: Literary Politics in the Work of a Scottish Writer (Berlin: Galdo and Wilch, 1999).


15 Attitudinal studies, in an added complication, show that Scottish national consciousness is often connected to class concerns and political programmes, and is quite unrelated to support for particular national programmes or aspirations. See


20 Archaeologies, p. 147.

21 Ibid., p. 148.

22 Ibid.


CRISIS OF MEMORY
Traumatic Memory and Holocaust Testimony: Passing Judgement in Representations of Chaim Rumkowski

Adam Brown

To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness stand, or to take the position of the witness insofar as the narrative account of the witness is at once engaged in an appeal and bound by an oath.

A fundamental characteristic of the Holocaust was the unresolvable, arguably unprecedented, ethical dilemmas that confronted many of its Jewish victims. The traumatic experiences of Jews imprisoned within concentration camps and ghettos not only included physical and emotional torment, but also frequently consisted of being coerced into making decisions – what Lawrence Langer terms “choiceless choices” – at the expense of
fellow inmates. In dealing with situations such as these, contemporary understandings and representations face great obstacles, especially when it comes to the question of passing moral judgement. Even survivor testimonies are challenged by this problem. Alan Mintz writes that Jewish “collaboration” was “rife and the object of deep and implacable hatred on the part of Jews who were its victims.” Indeed, as the above epigraph suggests, judgement may itself be considered an inherent part of the testimonial act.

In 1986, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi published a highly influential essay on this very theme. He called it “The Grey Zone.” Levi’s essay addresses the highly complex and sensitive issue of prisoners who, in response to dehumanising and life-threatening persecution, “compromised” themselves by “collaborating,” to borrow the commonly used terms, with their Nazi captors. A key example Levi uses is Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial Judenrat (Jewish Council) official of the Lodz ghetto. Responding to the simplifying effects of the judgements he sees contained within popular histories and films, Levi argues that one should not pass judgment on Jews who found themselves in extreme situations. His concept of the “grey zone” holds that certain “privileged” Jews, including Rumkowski, should not be condemned or absolved for their behaviour in extremis, suggesting that representations of these victims require sustained ambiguity. However, even Levi himself struggles to withhold judgement when discussing Rumkowski.

This paper will explore the theoretical tensions within Levi’s concept of the “grey zone,” and expose what may be termed a paradox of judgment – the perceived need to withhold judgement and the simultaneous compulsion to pass it. To illustrate this, Levi’s paradigmatic analysis of Rumkowski will be compared with the treatment of the Jewish leader in more recent survivor testimonies. It will be shown that in spite of Levi’s call to abstain from judgement, representations of Rumkowski often condemn him for his behaviour, revealing the volatile nature of traumatic memory. Nonetheless, some testimonies also exhibit self-reflexive moments that appear to question the possibility of moral evaluation, and perhaps move towards an acknowledgement of the ambiguity that Levi recommends. To varying extents, the paradox of judgement at the heart of the “grey zone” is visible in all of the testimonies examined.
I. Primo Levi’s “Grey Zone” and the Problem of Judgement and Representation

The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability, and this is often objectively serious, but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgement (29).

When one is faced with a catastrophic event such as the Holocaust, moral judgement is widely perceived to be essential, if not obligatory. However, when confronted with the extreme circumstances of so-called “privileged” Jews under Nazi persecution, it may be impossible to pass judgement on them. “Impossibility” here does not infer that one is literally unable to pass judgement on “privileged” Jews – far from it, as the following analysis will reveal. Instead, the “impossibility” of judgement refers to the perceived invalidity or inappropriateness of all moral evaluation, an impotentia judicandi. This is the problem that Levi’s essay on the “grey zone” engages with. While he maintains that the perpetrators of the Holocaust must be judged for their actions, he warns that judgments of their victims under certain circumstances should be withheld.

“The Grey Zone” is a crucial part of Levi’s engagement with his Auschwitz experience, and is arguably the most influential essay on the Holocaust ever written, having been appropriated, often uncritically, in the fields of Holocaust Studies, philosophy, law, history, theology, feminism and popular culture. The recent feature film entitled The Grey Zone (Lions Gate, 2001) is also inspired by Levi’s essay. The concept of the “grey zone” is essentially a metaphor for moral ambiguity, a conceptual realm that Levi characterises as having “ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge” (27). Levi’s meditation on the “grey zone” was partly motivated by the many representations which he felt trivialised the Holocaust. He singles out popular history, the history taught in schools, and feature films as particularly predisposed to the simplifying trend he identifies, the “Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities,” and resorts to the black and white binary opposition(s) of “friend” and “enemy,” “good” and “evil” (22).

The concept of the “grey zone” is important as it destabilises clear-cut distinctions, such as those noted above, and warns against hasty moral judgement, or, in some cases, calls for it to be withheld entirely. For these reasons, an acknowledgement of the “grey zone” complicates representation, which Levi shows to be strongly related to judgement. Commenting on
the complexity of the camp experience and the human need or desire for “simplification” early in his essay, Levi writes:

The network of human relationships inside the Lagers [camps] was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors. In anyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the Lager is evident the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to repeat Christ’s gesture on Judgement Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates (23).

Here, the notion that simplification results from passing moral judgement in and through representation is clear. Indeed, Levi opens his essay by stressing the prominent – even necessary – place of simplification in human affairs: “What we commonly mean by ‘understand’ coincides with ‘simplify’: without profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions” (22). To put the problem Levi evokes briefly, understanding requires representation, which involves moral judgement, resulting in simplification. While Levi focuses primarily on Auschwitz, his detailed case study of Jewish leader Chaim Rumkowski suggests the associated problems of judgement and representation apply more widely to the ghettos as well.

Levi’s essay focuses primarily on those prisoners who inhabited positions as Kapos (chiefs) of labour squads, members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommandos forced to work the extermination machinery, and Rumkowski. Levi stresses that when confronted by the difficult issue of Jewish “collaboration,” moral judgment would be better entrusted “to those who found themselves in similar circumstances, and had the possibility to test on themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion” (28-9). However, survivors of the Holocaust who could confidently claim that they faced a similar situation to Rumkowski are few, if any. In any case, Levi’s essay itself creates the impression at times that the obstacles to judging these “privileged” Jews apply not only to those who did not experience the camps and ghettos, but also to those who did. In the case of the Jewish Sonderkommandos at least, Levi is explicit: “I repeat: I believe that no one is authorised to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it” (42). This suggests that survivor testimony may also be a potential source of unwarranted judgements. Indeed, in the chapter preceding “The Grey Zone,” Levi meditates on what he calls the “marvellous but fallacious instrument” of memory. Reflecting on the bearing this has on judgement, Levi writes that judges themselves know very well how “it almost never happens that two eyewit-
nesses of the same event describe it in the same way and with the same words, even if the event is recent and neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it” (11). He goes on to write that the extreme situations of the Holocaust complicate matters even more.

Much has been written on the actions of Rumkowski and the Jewish Councils in general, however no substantial attention has been given to the role of moral judgement in survivor testimonies. There is also an ever-expanding literature on the problem of “representing the unrepresentable,” or, in the phrasing of the seminal collection of essays edited by Saul Friedlander, the “limits of representation.” In a sense, the problem of judgement in survivor testimony (or any other representation, for that matter) may be approached as one such “limit.” Robert Rozett writes that firsthand accounts of Jews cannot clarify the Nazis’ motives or plans, but “can only teach us about the effect of the horror on the individual victims and the experiences of the victims facing the horror.” This acknowledgement of perspective does not detract from the crucial importance of survivor accounts, however an awareness of the subjective nature of diaries, memoirs and oral testimonies does raise important ethical questions when considering how survivors represent the situations, experiences and behaviour of victims other than themselves. Most Jews who held leadership positions in the ghettos of Eastern Europe did not survive, and the diary of Warsaw Judenrat official Adam Czerniakow, is one of few testimonies that have filtered down to us, albeit posthumously. The vast majority of the victims who Levi includes in “The Grey Zone” have not left an account for posterity, Rumkowski included.

Merging the generic boundaries of survivor account and philosophical reflection, Levi tentatively takes it upon himself to testify to the experiences and behaviour of “privileged” Jews. At the same time, he warns against any moral judgement of them, drawing himself into a paradoxical situation. In the case of the Sonderkommandos, Levi declares that “our need and ability to judge falters,” stressing that we should “meditate on the story of the ‘crematorium ravens’ with pity and rigour, but that a judgement of them be suspended” (41, 43). Likewise, Levi clearly states that the same impotentia judicandi “paralyses” us when considering Rumkowski’s leadership of the Lodz ghetto. While we should not condemn Rumkowski, he writes that we cannot “absolve him on the moral plane” either (43, 49). In short, Levi holds that certain Jews in extremis should not be condemned or absolved for their actions, suggesting that representations of these victims require some form of sustained ambiguity. Nevertheless, the separation of representation and judgement is far from simple, if not impossible. Although a moral judgement of “privileged” Jews may be illegitimate, representations of such
individuals in survivor testimony reveal that it is also impossible not to judge them. Indeed, even Levi himself cannot avoid judging those he argues should not be judged. While his use of the Italian word *collaborazione* does not evoke the negative connotations often associated with its English translation, Levi’s judgement of “privileged” Jews is evident in various ways throughout his essay, as evidenced in his representation of the Jewish *Sonderkommandos*, discussed elsewhere. Likewise, the paradox of judgement is exemplified in Levi’s representation of Rumkowski. Paradoxically, it would seem, the “grey zone” warns against judgement but at the same time requires it.

**II. Representing Rumkowski: “King of the Jews”**

Levi concludes his essay on the “grey zone” with a detailed discussion of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877-1944), the elderly, failed Jewish industrialist who served as the president of the Lodz ghetto from October 1939 to August 1944. Due to being located in Poland’s most important manufacturing region, Lodz’s financial and material value to the Nazis helped ensure it was the longest surviving of all the ghettos. However, despite only being surrounded by barbed wire and board fences, the Lodz ghetto has been described as “more hermetically sealed off than the walled Warsaw Ghetto.” Facing severe food shortages, the ghetto’s peak population of 750,000 was continuously whittled away by starvation, disease and deportations. By maintaining the levels of production required by the Nazis, the Jewish community’s officials believed that even as the extermination of Jews was well under way (although the time at which this became clear to Jewish leaders is difficult to evaluate), at least a small number could be saved. This seems to be the theory on which Rumkowski’s actions were based, and he was not unique among *Judenrat* leaders in thinking this. Rumkowski was appointed *Älteste der Juden* (“Elder of the Jews”) in late 1939. The fact that all other members of the Jewish Council were executed and replaced soon after, and that Rumkowski himself later died in Auschwitz, demonstrates the precariousness of such a “privileged” position.

Rumkowski oversaw the running of the ghetto until its liquidation just several months before the war’s end. It has been hypothesised that without the Soviet army’s controversial decision to delay its advance into Poland by halting at the Vistula River, little more than 100 kilometres from Lodz, up to 80,000 Jews may have been saved and Rumkowski may even have been remembered as a hero. Nonetheless, for various reasons, Rumkowski has arguably become the most despised “privileged” Jew in all survivor tes-
timony. Even Jacob Robinson, who vigorously defended the Judenräte against Hannah Arendt’s polemics, holds that “Rumkowski’s behaviour is open to criticism.” Although Levi’s negative judgements of Rumkowski are usually (though not always) more subtle than others’, they are still clearly evident throughout “The Grey Zone.”

A key aspect of the paradox of judgement in Levi’s essay is the simultaneous characterisation of the “grey zone” as indecipherable realm and moral spectrum. While Levi invariably treats the “grey zone” metaphorically, the concept also possesses a spatial element, with the word “zone” connoting a physical area that is cut off. In light of Levi’s warning against judgement in the case of “privileged” Jews, the term “grey zone” suggests an indecipherable realm of ambiguity, in which pre-existing moral frameworks do not apply. As Levi writes early in his essay: “The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the ‘we’ lost its limits” (23). However, at various points throughout Levi’s essay, the “grey zone” also gives the impression of constituting a moral spectrum, along which its inhabitants can be situated. Expanding the “grey zone” to incorporate more than only victims in the camps and ghettos, Levi writes at one point that “within [the ‘grey zone’] must be catalogued, with different nuances of quality and weight, Quisling in Norway, the Vichy government in France, the Judenrat in Warsaw, the Saló Republic in Italy, right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks” (27-8, emphasis added). Here, Levi implies that the Judenräte, which includes Rumkowski, may be compared with collaborators whose level of coercion was of an entirely different kind, if coercion existed at all (which in some cases it did not). Indeed, the fact that the collaborationist Vichy regime in France’s unoccupied zone was arguably motivated by strong anti-Semitism and often acted in anticipation of German orders, would seem to disqualify any comparability with the forced cooperation of Jewish leaders.

Levi’s interest in Rumkowski was piqued long before he wrote The Drowned and the Saved. Indeed, the analysis he provides here is almost identical to an earlier attempt to come to grips with the Jewish leader in his “Story of a Coin,” which began as a newspaper article and was eventually published in 1981 in his collection of short stories, Moments of Reprieve. The fact Levi had previously written only about settings and situations he had witnessed or experienced directly is indicative of his personal compulsion to explore Rumkowski’s leadership of the Lodz ghetto. While Levi is not, at least consciously, prepared to condemn Rumkowski, he writes that his apparently “natural” will to power “does not exonerate him from his responsibilities,” declaring that:
If he had survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto which he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor certainly can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself … To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Lodz merchant, together with his entire generation, was fragile (49-50).

While this passage highlights the inefficacy of legal institutions and moral faculties in judging “privileged” Jews, Levi’s argument that Rumkowski should not be judged is contradicted by his suggestion that the Jewish leader had “contaminated” the ghetto, a statement which distracts one from the extreme coercion that he and other Judenrat officials experienced. Having already mentioned the production of ghetto currency, stamps and songs that Rumkowski had dedicated to himself, Levi masks the judgement behind his comment that his subject forced “his histrionic image” on the ghetto’s inhabitants. It would also seem paradoxical to critique the moral framework of individuals living in an extreme situation that is itself beyond evaluation according to contemporary moral standards.

Conceding that Rumkowski’s position was “intrinsically frightful,” Levi writes that “the four years of his presidency or, more precisely, his dictatorship, were an astonishing tangle of megalomaniacal dream, barbaric vitality, and real diplomatic and organizational ability” (45). While Levi portrays Rumkowski as demonstrating, at times, a genuine concern for many of his subordinates, he also characterises him as possessing an arrogant sense of self-importance that proved detrimental to many of the ghetto’s Jews. His representation of the much-reviled Jewish leader is replete with negative descriptors, such as “authoritarian,” “renegade” and “accomplice” (44, 46). Levi also links Rumkowski with the moral standards (or lack thereof) that he perceives in the Kapos, describing him as a “corrupt satrap” who displays the “identification with the oppressor” he had condemned so strongly earlier in his essay (46, 32). Indeed, Levi becomes more explicit towards the end of “The Grey Zone,” not only drawing a parallel between Rumkowski and “the Kapos and Lager functionaries,” but also “the small hierarchs who serve a regime to whose misdeeds they are willingly blind; of the subordinates who sign everything because a signature costs little; of those who shake their heads but acquiesce; those who say, ‘If I did not do it, someone else worse than I would’” (50). By generalising Rumkowski’s “complicity” in this way and making reference to the postwar excuse common among perpetrators, Levi verges on blurring the distinction between victim and perse-
Confidently claiming that Rumkowski “passionately loved authority,” Levi positions him as a self-proclaimed “King of the Jews” who “rode through the streets of his minuscule kingdom, streets crowded with beggars and postulants” (45). This reflects the fact Levi was heavily influenced by Leslie Epstein’s controversial novel, *King of the Jews*, which was also initially to be the title of his “Story of a Coin.” By turns scandalous, compassionate and perversive, the protagonist of Epstein’s fictionalised narrative develops an almost mythological aspect, fluctuating between dedicated representative and egotistical dictator of the ghetto. While Levi’s representation also shifts between positive and negative evaluations of Rumkowski’s character, the manner in which he passes judgement on the Jewish leader is evident in the way he frequently prefaces his critical comments about him. When Levi writes that his subject “must have progressively convinced himself that he was a Messiah,” “it is probable that Rumkowski thought of himself not as a servant but as a Lord,” and “he must have taken his own authority seriously” (46, emphasis added), one might question the validity of making such assumptions under the extremely complex circumstances at issue. In any case, Levi’s rhetoric clearly displays the moral evaluation he otherwise seeks to withhold, and it is evident that he expects his reader will adopt his judgment.

Furthermore, in the same way that Levi implies the Kapos and members of the Sonderkommandos were to some extent naturally predisposed to their positions of “privilege,” there is a strong sense that he thinks the same of Rumkowski. After explicating the addictive and corruptive qualities of “power,” he writes: “If the interpretation of a Rumkowski intoxicated with power is valid, it must be admitted that the intoxication occurred not because of, but rather despite, the ghetto environment; that is, it is so powerful as to prevail even under conditions that would seem to be designed to extinguish all individual will” (49). Significantly, this is the first time in his essay that Levi explicitly prioritises the influence of the human predisposition to “compromise” – in this case, Rumkowski’s alleged lust for power – over the impact of external factors, namely the “choiceless choices” imposed by the Nazi regime in order to pursue their goals.

Most tellingly of all, when Levi states that Rumkowski “must be placed in this band of half-consciences,” he adds that “whether high or low it is difficult to say” (50). The imagery invoked of a “band” along which “privileged” Jews are situated returns us to the paradoxical conceptualisation of the “grey zone” as both indecipherable realm and moral spectrum. Reflecting on where Rumkowski should be positioned on this moral continuum, Levi
gestures at the impossibility of judgement through his expression of uncertainty, his acknowledgement that “it is difficult to say.” This call for sustained ambiguity is also clear in Levi’s rhetorical movement from the particular to the universal, with the end of his essay transforming into a general digression on the corruptive influence of power. Having doubted one’s ability to judge the Jewish leader, Levi states: “We are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours” (50). Nonetheless, Levi’s judgement is clarified in his allusion to Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, which compares Rumkowski with Angelo, the play’s devious and hypocritical villain, who uses his position of power for his own personal gain and attempts to have a man executed for a crime he himself commits.

Levi’s search for a universal “lesson” in the experiences of the ambiguous figures of the “grey zone,” who are both ostensibly beyond, but at the same time subject to, his judgement, is clear in the closing lines of his essay. Here, Levi essentially provides a self-reflexive, pessimistic extrapolation from the historically specific ethical dilemmas facing “privileged” Jews to a despairing social commentary on human nature:

Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility: willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting (51).

Raniero Speelman writes that “this may be the most pregnant of Levi’s sayings and the nucleus of his philosophy. These words link the Shoah to us, just like we are already linked to the Shoah.” Indeed, in placing us in the position of Rumkowski – or at the very least acknowledging the possibility that we may logically be faced with such pressures under the same circumstances – Levi makes a genuine, if unsuccessful, effort to abstain from passing judgement on the Jewish leader.

III. The Persistence of Judgement: Representations of Rumkowski in Recent Survivor Testimony

The tension between representation and judgement can also be seen in the testimonies of two survivors of the Lodz ghetto, both of whom lost their entire families during the Holocaust. One of these survivors is Abraham Biderman, who spent several years in Lodz before being incarcerated in Auschwitz and several other concentration camps. In his recent memoir entitled The World of My Past (1995), Biderman provides a detailed ac-
count of his firsthand experiences, but also occasionally draws on secondary sources to contextualise his memories within a broader historical framework. While he does not always reveal his sources through endnotes, it is clear that his frequent references to Rumkowski are influenced by other texts.

Biderman quotes Rumkowski’s speeches and written proclamations at length, listing the boasts, threats and promises he made towards the ghetto population, and labeling him a “traitor.” Although he briefly mentions that Rumkowski was beaten by the Nazis, Biderman accuses the Jewish leader of acting like a “medieval despot” who “play[ed] poker with the devil.” He frequently contrasts Jews who accepted “privileged” positions with those he describes as “heroes without medals,” the “thousands of unknown and honourable people who refused to bend or be degraded.” Even more judgmentally, and in a manner that arguably overlooks the coercion the Judenräte were subjected to, Biderman holds that under Rumkowski, “the Lodz ghetto functioned autonomously with German precision.” Likewise, he implies a high degree of free will when he claims that Rumkowski “allowed the Germans to use him as their tool in the destruction of his people [emphasis added].”

Later, however, in a section titled “The end of an emperor,” Biderman changes his approach substantially. Contradicting his earlier assertion that Rumkowski played a “leading role” in the drama, he acknowledges that the circumstances dictated by the Nazis meant that Rumkowski had no control over the fate of the ghetto’s Jews. In the same passage, Biderman fluctuates between describing Rumkowski as a “hostage, a pawn, a tool in the hands of a most brutal monster,” and emphasising what he perceives to be his lack of integrity and leadership qualities, his efficiency in following through on German demands, and his failure to refuse the “privileges” given to him. He condemns Rumkowski’s apparent acquiescence to the Nazis’ demand for children as “a fatal, and unforgiveable mistake,” and attributes the longevity of the ghetto solely to the Nazis’ greed. Biderman dismisses all positive appraisals of Rumkowski on this point in the process, even though he admits the Jewish leader negotiated the “quota” of the ghetto’s first deportation down to half its initial number.

Nonetheless, upon narrating Rumkowski’s violent end in Auschwitz, Biderman is prompted to question his and others’ ability to judge him. Describing Rumkowski as beaten half-unconscious upon arrival at the camp before being thrown straight into an open furnace by other prisoners, Biderman asks:

Was Auschwitz the place for justice? It is hard to be a hero. It is just
as difficult to be a judge. I am only a survivor, a witness telling a story the way it unfolded in front of my eyes. And my story is a testimony to all those who lived and died behind the barbed wires of the Lodz ghetto. I leave it for history to judge.\textsuperscript{26}

Here, Biderman connects his testimony to the absence of a testimony by Rumkowski, one of the many who, metaphorically at least, “lived and died behind the barbed wires of the Lodz ghetto.” While negative evaluations of Rumkowski’s behaviour proliferate in Biderman’s memoir, this self-reflexive passage injects a moment of doubt into the survivor’s representation. In his final questioning of the possibility of judgement, Biderman reveals that he too is caught in the paradox of judgement evoked by Levi’s “grey zone.”

The recent testimony of Jacob Rosenberg, an award-winning writer and another survivor of the Lodz ghetto, further reinforces this. In his semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional work, \textit{East of Time} (2005), Rosenberg constructs a mosaic of Jewish experiences in the ghetto. As he notes in the preface to his book: “The anecdotes, incidents and characters that appear throughout these pages come directly from my memories – although some names have been changed, and occasionally I have succumbed to the storyteller’s prerogative (and delight) in a measure of embellishment, not to say invention.”\textsuperscript{27} This admission, like Levi’s acknowledgement of the fallibility of memory, underlines the status of testimony as \textit{re}-presentation.

In the main, Rosenberg represents Rumkowski, one of the few characters in his text to be referred to in several sections, judgmentally. The narrator’s initial references to Rumkowski display familiar moral judgements, describing him as a “king” and “puppeteer” who “mimicked” the Nazi state, and “could definitely not be regarded as a disappointment to his bosses.”\textsuperscript{28} A detailed description of Rumkowski’s perceived elitism, eager subservience to the Nazis, and the hatred he inspired in the ghetto follows. In the chapter titled “Give Me Your Children!”, which recounts the speech in which Rumkowski announced the order for children to be deported, the narrator negatively portrays him as an inexplicable enigma: “More than six decades later, I still keep wondering what sort of a man can bring himself to utter such words.”\textsuperscript{29}

Shortly afterwards, however, in a digression on the hierarchical “pyramid” of the ghetto, of which Rumkowski inhabits the top, the narrator’s tone changes briefly, leaving the reader to contemplate the Jewish leader’s dilemma from a point of attempted empathy. Expressing his dislike of Rumkowski, the narrator nevertheless questions:

But where is the man who can state with conviction whether Rumkowski’s decisions were a product of bravery or of cowardice? His
lot was lonely, to be sure, and very far from easy. Did he have a choice? Perhaps he did, and perhaps he didn't ... And in the end, who knows how many times, during sleepless nights, this man who projected such strength and confidence shrank back in horror at the echo of his own fateful words: ‘Mothers, give me your children!’?\(^{30}\)

In a similar way to Levi and Biderman, this passage, a rupture in the narrative’s critique of Rumkowski, reveals a fleeting – yet strong – degree of uncertainty, both towards the previously demonised figure and towards the capacity for moral evaluation under extreme circumstances. Although not essential to the last line, a question mark is nonetheless provided. Even so, the paradoxical tension between the impossibility and inevitability of judgement continues, as Rosenberg immediately follows this section with a vignette depicting a man’s grief and subsequent suicide at having lost his wife and child to the deportations, perhaps reinvigorating his prior condemnation of Rumkowski.\(^{31}\)

In any case, the uncertainty on the part of Rosenberg is evidently intended to be taken on by the reader, perhaps moving towards the open-ended, sustained ambiguity that Levi’s “grey zone” calls for. Rosenberg’s memoir raises a crucial point that cannot be easily set aside: like most “privileged” Jews, the only words about Rumkowski that we lack and can never obtain are his own. Indeed, Levi himself writes that only Rumkowski could clarify his situation “if he could speak before us, even lying, as perhaps he always lied, to himself also; he would in any case help us understand him, as every defendant helps his judge” (50). Here again, Levi’s discourse still betrays his judgement of Rumkowski while simultaneously emphasising the need to withhold it. It would seem that the tension between representation and judgement in Holocaust testimony is ongoing.

**IV. Conclusion**

Drawing on Levi’s “grey zone” and stressing the collapse of former ethical frameworks based on notions of “dignity” and “freedom” in the post-Auschwitz world, contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that the knowledge that human life continues in “the most extreme degradation,” knowledge that is imparted to us through survivor testimony, “now becomes the touchstone by which to judge and measure all morality and all dignity.”\(^{32}\) However, this is further complicated when judgements proceeding from the inevitable subjectivity of survivor experience and testimony are brought to bear on such controversial figures as Rumkowski, who, unlike some Jewish leaders, left no testimony of his own. To adopt legalistic ter-
minology, with survivors positioned as figures of judgement over “defendants” who have no means to account for themselves, and indeed with testimony itself an inherently judgmental act, it is clear that the representation of “privileged” Jews such as Rumkowski remains a particularly fraught issue.

When it comes to the problem of judgement and representation, the traumatic memories of survivors pose stark problems. Although a moral judgement of Jews in extremis may be illegitimate, as Levi’s essay on the “grey zone” suggests, representations of such individuals in survivor testimony reveal that it may also be impossible not to judge them. Reflecting the paradox of judgement evident in the concept of the “grey zone,” the representations of Rumkowski by Levi, Biderman and Rosenberg all clearly exercise moral judgement. While the self-reflexive moments of uncertainty visible in these testimonies can be seen to approach the kind of ambiguity that Levi’s “grey zone” seems to require, it is perhaps the case that such moments are overwhelmed by the judgements throughout. Not all survivor testimony condemns Rumkowski, however.

In a recent compilation of fragments of survivor testimony titled Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust (2005), Rumkowski’s name appears several times. Stressing the dire circumstances imposed on the Lodz ghetto, Polish-Jewish survivor Roman Halter, whose testimony earlier in the book had criticised Rumkowski’s request for Jewish children, maintains that: “It is important not to accuse Rumkowski and others who were running the ghetto, but to see it now as a totality of what was imposed from Hitler and Himmler down to other SS … I don’t really hold it against Rumkowski and the other ghetto leaders. It was terrible when he said voluntarily, ‘Please give up your children,’ but these times were abnormal, so horrendous, that one cannot rationalize in the circumstances in which we live today, how people behaved and what they did.” Whether or not this constitutes absolving Rumkowski of wrongdoing, a judgement Levi also warned against, is open to debate. It is highly significant that this fragment is located by the editor in a section entitled “Forgiving and Forgetting”.

Earlier in the book, a fragment by Lodz survivor Michael Etkind also mentions Rumkowski, overtly refusing to judge him (although he does use the word collaborate). Etkind, who held a “privileged” position of a different kind as a member of the ghetto’s postal service, addresses the issue of survivors’ judgements of the Jewish leader, thus it would seem fitting to end with his words:

Some resented Rumkowski’s role in the ghetto, but many did not. Had he survived he would have been murdered after the war; as it was he was killed in Auschwitz. But indirectly, because of him, more
people survived in the Lodz ghetto (for longer) than in any other; not those he meant to survive – himself, his family and his friends - but people like myself. He did collaborate … Those he put on the deportations list, because they were not working, hated and resented him; but the people who because of him survived, were very grateful to him … It is impossible to judge.\[34\]

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**NOTES**


17 For further discussion, see Brown, “Trauma,” pp. 155-8.


26 Biderman, *World*, p. 188.
Recreating Postmemory? Children of Holocaust Survivors and the Journey to Auschwitz

Esther Jilovsky

For those whose access to the Holocaust is purely through its post-factum representations, visiting associated sites in Europe is a way of bridging this postmemory with reality. The contemporary experience of Holocaust sites by post-Holocaust generations provides a practical dimension to their perception of the Holocaust, sometimes even evoking a sense of witnessing the Holocaust itself. Consequently, for children of Holocaust survivors, these trips can provide a tool for bypassing the process of secondary witnessing and attempting to become a primary witness of the Holocaust: “She felt annoyed to have been bitten by a fly, in Auschwitz. Still, to come out of Auschwitz with only a bite was something other inmates would have prayed for. She stopped herself. It was not other inmates. It was just inmates. She was not an inmate. Others, clearly distinct from her, were there. She was not there.”1 Visiting Auschwitz allows Ruth, protagonist of Lily Brett’s Too Many Men, to classify herself as an inmate.
By assuming this identity of a Holocaust victim, she attempts to become a primary witness. Yet this process is essentially futile – how can someone become a witness to something they did not actually live through?

Holocaust memoirs, including those by children of survivors, are a type of indirect Holocaust testimony. Based around a family connection to the Holocaust, they usually tell the story of family members who experienced the Holocaust as well as documenting the author’s visit to Holocaust sites. Thus they bear witness both to the events of the Holocaust and the ways in which later generations have been affected. Such memoirs are instances of secondary witnessing, because they re-tell the Holocaust story of family members connected to the author. However, the entwinement of the author’s journey to Holocaust sites complicates this issue, because the protagonist fashions their own memory of the places where the Holocaust occurred, which undoubtedly shapes their representation of their family’s experiences. In order to illustrate the various ways in which this process occurs, three contrasting texts by children of Holocaust survivors will be considered: *The Fiftieth Gate* by Australian historian Mark Raphael Baker, \(^2\) *Too Many Men* by fellow Australian writer Lily Brett, and *Lektionen des Verborgenen* or “Lessons of the Hidden” by German author Helena Janeczek.\(^3\) Each work describes a journey to Poland undertaken by children together with their parents, to seek out the sites of the parents’ lives both before and during the Holocaust. *The Fiftieth Gate* and *Lektionen des Verborgenen* are both memoirs, while *Too Many Men* is a lengthy novel which takes corresponding fictional liberties in its portrayal of what is probably based on an actual trip. Although Brett’s protagonist Ruth is a fictional character, which means that *Too Many Men* cannot be considered a memoir, the many autobiographical elements and countless similarities with Brett’s own life demonstrate that Ruth largely mirrors Brett herself. Baker and Brett are both Australian, though Brett resides in New York, while Janeczek is German born, but has lived in Italy most of her adult life. Consequently, she wrote *Lektionen des Verborgenen* in her adopted language of Italian, rather than German, her mother-tongue. While it is the German version that has been considered for this article, it should be noted that it has not been translated by Janeczek herself, and hence this text contains a further layer of interpretation and representation. Published around the turn of the twenty-first century, these texts epitomise the trend of fashionable genealogy, where tracing one’s family history purports to strengthen one’s own sense of identity. The ensuing investigation will demonstrate the ways in which these writers attempt to bypass the process of secondary witnessing, by considering whether they are actually trying to become primary witnesses of the Holocaust.
Children of Holocaust survivors form a distinct identity based on their common experiences, despite their myriad differences in nationality, religious background and walk of life. After the Holocaust, most survivors did not return to their country of birth, but instead emigrated to various places including Israel, North America and Australia. As a result, their children grew up in a country foreign to their parents, generally with no grandparents or extended family. The fact that many survivors married fellow survivors and had children immediately – perhaps as an attempt to replace their murdered relatives – exacerbated the less than ideal milieu for raising children. Therefore, these children, the so-called second generation, were in many cases adversely affected by their parents’ Holocaust experiences. The consequences can manifest themselves as a psychological condition such as trans-generational trauma, which occurs when the effects of the parents’ trauma are evident in the children, who in turn may even display trauma symptoms, despite the fact that they did not actually undergo the traumatic experience. They may also experience more abstract forms of loss, such as the particular forms of “memory” articulated by many second generation Holocaust survivors as their chief connection to their non-experience of the Holocaust.

Writing by children of Holocaust survivors forms a tangible record of their quest for an identity entwined with the Holocaust. It is a literature of displacement, dominated by an event which occurred before their birth yet which continues to exert influence over their lives. The multi-national, literary second generation began to emerge as a distinct group in the 1970s. The publication in 1979 of Helen Epstein’s account, interwoven with interviews of other second generation survivors from all over the world, Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors set the precedent for the influx of memoirs which followed in the ensuing decades. The English-speaking canon, which stretches from Australia to North America and Great Britain, includes such pioneering works as Jewels and Ashes by Australian Arnold Zable and The War After: Living with the Holocaust by English child of survivors Anne Karpf. Jewels and Ashes depicts Zable’s trip to Poland in the late 1980s interspersed with his re-telling of his parents’ stories. Karpf’s memoir tells essentially the same story but in a different way – it is moulded by her journalistic credentials, in contrast to Zable’s more literary approach. Both works were instrumental in bringing the second generation experience to the attention of the wider population in their respective countries. While these books share a common thread of second generation experience, their differences lie not only in the varying experiences of the authors and their families, but in their contextualisation within different national narratives of collective Holocaust
memory.

The parallel growth of secondary literature in the field, from clinical studies to literary criticism and cultural studies, includes works which straddle the boundary between primary and secondary sources. Many commentators use their position as children of Holocaust survivors to embellish or even validate their expertise in their research, even when the relevance of this connection to their chosen subject is not immediately apparent. One example where the use of this connection is absolutely justified is *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* by Marianne Hirsch, because Hirsch emphasises that her position as a child of Holocaust survivors provides the catalyst for her theory of postmemory, which addresses the relationship people have to significant events which occurred before their birth.\(^8\) In a similar vein, Aaron Hass’ psychological study on children of Holocaust survivors, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation*, integrates his personal story into the narrative, exhibiting his dual perspective of clinical psychologist performing the study as well as his common experience to those he is studying. Moreover, he explicitly states that this personal connection is the very reason behind this study: “I was interested in discovering the extent to which other children of survivors had experiences similar to my own.”\(^9\) The explicit statement of the author’s position as a child of Holocaust survivors does not only occur in books that deal directly with the Holocaust, however. In the Preface to his volume entitled *The Ethics of Memory*, philosopher Avishai Margalit describes his parents’ perpetual discussion about the memory of European Jews murdered in the Holocaust, including their own “huge families.”\(^10\) He mentions this because “philosophy, some philosophy, starts at home. And my parents' debate hovers above the abyss of my concern with memory and the obligations – if there are any – to remember; or, for that matter, to forget and forgive.”\(^11\) Margalit’s familial connection to the Holocaust thereby informs his study, even though his research is not concerned with the Holocaust itself. Thus, second generation commentators use their identity to validate a wide range of research areas and expertise, reflecting both the interdisciplinary nature of Holocaust Studies and the diversity of second generation experience.

Although second generation memoirs are a form of autobiography, they differ from most autobiographies in that they are anchored in an event which occurred before the author’s birth. Written around middle age, they are often evoked by the author’s parents reaching old age and death, which suggests that the impetus for children of Holocaust survivors to explore their heritage becomes more pressing when their link to it is threatened. Furthermore, the centrality of the Holocaust to contemporary Jewish identity, as argued by Peter Novick in relation to American Jewish identity,
means that second generation memoirs are perhaps unquestionably ac-
cepted as normative examples of being Jewish in the late twentieth cen-
tury. The widespread publication of these memoirs suggests a rather 
sympathetic and therefore lucrative market for them, which reflects Norman 
Finkelstein’s analysis of how the Holocaust has been manipulated for fi-
nancial gain. Interestingly, Finkelstein, himself a child of survivors, de-
plores the exploitation of the Holocaust, yet by asserting his identity as a 
child of survivors in his critical text on the Holocaust industry, he may, in 
fact, be interpreted as taking advantage of the very industry he criticises.

As Finkelstein shows, by articulating their closeness to the Holocaust as being a result of their parents’ experiences, children of Holocaust survi-
vors claim their identity as second generation. In using the concept of 
memory to describe their relationship to the Holocaust – defining it in terms 
of their displacement from the events themselves – the second generation 
constructs parameters for their unique position as survivors once removed. 
While it may appear impossible to have a memory of an experience one 
has not personally lived through, it seems that this is, in fact, the case for 
many second generation Holocaust survivors. As trans-generational trauma 
entails the presence of trauma symptoms in an individual who has not lived 
through a traumatic experience, the concept of inherited memory operates 
in a similar manner. Furthermore, the emergence of terms such as Hirsch’s 
postmemory \(^{14}\) and Ellen Fine’s \textit{absent memory}\(^{15}\) in the late 1990s to de-
scribe the relationship children of survivors have to the Holocaust itself 
deftly categorises this connection as a form of memory, even though the 
very definition of memory contradicts this interpretation.

Hirsch’s definition of postmemory declares that it “is distinguished from 
memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal con-
nection.”\(^{16}\) It therefore appears to fall somewhere between the two: post-
memory is both a memory removed from the source, and a personal inter-
pretation of history. Hirsch explicates further: “Postmemory characterizes 
the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that pre-
ceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories 
of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither 
understood nor recreated.”\(^{17}\) Thus for children of Holocaust survivors, the 
narrative of their parents’ experiences overrides their own life experiences, 
even though they are unable to fully understand, or even know, what actu-
ally happened to their parents. It is this concept of missing which is incorpo-
rated into Fine’s definition of absent memory: she writes that second gen-
eration Holocaust survivors “continue to ‘remember’ an event not lived 
through.”\(^{18}\) The representation of the verb in inverted commas serves to il-
lustrate the inherent paradox: that the sensation experienced as a memory
is not in actual fact a memory. In her view, “this nonmemory or lack of memory comes from the feeling of exclusion both from the experience and from knowledge about the experience.” Thus both terms address the particular relationship children of Holocaust survivors have to the Holocaust, taking into account the closeness they feel to it as well as their distance from it. While the element of memory in both terms encapsulates the particular qualities of the sensations described, the concept of postmemory is a useful tool for describing how children of Holocaust survivors relate to the Holocaust, as it allows for the range of perceptions held, as well as representations created, by this generation.

In Too Many Men and Lektionen des Verborgenen, the portrayal of memory – inherited or otherwise – is markedly different. Janeczek explicitly rejects the notion that she has inherited any of her parents’ memories, while Too Many Men’s protagonist, Ruth, has unconsciously absorbed the experiences of her parents to the extent that she forgets that she did not actually live through them. The description cited earlier around being “bitten by a fly, in Auschwitz” demonstrates that Ruth, at least on an unconscious level, does not differentiate between her own experiences and those of her parents. What happened to her parents in Auschwitz is so deeply ingrained in her psyche that she honestly forgets that she was not actually there. This is a pertinent example of postmemory – Ruth has not actually recalled the incident from personal experience but has instead created a fantasy that corresponds to the Holocaust story of her parents. The presence of this phenomenon in children of Holocaust survivors is noted by Hass, who explains that they “may assume the identity of survivors as though they themselves had been persecuted by the Nazis.” This is a direct result of their reaction not only to the remarkable survival of their parents, but also to an increased comprehension of the scale of loss incurred by their family during the Holocaust. Ultimately, this reaction creates an intrinsic need to feel directly associated with the Holocaust.

In sharp contrast to the character of Ruth, Janeczek dissociates herself from her parents’ memories: “Ich bin meinen Eltern dankbar, daß sie mich mit ihren Erinnerungen verschont haben, ich glaube, sie haben es richtig gemacht.” By distancing herself from their memories, she also distances herself from their effect on her life. Whilst visiting the Polish village that her parents originate from, Janeczek comments: “Ich habe nie an Zawiercie ... als Schtetl gedacht, fast nie.” The apparent lack of consideration Janeczek gives to her parents’ home town differs strikingly from that of Hirsch, whose detailed knowledge of Czernowitz is
the catalyst for her postmemory theory and who writes: “My parents’ Czernowitz, my cultural home, is the space of my postmemory.” Janeczek’s ambivalence toward her parents’ Holocaust past is a different form of postmemory. Her dissociation from this aspect of her heritage is no less an authentic reaction than Ruth’s or Hirsch’s appropriation of theirs.

In *The Fiftieth Gate*, memory is also an important theme, due to the fact that Baker’s quest for the past is, above all, a search for the memories of his parents. Baker explicitly acknowledges the extent to which he is shaped by his father’s memories: “He remembers, therefore I am.” In his attempt to recreate the past through historical research and the journey to the sites of his parents’ past, the memories of his parents are of utmost importance. As Baker reminisces about his life, he writes: “Perhaps it all ends when I return memory to them.” This suggests that although the discovery of his parents’ memories plays an imperative role in his search for the past, Baker is able to concede that they are not actually his memories. This feeling is also evident at a memorial service which Baker attends, accompanied by his father: “And I was his memory ... privately I mourned the things I had stolen from my father – first, two years of his life, and now his memory.” His position in regards to his mother’s memories is similar: “For me, it is a search that had begun one year earlier. No, not a search, an obsession, a raid on my mother’s memory, a son’s theft of her past.” As the discovery of his parents’ memories forms an essential part of Baker’s search for the past, he is caught between satisfying his needs and feeling guilty for taking possession of their memories.

A conflict between memory and history becomes apparent in *The Fiftieth Gate*, as Baker finds it difficult to confirm the memories of his mother without historical proof. He therefore feels incredibly guilty: “Why do I crave the contents of this single lone sentence I discovered on a reel of microfilm, when all it says is what she has repeated throughout her life?” As a historian, he finds it easier to believe historical proof than personal memory, even when his entire search is based on memory. This becomes increasingly evident in his attempt to uncover the name of the village where his mother was hidden during the Holocaust. When she is unable to recall the name, he compiles a list of villages in the area and asks his mother one by one: “So when I exhausted memory I turned to history.” Although history provides the impetus for the discovery of this information, he still relies on his mother’s powers of recollection, which demonstrates how Baker is eventually able to reconcile memory with history. This episode shows that for Baker, the postmemory he gleans from his parents is not absolute truth. In other words, his emphasis on uncovering the facts relating to their memories shows that verifiable events are of primary concern to him.
Each text contains several examples of how being together in Poland enforces the children's relationship to the Holocaust through their parents. The different ways in which each work strives for authenticity demonstrates how the children validate their connection to this past. Both *The Fiftieth Gate* and *Lektionen des Verborgenen* fall within the genre of autobiography – they are first person narratives describing the author's life. As a novel, *Too Many Men* is, of course, a fictional representation, which provides its author with an elaborate capacity to both conceal and reveal what may have really happened. By presenting her story through fictional characters, Brett has justifiable means of presenting the truth as she chooses: while one can assume similarities between her principal characters and her own life, the use of fiction as a barrier means that one cannot know for sure. Poetic licence perhaps means that the impossibility of having a memory of something not personally experienced can be presented as if it had been. For instance, Ruth describes why she does not eat meat: “‘Meat being grilled or fried or seared reminds me of burning flesh,’ Ruth said. How could she be reminded of something she’d never seen, never witnessed, never smelled? she thought.” In this passage, two sensations, one experienced and one not, are linked. Ruth's association of “burning flesh,” something she has never personally come across, with meat being cooked, something she has witnessed, demonstrates the manifestation of postmemory. By linking known experience with unknown experience that explicitly recalls the Holocaust, Brett encapsulates how the second generation can formulate their relationship to the events of the Holocaust.

*The Fiftieth Gate* emerges as grounded in thorough historical research, due to Baker's profession as a historian. As stated earlier, the tension in the book arises between memory and history: it seems that as a historian, Baker must force himself to trust personal memory above historical fact. For him, authenticity lies in facts submerged in archives and documents, rather than in the memory of his parents and other people he interviews. Baker is nevertheless aware of his explicit role in creating a purported historical record. He admits how much he is appropriating: “How easy it is to get things wrong, to forget this school or that confectionery shop, to size up a personality in the wrong way, to miss a communal conflict, to set your narrative in a tissue of unintended lies, to forget to read between the lines. And worse – to reduce survivors to supporting actors in their own tragedy.” Such misgivings do not stop him doing just this throughout the book, however. His intricate portrayal of his family history, created through extrapolation from archival research and interviews, is a striking creation. He concedes that: “Sometimes I think that if I were granted the time before I die, I would burn all my private papers. I would
prefer to leave the idea of me, rather than bits and pieces. What would my descendants make of all those scribbles and doodles? Yet this is exactly what he is making of his ancestors in this book. In this text, authenticity lies with the historian’s research. By presenting it in the context of his family’s story, Baker is consolidating his personal connection to the Holocaust.

Authenticity operates on a very different level in *Lektionen des Verborgenen*. In sharp contrast to Baker, Janeczek refrains from asking her parents anything: “Meinen Vater kann ich nicht mehr fragen, meiner Mutter habe ich nie Fragen gestellt. Ich kann sie nicht über die anderen befragen, wenn sie mir nicht zu verstehen gibt, daß sie mir etwas sagen will.” Janeczek’s emphasis on recounting only what she knows, without contextualisation in a wider field, displays an acute difference with *The Fiftieth Gate*. By presenting her parents’ memories as such, without further analysis or explanation, Janeczek emits an underlying uncertainty, which can be construed as excusing any misleading statements. This emphasis on uncertainty emerges in the following passage: “In der Nacht vom 25. auf den 26. August 1943 ist meine Mutter aus dem Ghetto von Zawiercie mit zehn Zloti in der Tasche weggelaufen. Auch möglich, daß es fünf oder sieben oder zwanzig waren, an Zahlen erinnere ich mich nie und noch viel weniger dann, wenn es sich um mir unbekannte Währungen handelt.” Janeczek’s statement that her memory does not work for unfamiliar currencies is perhaps a metaphor for writing about her parents’ experiences. By admitting that her memory is fallible when it comes to things she is not familiar with, she is also stating that she is not familiar enough with her parents’ memories to present them correctly. In highlighting her lack of certainty about the details, Janeczek is deftly categorising her mother’s memories as a form of postmemory, while simultaneously bearing witness to the after-shocks of the Holocaust.

For many members of the second generation, including the protagonists of *The Fiftieth Gate*, *Too Many Men* and *Lektionen des Verborgenen*, visiting Holocaust sites is a pivotal part of building their identification with the Holocaust. In order to explore this further, the function of Holocaust sites as loci for memory will now be considered. Holocaust sites include those which explicitly denote the destruction of European Jewry, such as concentration camps, death camps and mass killing sites; as well as those
which show this more implicitly, such as unused synagogues and Jewish cemeteries. Both kinds of sites are located in various countries of central and Eastern Europe, and are particularly concentrated in Germany and Poland. The conditions of the sites vary, as does accessibility, authenticity and attempts at memorialisation extraneous to the site itself. Each site also embodies the physical existence of Holocaust related events, and by extension, purports to offer contemporary visitors a link to this through their presence. Holocaust sites can be regarded as partial representations of the Holocaust, but unlike representations such as books and artwork, they require a tangible link with events. Whether they are presented today as museums or memorials or simply as unadorned sites, the meaning they communicate to those who visit them is dependent on their actual connection with what happened there. The role of the visitor in shaping the meaning of such sites is key. Jochen Spielmann asserts that memorials are dependent on visitors for becoming meaningful. He writes:

Without visitors, believers, wreath layers, and ceremonies, these places would themselves become mere historical sites and works of art. Only in their connection to visits, excursions, guided tours, observances, worship, recitations, and rituals can memories be passed on over time and become part of society’s understanding of itself. Monuments without visitors have lost their function.35

Thus, human acts of remembrance are crucial to perpetuating the meaning of memorials. James E. Young echoes this argument, writing that “memorials by themselves remain inert and amnesiac, dependent on visitors for whatever memory they finally produce.”36 As lumps of stone, their meaning is moulded by those who visit them.

But is this also true for Holocaust sites? Certainly, the significance of visiting such sites makes it meaningful. Yet whether they are visited or not does not change their significance to the events of the Holocaust themselves. As “Poland’s major tourist attraction,”37 Auschwitz is also practically synonymous with the Holocaust. While the streams of visitors ensure that it is not forgotten, it is impossible to know whether Auschwitz would retain this significance if no one visited. It is clear that Holocaust sites are meaningful in different ways, for different people. As Lawrence Langer argues in relation to Anne Frank, “many of us seek and find the Holocaust we need.”38 This applies to visiting Holocaust sites, too. For example, a child of Holocaust survivors may seek a reason for psychological problems which they attribute to their parents’ Holocaust experiences while a young Israeli may gain confirmation of their need to serve in their country’s armed forces.39 In other words, Holocaust sites are imbued with subjective mean-
Thus, for many Jews, a visit to Poland is no ordinary tourist trip: very often, it becomes an emotionally-invested pilgrimage in which personally experiencing sites of Jewish life and death is equated with a greater understanding of both the Holocaust and pre-war Jewish life in Poland. Many journeys are structured so as to communicate the narrative which begins with vibrant Jewish life and ends in the obliteration of not only these Jews, but their synagogues, institutions and cemeteries. Witnessing traces of all these things is what gives these trips purpose, and allows participants to fashion their own “memory” of events, since they have seen the places with their own eyes. As Young writes: “Forty-five years after the Shoah, a new generation comes to know a millennium of Jewish civilization in Poland by its absence and the rubble of its destruction: dilapidated synagogues, up-rooted and plowed-under cemeteries, warehouses piled high with religious artefacts.” By discovering Jewish Poland through the tangible traces of its obliteration, visitors are able to contextualise their knowledge of the Holocaust within the frame of what they experience in Poland. This focus on the damaged traces of Jewish existence in contemporary Poland means that many Jewish visitors are primarily focussed on the missing, rather than the present, and therefore show limited interest in other aspects of the country, including contemporary Jewish communities. As Jack Kugelmass explains: “Jewish tourists see nothing quaint about the local culture, either Jewish or non-Jewish; their interest is the dead rather than the living.” This emphasis on the dead, the past and the absent nature of Jewish life in Poland highlights the centrality of the Holocaust to these modern-day trips.

It is therefore clear why personal experience of the sites of both the Holocaust and pre-war Jewish life in Poland is regarded as a powerful tool in increasing comprehension of what was lost. The fact that travelling back to the time of the events is impossible means that visiting the places is possibly the closest post-Holocaust generations can get to the Holocaust itself. This sentiment is voiced by Kugelmass, who writes: “Most American Jews are of Eastern European descent: their sentiments about their ancestral homes, if a sense of these places is conveyed at all to them through the narratives of their parents and grandparents, lack the clarity of place that only direct experience can provide.” The phrase “clarity of place” testifies to the significance of visiting the sites of eastern European Jewish history, and to the powerful nature inherent in a visit to these places.

While the relationship between postmemory and place is key to understanding the role of the journey to Auschwitz undertaken by members of the second generation, of course not all children of Holocaust survivors choose to embark on such a journey. Interestingly, Hirsch devotes the clos-
ing paragraphs of her book to why she has never visited her parents‘ home town of Czernowitz. She writes that after the fall of communism in the early 1990s, she proposed to her parents and husband that they travel there together. For Hirsch, the idea of visiting Czernowitz along with her parents was the central element of the journey, as it would enable her to recreate the past: “Together, we would try to make the place come alive, investing it with memories of old, and memories created in the present, memories transmitted across generations.”43 The centrality of her parents to this trip is evident when Hirsch explains that it did not happen because her parents decided not to go. Without them to aid her in reconstructing memory, she was unable to undertake this journey. Rather, she resigns herself to experiencing this past purely as postmemory, through the representations available to her: “Instead I will have to search for other, less direct means of access to this lost world, means that inscribe its unbridgeable distance as well as my own curiosity and desire.”44 It appears that Hirsch is afraid that visiting Czernowitz would change her relationship to the place: it would become a real memory as well as a postmemory. Since she posits postmemory as a central component of the experience of children of Holocaust survivors, it seems that by attempting to change it through something as symbolic as actually visiting the places would threaten her second generation identity.

Yet for other children of Holocaust survivors the journey to Holocaust sites plays a vital role in consolidating their identification with the Holocaust. The supposition for many adult children of Holocaust survivors is that experiencing the places so important to both their parents‘ happy past and unpleasant suffering will bring a deeper understanding and perhaps even closure to the traumatic effects absorbed by the second generation. That Hirsch chose not to undertake such a journey indicates differing interpretations of the connection between place and postmemory.

The fact that the trips in each of the texts under discussion consist of the children travelling together with their parents concretises the family connection to the Holocaust: the fact that the parents were there, in Auschwitz, gives legitimacy to the children’s claim for an identity entwined with the Holocaust. In the opening pages of Too Many Men, Brett explains why the main character Ruth is with her father in Poland:

This was the third trip Ruth had made to Poland. She really didn’t know why she was here. And she didn’t know why she wanted her father to join her. Her first trip to Poland was just to see that her mother and father came from somewhere. To see their past as more than an abstract stretch of horror. To see the bricks and the mortar. The second time was an attempt to be less overwhelmed than she
was the first time. To try and not cry all day and night. And she had cried less on that second visit. Now, she was here to stand on this piece of earth with her father.\textsuperscript{45}

Evident in this quote – and compounded by the emotional investment demonstrated by her feelings of crying throughout her previous two trips – is the need for Ruth to witness tangible evidence of her parents’ past. These elements combine in regards to the significance she attaches to “stand[ing] on this piece of earth with her father.” But what does this mean in practice? Being with him means that he converses freely in Polish with locals, such as taxi drivers, showing Ruth another side to him lost in his heavily accented English. In addition, he gorges himself on Polish food, showing that his roots do indeed lie in this land completely foreign to his own daughter. However, these factors do not in themselves necessarily aid Ruth’s search for identity. It is more the notion that she wants them to aid this search, which confounds their meaning in the text.

Like Brett’s character Ruth, Baker has also visited Poland multiple times, but it is the trip he made with his parents and brother which features most prominently in \textit{The Fiftieth Gate}. Baker illustrates the effect of being with his parents in Auschwitz and their home towns by highlighting how it changes his opinion of their experiences. He cannot quite believe his mother’s family’s erstwhile wealth until he observes her dancing on the fields that once belonged to her family, exclaiming “‘Mine. They’re all mine.’”\textsuperscript{46} Observing this spectacle, Baker concedes: “We had never believed her when she told us that she was once rich, very rich, tremendously rich.”\textsuperscript{47} It is Baker’s presence at the actual site accompanied by his mother which causes his change of opinion: to him, her reaction embodies confirmation of her perpetual claim. The fact that Baker did not come to this realisation until he personally witnessed her there demonstrates the significance of this particular journey.

In \textit{Lektionen des Verborgenen} it is author Janeczek’s first trip to Poland, an organised tour for Holocaust survivors and their descendants, which she participates in along with her mother. Auschwitz is on the itinerary, which means that the entire group visits, regardless of whether they possess a personal or familial connection. In this case, it is perhaps what Auschwitz stands for which is important, rather than retracing family steps. This is further evident in that Janeczek and her mother leave the group to visit her parents’ hometown. However it is during the visit to Auschwitz, rather than visiting places of her childhood, that Janeczek’s mother breaks out into a panic. Upon seeing canisters of Zyklon B on display, she reacts: “schreit sie »meine Mama, meine Mama« ... [und] begleitet ihre Schreie mit einer Vor- und Rückwärtsbewegung des Kopfes und des Körpers.”\textsuperscript{48} She
screams “my mother, my mother,” and accompanies her screams with a forwards and backwards movement of the head and body. Though she was herself in Auschwitz, it seems unlikely that this reaction stems from her personal experience there. Rather, it is Auschwitz’s functionality as a symbol of the Holocaust which provokes this reaction – it is not known knowledge, but assumed knowledge – Janeczek’s mother’s assumption that her mother was murdered in the gas chambers is the reason behind her hysteria. It is this function of place in the relationship between collective Holocaust narrative and personal experience which is key to exploring the significance of post-Holocaust trips to Poland.

The difference this journey holds for those with a personal connection can be partially explained in terms of Freud’s theory in *Mourning and Melancholia*. As explained by Eva Hoffman: “In his essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ Freud makes the suggestive observation that in order to accomplish the natural process of mourning – to grieve and then move on – you have to know what you have lost. If you do not know what the lost object is, then mourning can turn into a permanent melancholia, or depression, as we would call it today.” Consequently, for children of Holocaust survivors, the trip to Auschwitz can be read as an attempt to identify the lost object that has caused their mourning. In a sense, this journey allows the children to create their own picture of the events of the past, as they have seen the places with their own eyes. However, even when they visit the actual locations of the Holocaust they cannot relive the events that occurred there. The past cannot be relived, particularly when one has not lived it oneself. Hence perhaps the journey of the second generation is not so much about finding a lost object, as creating an object to fill the gap.

The paradox of the second generation therefore lies in witnessing. Because they did not personally witness the Holocaust itself, they can be classified as secondary witnesses: they are witnesses to the Holocaust through their parents’ anguish, loss and stories. The journey to Auschwitz could thus be interpreted as an attempt to enhance the process of secondary witnessing and even to become a primary witness of the Holocaust. However, the parents’ presence in Poland with their children illustrates the futility of this quest: because the children were not actually there at the time of the Holocaust, they can only create a connection to it by proxy, which occurs in a combination of place and family. Therefore, by visiting the sites of memory with their parents, these members of the second generation concretise their link to this past.

In conclusion, the journey to Auschwitz with their parents forms a vital component of the second generation’s connection to the Holocaust in each of the texts discussed. By experiencing sites of memory in Poland with par-
ents who experienced the Holocaust, these children of survivors are creating a multi-faceted link to this past, through the twin elements of place and family. The varying shades of authenticity prevalent in these three texts illustrate how they are attempting to bear witness to the Holocaust. Even though they are not survivor testimonies, they utilise various measures to consolidate their relationship to the events of the Holocaust. Whether the emphasis is on historical accuracy, as in *The Fiftieth Gate*, or on the vagueness of memory, such as in *Lektionen des Verborgenen*, both books emerge as compelling testimonies of children of Holocaust survivors. As a novel, *Too Many Men* contains the barrier of fiction in the presentation of its story, which nevertheless portrays a believable experience of second generation. The presentation of the journey to Auschwitz as an essential element of the second generation experience in each of these texts posits the relationship between place and identity as key. By visiting the sites of memory together with their parents, these second generation authors are attempting to augment their perspective of the Holocaust. By entwining an authentic sense of place with their representation of an inherited past, they are demanding authenticity for an identity which might otherwise be categorised as unauthentic.

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NOTES


11 Margalit, The Ethics of Memory, p. ix.


14 Hirsch, Family Frames, p. 22.


16 Hirsch, Family Frames, p. 22.

17 Hirsch, Family Frames, p. 22.


21 Janeczek, Lektionen des Verborgenen, p. 93.


27 Baker, *The Fiftieth Gate*, p. 211.


39 For a discussion of trips organised by the Israeli Ministry of Education for Israeli teenagers, see Jackie Feldman, “Marking the Boundaries of the Enclave: Defining the Israeli Collective through the Poland ‘Experience’”, *Israel Studies*, 7 (2002), pp. 84-114. Feldman argues convincingly that the underlying purpose of these trips is to indoctrinate the youngsters “that the Holocaust never really ended, and that, but for the State and its defense forces, the Jews in Israel would today be on their way to the gas chambers.” (Feldman, “Marking the Boundaries of the Enclave,” p. 84). She concludes that the reason behind this philosophy is to enforce this view before the participants commence their compulsory military service.


42 Kugelmass, “The Rites of the Tribe”, p. 400.

Blurring the Boundaries: History, Memory and Imagination in the Works of W G Sebald

Diane Molloy

Walter Benjamin in his essay on Marcel Proust claims that “all great works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one - that they are, in other words, special cases.”¹ When W G Sebald’s fiction was first published many critics found it difficult to define his style or categorise his work, and indeed some claimed he had created a new genre. His work has been variously described as “literary monism,”² a “generic hybridity”³ and “documentary novels”⁴ and Joyce Hackett claims he has “reinvent[ed] the diary as his own genre.”⁵ However, Iris Radisch in Die Zeit refers to Austerlitz as “ein literarischer Bastard”⁶ and suggests that Sebald “ist eigentlich kein Erzähler, sondern ein materialistischer Geschichtsmetaphysiker, ein Virtuose des Zettelkastens, Stimmenimitator, Konversator und Archivar.”⁷ Descriptions of his prose include part documentary, part travelogue, part dream sequence, part history, part memoir, part photo album, and part cultural-historical fantasy.⁸ His narrative style has been said to incorporate reportage, memoir, art criticism, social chroni-
Diane Molloy

When asked about his style Sebald’s response was: “I just want to write decent prose.” The indeterminate genre of the narrative is brought about by the way Sebald exploits his sources, which include autobiography, biography, literary texts, historical data, images, and apparent memory. One example of many is in Die Ringe des Saturn where the narrative moves from the biography of Joseph Conrad to Heart of Darkness and back to the history of the Belgian Congo with nothing to mark the boundary between the three representations of the past and the fictional text that binds it all together.

The many authors Sebald draws from, ranging from Thomas Browne to Grimmelshausen to Borges, also share a fascination with “teils wirklichen, teils imaginären Wesen.” In the introduction to The Life of Henry Brulard (Stendhal’s autobiography; one of a number of biographies referred to by Sebald) the reader is warned that “his [Stendhal’s] attitude towards facts and dates was notoriously ‘cavalier’ and that he was more concerned with sincerity than veracity.” One Sebald narrator laments the lack of evidence to document an “unwahrscheinliche Zusammentreffen” while another knows “die unbestreitbaren Vorteile einer fiktiven Vergangenheit.” Sebald himself claims that “facts are troublesome” and that “the idea is to make it seem factual, though some of it may be invented” and that it does not matter if the work is “biographical, autobiographical, [or] topographical.” James Atlas argues that Sebald’s method of writing is to “build up a collage of apparently random details” and “stray bits.” However, there are threads of connection that draw together the past and the present and the incomplete and seemingly unrelated digressions as he and his narrators weave a complicated pattern of coincidences, tiny details and altered perspectives, “Kleinigkeiten, die sich unserer Wahrnehmung entziehen, entscheiden alles!” Sebald’s narrative style exploits and highlights the equivocal nature of history, the inability to define history clearly, or to separate history from fiction. The movement between probable history and possible fiction creates a space where there is no need for certainty of facts wie es eigentlich gewesen as Leopold von Ranke puts it.

While it may not be possible to have a clear division between history and fiction, as Hayden White argues in Tropics of Discourse, neither historians nor literary critics are comfortable with the idea of there being little to distinguish between the two. Books that are fictions relating history and biography disturb the accepted idea that history should attempt to remain faithful to the facts, that the author be able to provide documentary proof that an event or action actually occurred; that the document “functions as a
Blurring the Boundaries 165
 trace left by the past.”19 Dominick LaCapra in Writing History, Writing Trauma sees the resulting “undecidability of the text” between fiction, biography and history in Sebald’s work as problematic and considers it “unacceptable” to leave it to the reader to decide the status of the text.20 Sebald’s descriptive prose does not function as in a novel where the reader is transported to another time and space that is purely fictional and self-contained, it is rather an altered perspective on what is or has been; “eine Art Metaphysik der Geschichte gewesen ist, in der das Erinnerte noch einmal lebendig wurde.”21 His literary practice is to take what already exists either from history or from literature and view it from “ein Stück über der Welt imaginierten Punkt.” Nur so konnte er alles zugleich sehen.”22 This paper examines the ways that Sebald blurs the boundaries between history and fiction and what this means for the preservation of memories and the representation of the past. All four of Sebald’s fictional works: Austerlitz, Die Ringe des Saturn, Schwindel. Gefühle., and Die Ausgewanderten are considered.

Sebald’s stories are about history, memory, trauma and human experience in times of natural and man-made destruction. The history that is woven throughout the books ranges from the history of the herring to the Taiping Rebellion and demonstrates the interconnected nature of seemingly random events. They are concerned with the problematical representation and re-presentation of the past and the sources from which history is written including the archive and images, and the place of memory and imagination in historiography. The individual participants in history and the debt of memory that is owed to the dead underscores the narrative. They are populated by dead people, set in old buildings, crematoriums and cemeteries, seen through veils of ash, mist and diffused light with repetitions and returns where everything changes but stays essentially the same although strangely distorted, with both “grauen Feldern” and “ungewöhnlicher Deutlichkeit,”23 like the photographs that are scattered throughout. The narrators are unnamed but bear a striking resemblance to Sebald himself, often making it difficult for the reader to separate the two. There is a deliberate strategy by Sebald to highlight the artificial nature of point of view. In all the books, but particularly Austerlitz, the voice of the narrator and the narrated blend into one. On one occasion a narrator gives his name as Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, an historian and travel writer of the nineteenth century. The protagonists in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz are modeled on actual people and the narrators meet both real and literary characters. His use of the memories and biographical details of others has led to criticism, including questioning whether he had the “moral right to use real Jewish biographies in his aesthetic games.”24
who has written on post-Holocaust memory and Sebald, is concerned that Sebald’s adoption of biographies could be considered appropriation, while Georg Klein argues that Sebald is claiming a “false intimacy with the dead.”

Sebald insists that he tries to avoid “sensationalism and melodrama” in his work and is “conscious of the danger of usurping others’ existences” and does not proceed with the use of biographical details of living persons if the subject is uncomfortable with his doing so. Sebald is conscious of the responsibility to stay as close as possible to what really happened with objectivity, arguing in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that the only way to deal with material that is incommensurable with traditional aesthetics is by using the documentary form, that fiction pales when compared with “authentischen Fundstücke.” Using destruction and trauma to create an aesthetic effect not only fails the victims but is also a misrepresentation. However, Sebald’s stories are about memory and trauma, the real and the imaginary, the dead and the living and the narrators, perhaps reflecting Sebald’s own dilemma, find writing to be an arduous task, continuously tormented by scruples.

“Dieser Skrupulantismus bezog sich sowohl auf den Gegenstand meiner Erzählung, dem ich, wie ich es auch anstellte, nicht gerecht zu werden glaubte, als auch auf die Fragwürdigkeit der Schriftstellerei überhaupt.” Sebald and his narrators are torn between the need to write in order to keep alive the memory of the dead and the possibility of doing harm through misrepresentation or worse through the use of sentimental and maudlin prose.

Sebald’s narrators pursue the past and its representation in all its forms: biography, history, museums, architecture, photographs, paintings and documents, and most importantly, memory. Despite the difficulties associated with using memory as an historical source, and its entanglement with imagination, as Jacques LeGoff in *History and Memory* argues, it is the “raw material of history” and “the living source from which historians draw.” However, Jean-Luc Nancy in *Finite History* argues that once memory has been taken up by the historian it is no longer memory but has become history, which he considers to be quite separate. Sebald’s narrators make no distinction between memory and history, questioning whether there is or can be any clear distinction between the two. They challenge historians and history by creating a sense of connectedness between the past and the present as it is represented in both fiction and history, displaying the way memory works and its importance to history and memory, as well as to those who remember. Edward Casey in his book *Remembering* describes memory as having three broad categories: reminding, reminiscing and recognising. Reminding is the recalling of the past into the present,
through an association with things. Sebald uses photographs as reminders of past events; however, they also remind the reader that narratives may “conceal or distort the truth” as Mark McCulloh suggests. Throughout Sebald’s books there are photographs and reproductions of paintings and documents; none of these pictures are captioned and there is a disturbing tension between text and picture. Many of the pictures are authentic in that they are of the place, building or person named in the text; however, the “authenticity” of many of the photographs of people as they relate to the text is questionable. The second category, reminiscing, is reliving the past for no other reason than to re-enter the past; to reminisce is to make the past live again. The experience of reminiscing does not necessarily require strict adherence either to the consistency of time and space or to the totality of the event remembered. Those who reminisce freely move around within a memory as elements are recalled and rather than being strictly a narrative are more like Claude Levi-Strauss’ *bricolage*. Casey describes reminiscing as “an essentially privileged and especially powerful way, of *getting back inside our own past more intimately, of reliving it from within*” (italics in original). Paul Ricoeur considers diaries and autobiographies to be forms of reminiscing where the act of writing provides the traces of the past. Memories are turned into writing in order to preserve them but they retain their reminiscing quality. Sebald’s work, with its digressions and coincidences, and reproduction of biographies and diaries has a strong sense of reminiscing. While reminding relies on signs and reminiscing on words, recognising, the third category, is “linked to the past only through its shadow in the present.” However, to recognise something from the past it must have been experienced or at least to have been encountered before in some way. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* Sebald writes:

> wenn ich Photographien oder dokumentarische Filme aus dem Krieg sehe, als stammte ich, sozusagen, von ihm ab und als fiele von dorther, von diesen von mir gar nicht erlebten Schrecknissen, ein Schatten auf mich, unter dem ich nie ganz herauskommen werde. This same sense of being in the shadow of something that was not experienced is felt by Sebald’s narrators. Recognising as memory is located in the present and as such is, argues Casey, “a borderline phenomenon – as located somewhere *between* [italics in original] memory and perception, past and present, myself and another” and is the space where Sebald locates his stories. Reminiscing brings the past wholly into the present as a self-contained event, whereas recognising retains some of its past nature - it remains linked to the past. This means that in reminiscing there is a discontinuity between the present version of an event and the original version
– there is no engagement with the past. Recognising on the other hand, brings the past event into the present and brings with it past emotions that combine with the present. Ricoeur considers “recognition to be the small miracle of memory.” Subconsciously Austerlitz was, for most of his life, careful to avoid the possibility of recognising anything from his past, “Ich las keine Zeitungen [und] drehte das Radio nur zu bestimmten Stunden an.”

It was by chance that he heard and recognised his past through the voice of another. For Austerlitz this recognition enabled him to combine what he now recognized as his past with his present identity. For the narrators this recognition of the past creates a sense of confusion rather than clarity.

The many ways that memory engages with the past blurs the distinction between history and fiction but this distinction is further complicated by the way that memory merges with hallucination, dream and imagination and its role in testimony, and the difficulty of knowing where memory ends and imagination begins. Sebald’s narrators and characters struggle to know the difference between the memory of an event and the memory of a dream or something that has been read, heard or seen.

Wahrscheinlich sind es verschüttete Erinnerungen, die die eigenartige Überwirklichkeit dessen erzeugen, was man im Traum sieht. Vielleicht ist es aber auch etwas anderes, etwas Nebel- und Schleierhaftes, durch das hindurch, paradoxerweise, im Traum alles viel klarer erscheint.

Austerlitz’s experiences in the Liverpool Street Station oscillate between memory and hallucination as he hears voices and sees faces and “Bilder aus einer verblichenen Welt”; he is tormented by hallucinations and “wiederholt träumte.” Hallucinations, dreams and memory have become indistinguishable. Paul Ricoeur in Memory, History, Forgetting, claims that the “problem posed by the entanglement of memory and imagination is as old as Western philosophy,” but that it is possible to know the difference as memory can be recognised as something that we know has happened “which [has] implicated us as agents, as patients, as witnesses” whereas something imagined need have no connection with reality. The problem all the narrators grapple with is that all versions of the past “keinen wahren Eindruck davon zu vermitteln” and it is not always possible to recognize from ones memories those things that really happened and those things that were or are imagined. Past events are not accurately stored in memory waiting to be recalled; as Benjamin argues in Excavation and Memory: memory is “not the instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium.” There are many versions and perspectives of the past but the potential for the biggest discrepancy is between those who were victims and
those who are survivors.

Das also, denkt man, indem man langsam im Kreis geht, ist die Kunst der Repräsentation der Geschichte. Sie beruht auf einer Fälschung der Perspektive. Wir, die Überlebenden, sehen alles von oben herunter, sehen alles zugleich und wissen dennoch nicht, wie es war.\textsuperscript{48}

Sebald’s inclusion of biography and what appear to be the memories of others allows him to draw on Marianne Hirsch idea of “post-memory” to tell stories about times and events which he did not witness and of which he has no personal memory; to bridge the gap between those who experienced “history” and those who are onlookers in an effort to view the past from another’s perspective.\textsuperscript{49} Sebald’s narrators tell the stories of those who are victims of history and while they are themselves neither victims nor perpetrators the aftermath of the events has not left them untouched.

Those memories that are associated with trauma are part of a complex set of “Erinnerungen, hinter denen und in denen sich viel weiter noch zurückreichende Dinge verbargen, immer das eine im andern verschachtelt, gerade so wie die labyrinthischen Gewölbe, die ich in dem staubgrauen Licht zu erkennen glaubte, sich fortsetzten in unendlicher Folge.”\textsuperscript{50} Lawrence Langer in Holocaust Testimonies defines testimonies as “human documents rather than merely historical ones”\textsuperscript{51} and a “form of remembering” that recalls “a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles.”\textsuperscript{52} Sebald’s texts include stories of exiles, those with damaged lives and survivors of either natural or man-made destruction. The stories of these characters are told through a narrator, and often the narrator is relating the story told to him by someone other than the victim, for example, Paul Bereyter’s story is told to the narrator by Mrs Landau. Many of the stories are personal accounts of the way that past trauma impacts on the victim for their entire life and there is the retelling of traumatic periods of history but those narrating the stories were not present at the traumatic event. However, although the narrator of testimony was actually present at the event as witness, at the time of narrating he or she is now a “third-person observer.”\textsuperscript{53} The distinction between witness, survivor and narrator has blurred.

Freud describes trauma as resulting from “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield … [and is] bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale … and set in motion every possible defensive measure.”\textsuperscript{54} These defensive measures result in trauma standing outside of memory. To recall the event into memory requires a reconstruction of the event that will inevitably involve imagination.
Just as physical “memory” in the form of buildings and archeology is transformed over time into something new, such as the Liverpool Street Station in Austerlitz, so too are memories transformed over time. They contain traces of the past, but are filtered through subsequent experience and time. Austerlitz needed to reconstruct his memories after he had “forgotten” both his trip on the Kindertransport and his first language. A series of events triggered the memory and set in motion his search for his past. When he does remember he realizes “wie wenig Übung ich in der Erinnerung hatte, und wie sehr ich, im Gegenteil, immer bemüht gewesen sein mußte, mich an möglichst gar nichts zu erinnern und allem aus dem Weg zu gehen.”

This lack of practice in using memory and the desire to recollect as little as possible are as corrosive to memory as altered perspectives and the mixing together of fact and fiction. Even more corrosive is the desire to forget. History needs memories to avoid the risk of forgetting “crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration.” The protagonists of the four stories in Die Ausgewanderten are tormented by their desire to forget and the inability to do so but the trail of natural and manmade destruction and the dead continue to impact on the present: “So also kehren sie wieder, die Toten” LaCapra sees the “undecidability of the text” as a negative aspect of Sebald’s stories but Ricoeur sees it as “up to the recipients of the historical text to determine, for themselves and on the plane of public discussion, the balance between history and memory.” But “memory and the passing on of the objective information it retains must be delegated to those who are ready to live with the risk of remembering,” the past is full of “Schmerzensspuren, in unzähligen feinen Linien durch die Geschichte ziehen.” But it is memory that allows us to mourn the dead; Mr Squirrel, despite his “Trauermanie,” nevertheless had no memory therefore could not possibly “der Toten gedenke.” It is these problems that Sebald’s narrators and characters struggle to come to terms with. The outcome of so much confusion between what is real and what is imaginary, which perspective to take and the understanding that what we can know in the present is nothing more than a shadow of the past leaves all of Sebald’s narrators confused, sick and melancholy.

The difficulty of classifying Sebald’s work within literary genres has extended to whether or not they can be considered Holocaust literature. He rarely makes any direct reference to either the Nazis or the Holocaust. Instead he deals with the crimes and excesses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from imperialism to the Second World War and all its atrocities, and the degradation of the environment by mankind and nature. His stories cover the “broader catastrophe” of modern history as well as the Spuren der Zerstörung that are the consequences of that history, and as
such it is possible that his stories cannot avoid being in the shadow of the Holocaust. Some critics have claimed that the stories have a preoccupation with the Holocaust, while others have been critical of his treatment of the Holocaust as just a moment in history or as natural history. Scott Denham reads his work as “a Holocaust literature of a special sort,” that he is “thoughtful and eloquent” in his approach to the subject. 63 Sebald did not consider his work to be “Holocaust literature,” disliking the term. 64 James Wood in his essay “W G Sebald’s Uncertainty” claims that Sebald’s books are “not really about the Holocaust” and “certainly not about Nazism,” but rather they are “menaced by 20th century history.” 65 However, as critics and Sebald himself have noted, it may be impossible for him to avoid the shadow of the Holocaust. Born in 1944, he escaped any direct consequences of the war but believes he grew up in its shadow and as a German he believed it was a subject he could not ignore; his history and identity are bound up with the events and the aftermath of the Second World War. Sebald faced the ethical dilemma of his generation of how to sympathise with the victims of the Nazis while at the same time retaining one’s own Germanness.

Peter Weiss writes in his Notizbücher, quoted by Sebald: “writing is an attempt to preserve our equilibrium among the living with all our dead within us, as we lament the dead and with our own death before our eyes, in order to set memory to work, since it alone justifies survival in the shadow of a mountain of guilt.” 66 Sebald’s narrators are the inheritors of history, collecting the memories of others and often they seem not to know what to do with the information they have gathered. Peter Morgan describes Sebald’s texts as reflecting his “cultural pessimism” and “melancholy disappointment.” He argues that the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung 67 is still under way for those of Sebald’s generation and that he has not been able to resolve the history that he has inherited.68 The effort to understand or to see anything clearly seems to result in nothing, there is no resolution; the narrator of Austerlitz returns to the place where he started, haunted by the dead. Are we able to really know the past or can we only know what remains of the past in the form left to us by previous writers? “Wir alle, auch diejenigen, die meinen, selbst auf das Geringfügigste geachtet zu haben, behelfen uns nur mit Versatzstücken, die von anderen schon oft genug auf der Bühne herumgeschoben worden sind.” 69 There is a sense of going over what has already been said before, as though those tiny details, like the individuals who disappear when a scene is viewed from a great distance, still impact on the present. Another perspective on Sebald’s work is that it is about how those of us who have inherited the consequences of past deeds can approach the past in an attempt to live with it rather than
deal with it. Sebald claimed in his speech at the opening of the Stuttgart Literaturhaus in 2001: “Es gibt viele Formen des Schreibens; einzig aber in der literarischen gibt es, über die Registrierung der Tatsachen und über die Wissenschaft hinaus, um einen Versuch der Restitution.”

Rather than writing in the shadow of the war or the Holocaust Sebald’s work could be viewed as being in the shadow of Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

Sebald’s narrators remember, recollect, recall, recognise, reminisce, imagine, hallucinate and dream as they attempt to preserve and explore the past rather than make sense of it. The weight of history that Sebald’s narrators carry with them is bound up with the fictional literature of the past, photographs and the physical remains of the past. The uncertainty of where imagination takes over from history in Sebald’s prose reminds the reader that all narrative, history and fiction, is told through the voice of a narrator posing as autobiographer, biographer, historian or literary author and that all “surviving remnants of history” are valuable even those that only resemble reality. Sebald’s narrators are unreliable historians but for Sebald history is an unreliable process. He was critical of those narrators who have a “reassuring quality” and instead wanted his narrators to sound uncertain so that the reader would share with the narrator, and the author, a sense of “irritation” at the lack of certainty.

The stories are a perspective on history and biographies through Nacherzählung, a re-telling of stories and events. Sebald’s prose is a type of witnessing that is not testimony. How to present history is a difficult and vexing task and, as Mark Anderson wrote, in a country such as Germany “where the past was ruthlessly denied, forgotten, or covered over, the surviving remnants of history provide the only possible means of gaining access to the past.”

But the efforts of Sebald’s characters and narrators, real and imaginary and the long list of those from whom he borrows, are all sickened in some way by their efforts to remember. The narrator of Max Aurach’s story “spürte ich doch in zunehmendem Maß, daß die rings mich umgebende Geistesverarmung und Erinnerungslosigkeit der Deutschen, das Geschick, mit dem man alles bereinigt hatte, mir Kopf und Nerven anzugreifen begann.”

The link between past, present and future in Sebald’s books is not through either landscape or buildings, fictions, history or images, all of these are shown to be transient, but through the physical presence of the body; the narrator of All’estero asks “was als eine undeutliche Sehnsucht über unsere Körper sich fortpflanzt, um sie zu bevölkern, die staubigen Landstriche und die überschwemmten Felder der Zukunft.”

The past and its dead are a cross between the silk thread that is light, beautiful and natural, running through all of his stories and the backpack that is carried by Sebald and his characters as they travel through time and space in search of something they never seem to find, discover
details they had previously overlooked and see things from new and altered perspectives. The result of Sebald’s narratives is to put into doubt the need for a clear distinction between history and fiction, and memory and imagination.

NOTES


4 McCulloh, Understanding Sebald, p. xx.

5 Joyce Hackett, quoted in McCulloh, Understanding W G Sebald, p. xx.


7 Radisch, "is in fact not a storyteller, but a materialistic historical metaphysicist, a virtuoso of the card index, impersonator, conservator and archivist" (my translation).

8 McCulloh, Understanding Sebald, p. xix.

9 Hackett, quoted in McCulloh, Understanding Sebald, p. xx.


18 White, Tropics of Discourse, p. 122.
20 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 34.
22 Sebald, Die Ringe des Saturn, p. 103, “an imaginary position some distance above the earth. Only in this way could he see it all together,” The Rings of Saturn, p. 83.
33 McCulloh, Understanding Sebald, p. 126.


37 Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 77-8, "when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience had cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge," *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 71.

38 Casey, *Remembering*, p. 129.


40 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 205, "I did not read the newspapers ... [and] turned on the radio only at certain hours of the day," *Austerlitz*, p. 197.

41 Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, p. 98-9, "I suppose it is submerged memories that give to dreams their curious air of hyper-reality. But perhaps there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer," *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 79-80.


46 Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, p. 95, "fail to convey any true impression of how it must have been," *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 77.

47 Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 576.

48 Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, p. 151-2, "This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was," *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 125.


50 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 200, "memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty grey light, and which seemed to go on and on forever," *Austerlitz*, p. 192.


55 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 205, "how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past," *Austerlitz*, p. 197.

57 Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten*, p. 36, “And so they are ever returning to us, the dead,” *The Emigrants*, p. 23.


60 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 24, “the marks of pain which … trace countless fine lines through history,” *Austerlitz*, p.16.


67 “Process of coming to terms with the past,” Collins German English Dictionary.


69 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 109; “All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others,” *Austerlitz*, p. 101.

70 W G Sebald, speech printed in *Stuttgart Zeitung Online*, 18 November 2001, access date 14 March 2007; “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship,” *Campo Santo*, p. 215.


73 Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten*, p. 338, “felt increasingly that the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves,” *The Emigrants*, p. 225.

74 Sebald, *Schwindel Gefühle*, p. 121, “what relation was there between the so-called monuments of the past and the vague longing, propagated through our bodies, to people the dust-blown expanses and tidal plains of the future,” *Vertigo*, p. 106.
REVIEW ARTICLE
“Weak Thought” and Its Discontents: Engaging the Philosophy of Gianni Vattimo


Ashley Woodward

According to Manfred Frank, Gianni Vattimo is “the man whose name occurs immediately to one and all when someone calls for the leading Italian philosopher and intellectual.” While much of Vattimo’s work has been translated into English (he is perhaps best-known for the book *The End of Modernity*), there has been little critical reaction to this work. Finally, a volume of critical essays has become available in English with the publication of *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*. The volume is edited by Vattimo’s “disciple” Santiago Zabala, who also provides an excellent introduction to Vattimo and his philosophy of “weak thought” (pen-
siero debole), containing much biographical background not previously available. The contributors are all distinguished philosophers and theologians in their own right, and among those well-known in the English-speaking world are Umberto Eco, Charles Taylor, Hugh J. Silverman, Reiner Schürmann, Richard Rorty, Manfred Frank, and Jean-Luc Nancy. (Zabala explains in his introduction that Jacques Derrida was also invited to be a part of this project, and was keen to write an essay for his “friend Gianni,” but was sadly prevented from doing so by his failing health (34)). The chapters are collected in three sections: “Part One: Weakening Metaphysical Power” (On Vattimo’s philosophy of weak thought generally); “Part Two: Weakening Metaphysical Methods” (on hermeneutics and the problem of method); and “Part Three: Weakening Metaphysical Beliefs” (on religion). The book also contains a concluding essay by Vattimo, and an extensive bibliography of writings by and about him compiled by Zabala.

The subtitle of the volume was originally planned to be “a Festschrift for Gianni Vattimo on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday.” The reasons for the change are perhaps obvious from a publishing perspective, but the rejected subtitle gives a clearer indication of the nature of the collection. The essays collected here – most specially commissioned for the occasion – are offered in tribute to Vattimo. Tributes can take many forms, and not all of the essays collected here in fact address Vattimo’s work directly, or in a sustained and engaged way. Many of those which do engage Vattimo start from the author’s own philosophical position, and then stake out the differences of Vattimo’s position to their own. This is perhaps partly explained by the fact that the contributors are high-profile academics, with their own habits and patterns of thought well-established, and their own positions to defend. Thus, while the volume is very effective as a tribute, and the inclusion of many “big-name” academics helps establish the stature of Vattimo’s own philosophical profile, the volume also has its drawbacks considered as a collection of secondary texts on Vattimo. It is of course only fair to assess the book as it was intended (i.e. as a tribute), but many English-speaking readers may well approach it wanting to learn more about Vattimo’s own philosophy and its place in the contemporary critical scene, and it is therefore worth noting its limitations in this regard. It is also notable that while the contributors typically express the highest regard for Vattimo’s philosophical achievements, most of the essays which engage with his work directly argue quite strongly against one or more of his conclusions. Some of these criticisms are pertinent, while others miss their mark. In what follows, I will chart my own interpretive thread through the volume, picking up and addressing arguments in some chapters while passing over others entirely, in order to bring out what I believe are some of the most in-
interesting points on which Vattimo’s philosophy of weak thought is critically engaged by the contributors to this volume. Firstly, however, since Vattimo’s philosophy remains largely unknown in the Anglophone world, I will give a brief introduction to this philosopher and his distinctively original thought. Vattimo’s work is syncretic and multifaceted, but since the most interesting engagements in *Weakening Philosophy* take place around hermeneutics, I will emphasise this trajectory of his philosophy in the following comments.

Gianni Vattimo was born in Turin in 1936. He completed doctoral work on Aristotle at the University of Turin with Luigi Pareyson, before studying at the University of Heidelberg with Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer. He is currently Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Turin. Vattimo served a term as a member of the European Parliament from 2000-2005, and is widely known as a politically-engaged public intellectual and cultural critic. Vattimo’s philosophy takes its bearings from “the Holy Trinity of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer.”³ Vattimo has spent much of his philosophical career reading and developing radical interpretations of the two leading critics of modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. During his time at Heidelberg he translated Gadamer’s *Warheit und Methode* [Truth and Method] into Italian, and he has been largely responsible for disseminating Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in Italy.⁴ In 1983, he and Pier Aldo Rovatti (who also contributes a chapter to *Weakening Philosophy*) published an edited collection of essays entitled *Il pensiero debole* [Weak Thought],⁵ and this term has become central both to his own work, and to a general trend in Italian philosophy. Weak thought has sometimes been characterised as a kind of Italian deconstruction (see for example Rainer Schüermann’s chapter), and shares many thematic concerns with French “post-structuralism” and philosophical “postmodernism” more broadly. As with deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, the iconoclastic philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger are of central importance to Vattimo’s weak thought. As Jean Grondin suggests, however, it is the influence of the hermeneutic tradition (and Gadamer in particular) on Vattimo’s thought which gives it its distinctive character (Paul Ricoeur aside, hermeneutics has never been well-received in France).⁶

Running from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Wilhelm Dilthey to Heidegger to Gadamer, the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics had its prehistory in the problem of how to interpret biblical texts, developed with the problem of how to interpret written texts in general, and finally became a hermeneutic *ontology* which concerns itself with the interpretation of all of reality. While he has published a book on Schleiermacher,⁷ Vattimo’s mature philosophy develops a hermeneutic ontology influenced primarily by
Heidegger and Gadamer, and which also – significantly – takes Nietzsche seriously as a hermeneutic philosopher. Jean Grondin’s chapter (“Vattimo’s Latinisation of Hermeneutics: Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?”) explains how Vattimo develops his own “postmodern” hermeneutics by applying Nietzschean and Heideggerian ideas to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, ideas Gadamer himself would never have accepted. Vattimo’s interpretation of Gadamer turns around the famous phrase from *Truth and Method*, “Being that can be understood is language.” Vattimo chose to translate this phrase maintaining the commas of the original German omitted in the English translation, so that the phrase is effectively: “Being, that can be understood, is language.” This choice allows a reading which radically identifies Being with language (rather than the demarcation of a limited sphere of Being which can be understood through language). As Grondin explains, Gadamer always believed that while language was central to interpretation and understanding, what gets interpreted through understanding is in some sense the meaning that things-in-themselves have. Vattimo develops and radicalises his interpretation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, however, by applying Nietzsche’s famous aphorism: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” In effect, Vattimo subjects Nietzsche’s radicalised Kantian thesis – that we have no access to things-in-themselves, only to appearances – to a “linguistic turn,” courtesy of Gadamer’s (suggested) thesis about the relation of language and Being. For Vattimo, Being is language – our linguistic structures are that which gives meaning to beings (entities), that by virtue of which they appear as what they appear to be. Thus, we can have no facts about things as they supposedly are in-themselves; things are what they are only by virtue of language and interpretation.

Furthermore, Vattimo subjects Gadamer’s hermeneutics to what may be seen as a Heideggerian correction. Gadamer has often been criticised as a conservative apologist for tradition. Such a view arguably rests on an interpretation of his work which sees history as an objective and unchanging given, the true meaning of which is to be gained through interpretation. Vattimo, however – picking up on Heidegger’s influence on Gadamer and exploiting the dialogue with *Being and Time* which takes place in *Truth and Method* – insists that hermeneutics must see history as the history of the epochs of Being (*Seinsgeschick*). That is, beings are revealed as what they are by virtue of particular “disclosive openings” or events of Being, openings which change through historical time and which Heidegger calls “epochs.” The meaning of history is thus never given once and for all, since as we move through historical time the changing nature of the disclosive opening in which we ourselves live governs the parameters of our interpretations.
of the past. Thus, the past is never given once and for all, as objectively factual, and the inheritance of tradition implies a necessary critical interpretation from the perspective of our current situation. Thus, in Vattimo’s hermeneutic ontology, Gadamer’s idea of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* [effective history] is amalgamated with Heidegger’s *Seingeschick* [destiny of Being] to overcome the danger of a conservative historicism.

Vattimo radicalises hermeneutic ontology by reading Gadamer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger together in this unconventional way. For him, Being itself is language; that is, beings are what they are by virtue of their appearance in disclosive openings formed from the transmission of linguistic messages handed down to us through tradition. Vattimo gives a further original twist to his reading of these philosophers by contending that the term “nihilism,” used critically by Nietzsche and Heidegger, may be recuperated to give a positive meaning to their own philosophical positions. Nietzsche suggests an epistemological form of nihilism with his statement “there are no facts, only interpretations.” Heidegger suggests an ontological form of nihilism in his story about the forgetting (or oblivion) of Being in the history of metaphysics. Vattimo argues that we should embrace nihilism positively in both these senses: it means that there is very little of Being left in the metaphysical sense; that is, considered as an objective and eternal structure. Instead, Being is dissolved in the history of interpretation, in which there are no facts, only more or less cogent interpretations. As such, Vattimo thinks that nihilism is a term which can and should be embraced positively; it indicates the disclosive opening in which we find ourselves today, and it describes the hermeneutic ontology he proposes, which he believes goes a long way in overcoming the problems of metaphysical thought identified by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Vattimo’s positive construal of nihilism is arguably his most provocative gesture, and, as we shall see, a point on which his interlocutors often feel some discontent.

Vattimo’s philosophy is called “weak thought” precisely because it eschews the primary ways in which metaphysical thought strives to be “strong” or rigorous: that is, by formulating concepts or propositions thought true by virtue of their correspondence to an independent and objective reality. Instead, weak thought takes the form of an ontological hermeneutics as just outlined; it strives to interpret both written texts and the world in a way which will be convincing (or at least plausible) to other members of a dialogic community, but which recognises itself as “only” an interpretation. As such, it is an attempt to develop a “postmetaphysical” form of philosophising which avoids the problems of metaphysics identified by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. The preceding is a necessarily brief outline, indicating some of the main points of Vattimo’s philosophy. In what follows, I
wish to take up in dialogue some of the authors who contribute chapters to *Weakening Philosophy*. First, since in his conclusion Vattimo chooses to clarify his own position rather than respond to the contributors’ essays, I wish defend him from several criticisms that I believe are misplaced. I will then turn to some of the more apposite critical engagements in the volume.

The leading article of the anthology (after Zabala’s introduction) is by Vattimo’s long-time friend Umberto Eco. Eco was one of the contributors to the book *Il pensiero debole*. He notes here that that book was conceived as a critical discussion concerning the prospects for a “weak thought,” but was taken by some (whom, Eco quips, probably prefer just to read the titles of books rather than the books themselves) as a manifesto. Consequently, Eco was lumped together with the apostles of weak thought, despite the fact that his chapter was in significant disagreement with Vattimo and Rovatti’s provocation. In his contribution here, Eco seeks to distance himself from weak thought by setting out the difference between Vattimo’s position and his own. The crux of this difference is indicated by the title of his chapter: “Weak Thought and the Limits of Interpretation.” Eco takes it as well-established and commonly accepted in contemporary philosophy that the relationship between the world and the mind is interpretive (rather than representational, as in the image of the mind as a mirror of nature criticized by Rorty); that there are no facts free of interpretive frameworks. However, he proposes that there are limits to interpretation, so that while we may well say that there are an indefinite number of valid interpretations of a text (or the world), there are also identifiable *mis*interpretations. In other words, Eco believes that there are *constraints* on interpretation, while construing Vattimo’s position as one which rejects such constraints. After quoting Vattimo’s metaphor of Being in the contemporary era as “moth-eaten,” Eco writes:

> Even if being were moth-eaten, there would always be a fabric whose warp and web, confused by the infinite holes that have eaten into it, still subsist in some stubborn way (55).

And, even more evocatively:

> Being says no in the same way a tortoise would say no if we asked it to fly (55).

Eco’s argument, in a nutshell, is that there are *objective conditions* which constrain our interpretations of the world; conditions which mean that tortoises are the kind of beings which cannot fly, and which mean that a small stick with its tip covered in cotton is a better tool for cleaning one’s ear than a screwdriver.
This may seem quite reasonable. Underlying Eco’s criticism of Vattimo, however, seems to be the assumption that for Vattimo there are no limits to interpretation. Now, this seems to me to be a misinterpretation of Vattimo’s texts (whatever warrants such a claim). For Vattimo, interpretation is always limited; not by supposedly natural and objective conditions, but by historical conditions. Specifically, in the epoch we are in, nihilism itself acts as a guiding thread and limit to interpretation (such that we ought to prefer nihilistic interpretations over non-nihilistic ones). Vattimo expresses this same idea in different terms when discussing biblical interpretation: the only limit on such interpretation, he argues, is charity, the central value and only core meaning of Christianity (as he sees it). Now, these may be very minimal limits on interpretation, and a good deal of critical work could be done on this problem. The point, however, is that Eco’s criticism misses the mark. Eco seems to insist on ahistorical and objective limits to interpretation (there is something about the objective structure of the real which makes x a plausible interpretation and y a misinterpretation, etc.). Since Vattimo’s limit is a historical one and nothing more, Eco discounts it. Another way of seeing the issue might be this: Eco thinks that for Vattimo there are no limits on interpretation because from a God’s eye perspective Being is subject to any and all transformations (it is infinitely malleable). But this is precisely the position Vattimo rejects; we are in history and constrained in our interpretations by the history of interpretations. From this perspective, we must even understand the interpretation of Being as “moth-eaten” as itself an historically relative interpretation. What Eco refutes is an objective thesis about Being, perhaps quite reasonably. But this thesis is not Vattimo’s own.

Another criticism which I see as misplaced is made by Wolfgang Welsch in his chapter “The Human – Over and Over Again.” Welsch’s leading question of Vattimo is, “Did the author of The End of Modernity depart from the modernist way of thinking, or does he remain its partisan?” (87). Welsch defines “the modernist way of thinking” as given by what he calls the anthropic principle, or what is more commonly known as humanism. Its fundamental axiom was formulated by Diderot in 1755: “Man is the unique concept from which one must start and to which one must refer everything back.” After a survey of various major thinkers and schools in contemporary philosophy (including, notably, Nietzsche and Heidegger) which characterizes them as essentially humanistic, Welsch concludes that the entire hermeneutic tradition, and Vattimo with it, also remains humanistic, thereby failing to overcome modernist thinking. Vattimo’s hermeneutic ontology is modernist, on Welsch’s reckoning, because the meaning of things is thought to be given by language, itself a human product. Welsch argues
that there are good reasons for desiring to overcome the modernist, humanistic mindset. One of these is that it is dogmatic, and another is that it is self-contradictory. On this second point, Welsch argues that modernist thinking

maintains that all our understanding is determined by our physical, cultural, social, etc., parameters and contains nothing capable of reaching beyond them. But a determination and limitation of this kind could in any case be stated only from a position outside these parameters, from the perspective of a God’s-eye view. Otherwise the assertion would be itself subject to the same restrictions and thus could itself be at best only relatively valid and hence unable to serve as a binding principle. But according to the modernist position, precisely such an overview is unavailable to us (97).

Now, there are several problems with Welsch’s reading of Vattimo here. First, Vattimo’s own definition of the defining trait of modernist thought differs from Welsch’s, and Welsch makes no attempt to take this into account or debate Vattimo on this issue. For Vattimo, modern thought is defined by the taking of the novum (the new) as a central value. This valuation of the new is linked to the ideas of progress and of overcoming, where the new is thought to overcome or surpass the old in a way which contributes towards the march of modern culture toward the telos of emancipation. From a Vattiminian perspective, Welsch would appear to remain thoroughly enmeshed in the modernist mindset precisely because of his desire to overcome humanism. Secondly, the problem of the self-contradictory nature of modernist thinking that Welsch notes here is in fact a well-known problem with many naïve formulations of relativism. However, Vattimo’s thinking is not so naïve. He recognizes that it would be self-contradictory for hermeneutic ontology to claim the primacy of interpretation as a fact about the world, and insists that hermeneutic ontology is itself only an interpretation, one which is moreover not warranted by any supposed conformity with the objective nature of things, but one which has become available in the contemporary world precisely because it has been handed down to us through the historical transmission of interpretations. (In other words, Vattimo’s hermeneutic ontology finds its validity-conditions not in supposedly extra-interpretive facts about the world, but in the history of hermeneutics itself, as it has been handed down from Schleiermacher to Gadamer.) To illustrate this point, Vattimo emphasises what he sees as an essential caveat to Nietzsche’s famous statement about facts and interpretations: “There are no facts, only interpretations, and this too is an interpretation.” While Vattimo’s position brings with it its own attendant difficulties – some of which
Welsch also correctly notes, and to which I shall turn shortly – his rejection of the possibility of hermeneutic ontology presenting itself as a “fact” (in Welsch’s terms, presenting a position from a “God’s-eye view”) means that it successfully avoids the charge Welsch makes against modernist humanism.

Taking up a further misplaced criticism – in relation to Nancy K. Frankenberry’s chapter “Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental” – will also allow discussion of a theme to which Vattimo has more recently turned, and to which a third of Weakening Philosophy is dedicated: religion. It is notable that in his book The Weak Thought and Its Strength (one of the few other books on Vattimo available in English), Dario Antiseri spends much time trying to argue that Vattimo’s weak thought would indeed be compatible with religious belief, and chastising him for remaining an atheist.21 Since the writing of that book, Vattimo has taken a “theological turn,” marked perhaps most famously by the conference organised, and subsequent book edited, with Derrida: Religion.22 Vattimo has developed a surprising interpretation of Christianity which makes it compatible with his own Nietzscheanism, by seeing Christianity itself as the impetus behind secularization. He equates Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the “death of God” with the death of Christ on the cross, and the secularization process with the theological theme of kenosis, the self-abasement of God through his incarnation in Christ. The incarnation is understood as a handing-over of power from God to humanity, and a change in the relationship of the divinity to humanity from one of “Father” to one of “friend.” The kenotic theme may be understood as confluent with secularization because they both enact a weakening of metaphysical power. Moreover, Vattimo argues that the strong reasons for being atheistic which were proposed as part of the Enlightenment critique of religion as superstition have now themselves been undermined (with the critiques of reason, of progress, etc.). Ultimately, Vattimo defends a version of Christianity in which metaphysical beliefs (such as the notion that the Godhead is composed of a Trinity, etc.) are reduced to the point of having little or no significance, and what survives is what he sees as the central value of the Christian tradition, caritas (love or charity).23

Frankenberry, quite reasonably, comments that once Christianity has been reduced in this way “…one can question whether there is any longer any reason to talk about Christianity if we can more simply talk about love. If everything said in terms of the Christian belief system could equally well be communicated in the vocabulary of existentialist humanism, one language or the other would seem to be superfluous.”24 The implied answer to this question is that religion meets certain human needs, helping people
confront the contingency or arbitrariness of existence. However, Frankenberry faults Vattimo (and Rorty) for supposedly subscribing to a functionalist explanation of religion which explains religious beliefs as a function of certain human needs (284-5; 295, note 39). Referring to influential critiques of functionalism as a method of explanation in the social sciences (such as Carl Hempel's), she argues that functional explanations do not increase our understanding because “[n]eeds – even the deep human need for meaning – do not explain anything. 

Needs are what need to be explained...What exactly is shown? Are the purported needs any less obscure than the religious phenomena they are supposed to explain?” (285).

It is true that Vattimo’s thinking about religion and secularization has an important debt to Nietzsche’s analysis of religion, which might be seen as functional (metaphysical beliefs provide a sense of security, etc.). However, Vattimo would certainly not endorse an approach to religion which purports to be a model of explanation. In the hermeneutic tradition, an important distinction is made between explanation and understanding, where the former is the goal of the natural sciences (and, arguably, social sciences which [mistakenly?] adopt methodologies from the natural sciences), and the latter is the goal of the human sciences. Frankenberry seems to conflate explanation and understanding. Significantly, understanding is that which is arrived at through interpretation, and discussion of religion as a function of needs should be understood as an interpretation, not a causal explanation (nor a matter of deductive logic in which needs and religious beliefs might be established as independent terms before a relation is established between them, a demand which seems to be implicit in Hempel’s critique). As an interpretation, the view of religion as answering human needs yields a great deal in understanding, since it can displace an entire worldview – from a world which includes the objective existence of metaphysical entities (seen as the best way to understand religious belief), to a secularized world which has a scepticism towards the existence of such entities (because alternative interpretations of the phenomenon of religious belief are available). As such, Vattimo’s implicit justification of continuing to talk about the Christian tradition because it meets certain needs is far more defensible than Frankenberry supposes.

The preceding arguments made by Eco, Welsch, and Frankenberry may all be seen as displaying what Jean-François Lyotard called a differend: a dispute in which the two parties cannot agree on a common criterion for settling the dispute. This is perhaps not surprising, since what are often being disputed in these critical engagements with Vattimo are the criteria for validity themselves. Vattimo’s philosophy provocatively calls for a
“weakening” of such criteria, transposing them from the supposed objectivity of the world to the fluidity of the history of interpretation. As with all philosophers who innovate on such a profound level of thought, a special difficulty arises as to how to judge the validity of their claims. Either we can apply previous tests for validity, tests which the innovator is not likely to live up to because they rely on a framework for thought which have been explicitly rejected, or we can try to assess the innovator’s work on its own terms, testing it for internal coherence and freedom from “performative contradiction.” Perhaps ideally, we can combine both approaches, offering both an “internal” and an “external” reading to help us get a clearer picture of the value of a radical thinker’s thought.²⁹ The problem with many of the perspectives expressed here, however, is that they do not sufficiently take the “internal” perspective on Vattimo’s work into account, and the result is that we often simply have a differend; an assessment of Vattimo’s work in terms other than his own, and terms he has explicitly rejected. The result is that many of the engagements here risk being an unproductive disagreement, an impasse, rather than a genuine dialogue with Vattimo.

Nevertheless, there are also many engagements with Vattimo’s thought in this large volume which are made in terms internal to his own problematic. Turning now toward some of these, we can identify at least two points on which important objections to Vattimo are made: his description of the ontology of the current situation, and his prescription of the form of postmetaphysical thinking appropriate to it.³⁰ On the first point, we can return to Frankenberry, as well as turning to Giacomo Marramao and Paolo Flores D’Arcais. To some extent (the exact extent is debatable), the cogency of Vattimo’s philosophy depends upon his description of the ontology of our epoch as nihilistic. That is, the legitimacy of weak thought relies on the supposition that “God is dead,” that Being is in decline, that metaphysical beliefs have largely lost their purchase, and so forth. But several contributors to this volume question this interpretation of our epoch. For a start, Vattimo’s description of our epoch may be challenged on directly “factual” grounds. For example, while Vattimo’s interpretation suggests a widespread weakening of metaphysical beliefs in contemporary culture (the result of secularization), Frankenberry points to empirical studies of religious belief which suggest that belief in supernatural entities and metaphysical principles abounds in the contemporary world (and is particularly high in the U.S.A., it seems) (282). Of course, Vattimo would not consider his interpretation of our epoch to be a “factual” description of an “objective” situation; it is self-consciously an interpretation, and only an interpretation. Nevertheless, at the very least, empirical studies such as those cited by Frankenberry suggest alternative interpretations, ones which Vat-
timo and the partisans of weak thought cannot simply ignore without being accused of upholding their own preferred interpretations on purely arbitrary grounds.

So, how are interpretations of epochality to be validated? Marramao pointedly asks, “according to which criteria and/or experiences can we affirm that historicity and contingency belong to our epoch and not to preceding epochs?” (79). This problem is particularly difficult since the appeal to our epoch as nihilistic is often what does the work of validation for weak thought. Vattimo argues that we ought to think weakly because we are living in a nihilistic epoch, but what resources does weak thought have to validate this interpretation of epochality? Clearly, Vattimo does not believe it is an “objective” description, but one which emerges from the history of interpretation itself. That is, Vattimo offers it as an interpretation and “validates” it with reference to a host of previous interpretations, principally those of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also many others (Dilthey, Theodor W. Adorno, Lyotard, Arnold Gehlen, etc.). According to D’Arcais, however, this move doesn’t place Vattimo in a better situation. If the interpretation of (post-)modernity as nihilistic is only an interpretation, a “fable,” then there is the problem of choosing between different fables, with no apparent criteria for judgement. D’arcais argues that “no fable can prove another one wrong: they all co-exist in the limbo of a common undecidability, unless there is a criterion given from a higher level … ” (262). Moreover, D’Arcais notes, Vattimo’s hermeneutics appears circular since it validates itself with reference to an interpretation of culture and history which it simply presupposes. He writes that:

only by presupposing modernity as the occurrence of nihilism does this interpretation become more persuasive than that of modernity as an unbridgeable gap or as the totalitarian aberration of the Enlightenment. In the end, the “truth” or greater persuasiveness of hermeneutic interpretation reduces itself to the claim: “I will tell the fable in this way!” (263).

This problem of validating his description of the contemporary situation leads on to the second problematic aspect of Vattimo’s philosophy I wish to discuss. This is a problem I have already raised, and the one which emerges most often in the pages of this book: the problem of relativism. This is a problem which bears directly on Vattimo’s prescription of weak thought. Relativism is of course a constant bugbear for hermeneutics and theories of interpretation generally, and is arguably the central problem in Vattimo’s philosophy, the one which may cause the most resistance to weak thought. We have already seen some of the objections to Vattimo in-
volving accusations of relativism (Eco, Welsch), and I would simply like to summarise the difficulties weak thought has with relativism via a few further points made by D’Arcais.

Firstly, it should be noted that the problem of relativism, within the pur-view of Vattimo’s philosophy, does not bare on epistemology, at least insofar as it is traditionally conceived in terms of “objective” truth. Rather, it bears on the act of interpretation, and the problem of knowing which interpretations are better than others (and for what reasons). As D’Arcais notes, Vattimo’s weak thought is “an essentially moral philosophy, or more precisely, an ethico-political philosophy.” This is because “it is an antimetaphysical, antidualmatic and antiauthoritarian philosophy, where the theoretical purpose (antimetaphysical and antidualmatic) is nonetheless explicitly commanded by a political purpose (antiauthoritarian)” (250). Ultimately, Vattimo’s reasons for rejecting metaphysics are not theoretical (problems of system, of closure, of foundation, etc.), but ethical. This is precisely the theme which he chooses to develop in his concluding essay to this volume, “Metaphysics and Violence.” Vattimo argues that metaphysics is essentially violent, for at least two reasons. While he develops this theme in detail with reference to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and Lévinas, the links between metaphysics and violence may be simply put as follows. First, Vattimo gives a specifically hermeneutic account of violence as silencing an Other and excluding them from dialogue (and hence, on Vattimo’s account, excluding them from participation in the community and in the constitution of “reality”). In appealing to truth and foundation, the “strong” thought of metaphysics discourages an ethical relation to the Other because one has no reason to engage in respectful dialogue with him or her. If one believes one has the truth (or a method by which to determine it), then one would seem to be warranted in ignoring, or even silencing, those who disagree with either that truth or that method. Hermeneutics appears as an “ethical” philosophy on this count because it encourages respectful dialogue with others, and Vattimo’s “nihilistic” hermeneutics particularly so because it rejects claims to ultimate truth or foundation (and thus, rejects strong reasons to close off dialogue with, or actively silence, others).31 Secondly, metaphysics – as Heidegger and Adorno both demonstrate in differing ways – is a form of thinking which is fundamentally complicit with the total rational organization of society. That is, metaphysics, as instrumental rationality (Adorno) and techno-scientific Ge-Stell (Heidegger), promotes a form of social life in which freedom is diminished and alienation is cultivated.32

While the desire to listen respectfully to others might appear to lead to a kind of “anything goes” relativism, in which all interpretations are seen as equally valid, Vattimo rejects this “vulgar” form of relativism on the grounds
that it, too, lends itself to violence. If all interpretations are considered equally valid, then there is nothing to determine which interpretations will take precedence except the violent play of competing forces. In other words, no principles would legitimate dialogue, since there would be no way of convincing someone that one interpretation is better than another, and so no reason not to simply impose one’s own interpretation through force. So Vattimo seeks a criterion to guide interpretation, to enable the judgement that one interpretation is better than another. As we have already seen, he takes this criterion from his interpretation of history, and suggests that the nihilistic epoch in which we live gives us criteria for interpretation. However, at a deeper level of motivation is the view that the single criterion for guiding interpretation is an ethical and political one: the reduction of violence. Thus, the reduction of violence is the criterion by which Vattimo might claim that the interpretation of the current epoch as nihilistic is preferable to other interpretations, since it suggests that the violent thinking of metaphysics is no longer appropriate or tenable.

However, as D’Arcais points out, Vattimo seems to run into a difficulty here. For what validates this very appeal to a reduction of violence? This is the metaethical question: why be ethical? Generally, Vattimo appeals to his philosophy of history again here, stating that the reasons for being ethical are not metaphysical absolutes, but have been given to us in the handing-down of tradition. But, as D’Arcais rightly notes and as Vattimo himself argues, tradition is itself a matter of interpretation (i.e. we must choose what aspects of tradition to accept and what to reject), and the ethical reduction of violence seems to be validated by appeal to a philosophy of history (nihilism) which is itself validated by the ethical reduction of violence, and we seem to have a problem of circularity. D’Arcais thinks that Vattimo thus reaches an impasse, where the choice is between a vulgar relativism and a metaphysical principle (the only ways of avoiding this circularity). He writes:

One cannot escape this dilemma: either there exists a criterion by which to choose one interpretation over another, one that avoids the anarchic confusion but supplies a criterion that is (metaphysical) truth and not interpretation, or this criterion does not exist, and consequently everything is really interpretation (including this affirmation) but unavoidably (in its turn a truth, above all!) there is anarchic confusion (which closes the discussion on preference, and entrusts it to the contingent facticity of the battle among wills to power) (261).
thinking: perhaps circularity only appears as a problem if one insists that there must be an ultimate and independently verifiable criterion which guides thought. Perhaps all Vattimo’s philosophy requires – and all it aspires to - is a self-consistent interpretation of the world and of thought itself which is able to engage itself as a plausible position in a dialogue, and indeed in such a way that it remains open to other positions because it does not take itself to be a truth, but only an interpretation. Nevertheless, D’Arcais’ investigation of the problem of relativism in Vattimo’s weak thought is something more than simply a misplaced criticism like those we saw earlier, since it is based on a careful internal reading of Vattimo’s thought, and brings to light a potential aporia. D’Arcais thus correctly identifies the point on which many are likely to have justifiable hesitations about Vattimo’s philosophy. In short, it remains unclear whether Vattimo’s hermeneutics can adequately avoid the problem of relativism, and this, I believe, is the central point on which further dialogue and debate around Vattimo’s work needs to focus.

_Weakening Philosophy_ stands as a major contribution to the dissemination of Vattimo’s thought in the Anglophone world. It perhaps does not always serve as well as it might as an introduction to this important Italian philosopher, and as a critical assessment its results are varied, patchy, and far from definitive – no clear and consistent critical angle emerges from the many varied essays collected here. But this only serves to highlight the multifaceted and provocative nature of Vattimo’s work. Ultimately, it is undeniable that _Weakening Philosophy_ is an invaluable sourcebook of critical interpretations of Vattimo, which all future engagements with his philosophy must take into account. Engaging with Vattimo’s weak thought is important, even for those who could never accept its conclusions, for it represents an important position in the trajectory of postmetaphysical (post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian) thought. Arguably, it is this trajectory which still defines the horizon and limit of contemporary philosophical and critical thought, and even those who reject this Heideggerian problematic outright – such as the increasingly popular Alain Badiou and his followers – arguably inscribe its importance in the very desperation and arrogance of their gesture. Vattimo’s work should also be considered one of the most original and significant (if controversial) developments of Gadamerian hermeneutics, and interpretation-theory in general, which highlights and proposes innovative solutions to problems endemic to this discipline, such as the limits of interpretation and the problem of relativism. Above and beyond the theoretical dimension of his work, however, Vattimo’s most distinctive contribution to postmetaphysical and hermeneutical philosophy is perhaps his extension of it into the practical domains of ethics, politics, and lived exis-
tence. This point is highlighted by many of the contributors to *Weakening Philosophy*, and I will conclude with two examples:

Vattimo on more than one occasion has been asked to clarify precisely what he means by [weak thought]. In response, he tells us most emphatically that it is not a weakness of thinking in which philosophy is no longer able to give directions to the concerns of life.37

Vattimo’s thought always relates to and affects the life we live … If you read Vattimo and follow his reasoning for part of the way, you will begin to act, judge, and live differently in a number of situations.38

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NOTES

1 Frank, “The Universality Claim of Hermeneutics” in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 159. All in-text parenthetical references are to Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*.


4 Grondin writes that “[i]n no other country is Gadamer as celebrated as a major philosopher as he is in Italy today. For this also, we owe gratitude to Gianni Vattimo” (p. 204).

5 This collection has been translated into English as *Weak Thought* by Peter Car ravetta and is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.


8 For Vattimo’s argument for this characterisation of Nietzsche, see his essay


10 The German reads: “Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.” Vattimo’s translation is discussed by Zabala in his introductory chapter (p. 9).


12 Vattimo writes: “…one should rather say that things are what they truly are, only within the realms of interpretation and language. In other words, a consistent formulation of hermeneutics requires a profound ontological revolution, because ontology must bid farewell to the idea of an objectified, external Being to which thought should strive to adequate itself.” “Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology” in Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 301.


14 This example stems from an exchange between Eco and Rorty.


17 Welsch writes: “We long have known the answer to every question. It reads, “it is the human.” This self-fulfilling certainty suffocates thought instead of allowing it to breathe” (p. 96).

18 See Vattimo’s introduction in The End of Modernity.

19 This adjective is used by Teresa Oñate in her chapter in Weakening Philosophy, “The Rights of God in Hermeneutical Postmodernity.”


terpretation of Christianity might appear eccentric at times, he does draw on historical precedents, such as Dilthey, who also saw Christianity as the origin of secularization.

24 Frankenbery in *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 278.


27 This distinction was developed by Dilthey.


29 This is what Rex Butler suggests should be done in the case of Jean Baudrillard. See the conclusion to his *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1999).

30 There are also of course many other apposite questions put to Vattimo in these pages which correctly identify potentially problematic areas of his thought; far too many to consider in this review. To give just one example, Giacomo Marramao, in his chapter “Which Ontology After Metaphysics? Conversations with Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty,” questions the capacity of weak thought, which targets metaphysical beliefs as underlying authoritarian power structures, to adequately deal with the social organizations of power which are no longer distributive or hierarchical, but productive and generative (as theorized by postfeminists and post-structuralists) (p. 81).


35 For example, Vattimo writes that “[t]he arguments that hermeneutics offers to support its own interpretation of modernity are aware of being ‘only’ interpretations…Their value lies in being able to establish a coherent picture we can share while waiting for others to propose a more plausible alternative.” *Beyond Interpre-


“To a man with a big nose”: a new translation

Jorge Salavert Pinedo

The famous Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas (Madrid, 1580 – Villanueva de los Infantes, 1645) studied humanities at the renowned University of Alcalá and later served as a courtier, holding various positions as diplomat and adviser to several powerful men in early seventeenth century Spain.

The sonnet “A un hombre de gran nariz” is widely believed to be dedicated to his literary rival, poet Luis de Góngora, and is still regarded as one of the best examples of Quevedo’s prowess as a satirical poet. Quevedo, who, together with Gracián, led the literary movement known as Conceptismo, authored other sonnets attacking Góngora, although no other poems focus on a physical trait.

Apart from the profound dislike Quevedo had for Góngora’s literary style (the latter is the best-known representative of the rival stream, Culturanismo), he also accused Góngora of being a converso, that is to say, a Jew who had converted to Catholicism. While later in his life Quevedo repudiated many of his satirical poems, dismissing them as childhood games, their literary value remains undiminished, several appearing repeatedly in anthologies.

The sonnet is an elaborate series of puns, hyperboles and metaphors, a skilful combination of form and content in which a concepto (a conceit in the seventeenth century sense of the word) is methodically exploited for sa-
terical effect. Quevedo wittily elaborates on the enormous size of a nose, supposedly Góngora’s.

As is usually the case when translating poetry, this sonnet poses some interesting challenges to the translator, and therefore careful consideration is required. Earlier translators of the sonnet have either prioritised purely semantic aspects over rhythm and rhyme, or have simply ignored the fact that the satire is in verse. It seemed evident to me that Quevedo’s sonnet merited a more ambitious rendition into English.

Any acceptable translation of poetry should at the very least suggest some of the original’s musicality. In the case of a Spanish Golden Age sonnet such as this one, the closest equivalent in the English literature of the period is the Elizabethan sonnet. Quevedo used the hendecasyllabic – to be precise, the so-called emphatic hendecasyllabic metre, which has three mandatory stresses in the first, sixth and tenth syllables. I chose to make use of the iambic pentameter in my English translation, as it is the closest equivalent in the English literary tradition.

The formal aspects of the poem, such as rhyme and rhythm, pose a real challenge. Burton Raffel has posited that total, absolute translation is not possible; however, I concur with his assessment that “it is certainly possible to satisfactorily translate – that is, to translate most things and to translate them well.”

The sonnet displays a perfect feminine rhyming scheme, not unusual in Spanish literature. As I worked my way through the translation, it gradually became evident to me that some semantic sacrifices would be necessary in order to convey the hyperbole within a poetical frame, while respecting its satirical nature.

Literary translation should always be a delightfully versatile practice, because it allows translators to put their intuitive, creative efforts into providing a potential reader with a text as pleasing as the original. As Willis Barnstone has suggested, “in poetry translation the art is what comes through … and is found not in duplication but in approximations, equivalences, and differences.” My translation, therefore, is aimed at achieving as close as possible an approximation in both form and content; my approach was to try and harmonise the two aspects, finding such a balance between the two that an English reader who has no knowledge of Spanish may still get equal enjoyment from the poem.

As every line in the original sonnet is a hyperbole, the translation should render similar or equivalent images. Where this was not possible, approximate equivalence was sought. Thus, for instance, I used “snout” in the first line, rather than the much plainer “nose,” in order to achieve a more humorous effect.
Quevedo’s choice of the adjective *superlativa* in the second line was not gratuitous; rather, its use was deliberate. He was toying with the idea of “huge in size” as much as the allusion to “grandiloquence.” Because of the balance I felt was needed between the demands of content and form, I developed the line around the two above concepts also by means of an adjective, “unparalleled.”

Quevedo possessed a remarkable mastery of the Spanish language, as can be observed in the next line, which includes an amusing yet difficult pun. *Alquitara*, the Spanish noun for alembic, does suggest a reference to Góngora’s convoluted (*alambicado*) style. Admittedly, the translation conveys this reference only remotely. The hyperbole is nevertheless further elaborated by rendering the alembic as a “lively, lengthy hose,” in order to create a rhyme.

In the next line, equivalence has been sought for the beard in *mal barbado*, rendered instead as “dreadfully moustached.” The rhyme is imperfect, but the line contains echoes of the original’s musicality.

In the second quatrain, the limitations of content and the original rhyme scheme (ABBA) turned out to be too difficult to emulate. With my final rendering, however, I try to insinuate or point to the existence of a rhyme, even though the structure is radically different from the original one. My objective then turned to produce meaningful equivalences, where the priority was to render the author’s jocular imagery.

In line seven, with the combination of two nouns, *sayón* and *escriba*, as modifiers of *nariz*, Quevedo was directing a truly cruel insult as well as an accusation of being a *converso* against Góngora. The former is an obsolete term for hangman, while the latter is another pun on *sopher*, the Hebrew term for a scholar or teacher of Jewish law and tradition, who transcribed, edited, and interpreted the Bible.

Some of the hyperbolic images used by Quevedo have been discarded or regrettably lost in translation. The *espolón* (bow) and the *galera* (galley) have been replaced with “an ominous nasal missile,” thus producing an assonant rhyme with “tribes” in line eleven and “archetype” in line thirteen. In line ten, while keeping the image of an Egyptian pyramid, for hyperbolic effect “rightly monstrous nipple” is added to the translation and achieves an assonant rhyme with lines twelve and fourteen.

Quevedo manipulated language with remarkable effects, transgressing grammatical rules at will, as can be seen in the case of *naricísimo*, the superlative form of the noun *nariz* (nose), a grammatical transgression with obvious, humorous overtones.

The reference to *las doce tribus* is yet another jibe at Góngora’s allegedly *converso* status. Combined with the noun *narices*, it produces a simi-
larly exaggerated effect. The unusual word order somewhat tries to replicate the hyperbaton of the original.

Amongst many other scholars, Peter Newmark has argued in favour of bringing creativity into play in literary translation. The alliteration in the last line brings a little flavour of creativity, of humorous play with sound that makes for an apposite ending.

**A un hombre de gran nariz**

Érase un hombre a una nariz pegado,
érase una nariz superlativa,
érase una alquitara medio viva,
érase un peje espada mal barbado;

era un reloj de sol mal encarado,
érase un elefante boca arriba,
érase una nariz sayón y escriba,
um Ovidio Nasón mal narigado.

Érase el espolón de una galera,
érase una pirámide de Egito,
las doce tribus de narices era;

érase un naricísimo infinito
frisón archinariz, caratulera,
sabañón garrafal, morado y frito.

**To a Man with a Big Nose**

Once there was a man to his snout attached
Owner of the most unparalleled nose
He was a lively, very lengthy hose;
He was a swordfish dreadfully moustached.
His nose was a large sundial all askew
‘Twas a big elephant sitting upright;
It was a killer nose, a dangling scribe:
Was Ovid Naso with a nose most rude.

He was an ominous nasal missile;
A pyramid, a colossal nipple,
Alas, of nostrils he was the twelve tribes.

Pinnacle of noses, stated simple,
Gargantuan arch-nose, nosy archetype:
A patently purple scalded pimple.

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NOTES


ESSAYS
The Great Inland Sea: reflections on the buddhadharma in the post-secular age.

Martin Kovan

For many decades following its first European settlement the Australian continent was believed to hold a vast inland sea, which had only to be verified by prompt exploration and scientific authentication. The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a rash of different expeditions that each sought out, and universally failed to find, the great inland sea of which so many, so hopefully, had dreamed. The primary cause for their hope is unclear, except that a reservoir of freshwater would have been able to support the burgeoning agricultural economy and demography of this new, promised southern land.
Their hope, though, perhaps went beyond this prosaic need and answered to a hunger for mythology. It was to them, as it can conveniently be to us, more than a metaphor of pathos. It was a human hope, wholly imured in historical contingency. These explorers had neither the technological facility with which the twenty-first century could come by the same knowledge, nor the safeguards in place for at least being able to rescue their lives should it come to the worst. It was a literal wandering in the wilderness, a wager with an indifferent world it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to conceive of. They kept on, believing that each step in obdurate sand was bringing them closer to a revelation of vast water.

Instead, many died, most often of starvation, in a desert they had not reckoned with. Often in states of utter hopelessness, still in search of an image which even in their dying breath they had no means of knowing was a mirage. Others simply gave up to defeat: they couldn't find anything. They sacrificed themselves for, and remained in thrall to, a hypothesis. There is no great sea to be found in the centre of the Australian continent, even should there once have been. It is largely arid desert. It can only be hoped that in the journey itself there was also a redemption of its end.

In our own time, they still die, such explorers of the spirit, which is as much what the Australian explorers were. They too are in thrall to an image they are certain shines like phosphorous from a transcendent truth. The exploratory expeditions continue; some even return to civilisation to report on the revelation of plenitude they have found at the centre of the human heart of darkness. It is there, they claim, and they carry its truth in the nervous system, the bones, and the blood. I have seen it. Until they lead others there by the hand to show them directly the same revelation of the same place, there is no certainty possible in regard to their claims. There is only hearsay.

Between the familiar and the unseen, between the realms of a phenomenal world and the intangible tracings of mind, beings find differing levels of such fulfilment. For many, world and mind are not a duality: everything that finds an origin in the play of consciousness, from Neolithic cave-painting to the programming of artificial intelligence in autonomous machines, also finds its proper manifestation in the visible forms of material culture that are then able to move back into conceptual reorientation. So ensues a multiform interaction of thought and matter, a web of invention that privileges no single dimension while it ceaselessly generates hitherto non-existent forms of being. Individual beings alone privilege one or other 'side' of the flux, according to a partial tendency. (How and why they do remains a fundamental question of theoretical psychology, not least of a metaphysics that might encompass it.)
For others, world and mind are neither a duality nor a multiform monism, but a designation of the same gestalt under two aspects that bear a relation of function if not of value. Spinozan thought and extension, for example, were understood equally as infinite terms (attributes) of a single substance, but for those faithful to the intuition of transcendence, thought takes precedence, comes causally prior to the material world, and is held responsible for it. All the worlds will dissolve into mind when mind has been recognised in its true nature, and all the subjective idealisms, from Berkeley to the Buddha to the Advaita Vedanta, come finally to rest in the Mind that is generator, creator, destroyer and magic-show master in one: a great inland sea from which all life has come and into which it will return – into the post-conceptual Absolute, the blissful void of Buddhist śūnyatā, or for the Vedanta the final release of the ego into the Self of Brahman.

Lost paradises, as these are, stand as both large propositions and powerfully seductive redemptions of the frequently senseless suffering of experience. They are able to stand in the mind as rationally defensible, intuitively sensible, aesthetically beautiful answers to absurdity. They are more than just ideas, and certainly reach far beyond the cognitive brilliance but terminal limitations of Western philosophy. Religion, if not at all moribund, finds itself discredited everywhere, but contemplative spiritual practice, especially of the Buddhist dharma, discovers a more profound engagement among the middle classes of the northern democracies today than at any time since the spread of esoteric and heterodox Christian movements of the European Middle Ages. Of them, too, it must be asked whether they enter into the search for an illusion, but one which is as necessary now as such search has always been before now.

On a path, for example, in a dry place, there are two people walking towards each other. The first is a nondescript figure, in simple working clothes, perhaps a teacher. The other wears the more elaborate clothes and markings of a life devoted to the serving of a God. At an inevitable point in their passage, they come to each other and out of courtesy stop and exchange some words. The religious one asks the other, "Where do you go?" The other looks the renunciate up and down and says simply "I go to work. They need a teacher in the next valley. I can read and write, I know the plants. And you, where do you go?" The renunciate says, "I'm not going anywhere, especially. All places are the same. I'm merely travelling on the way." "To what purpose?" asks the first. "To find God."

They part with some warmth and keep walking in their respective directions. But neither of them reach their goal. The teacher is attacked in the night by a gang of illiterate thieves, who kill him though they discover no money on his person. Before he passes into unconsciousness however,
the teacher has a revelation of extraordinary happiness, of understanding, and feels he is passing into a blessed state. His last thought is of regret for not being able to do some good for the people of the valley, and he deplores his untoward fate.

The renunciate, too, is killed in a rockslide set off by a goat traversing a narrow ravine high above. He too dies deploiring his fate, asking of his God what he has done to deserve such a death, especially as he has harmed no one and has been praying all his life for the deliverance of his soul. When their bodies are found they both receive the same rites of burial, the same prayers are spoken over them. After all of the people go back to their homes and soon forget each of the dead, it is the same earth that holds them in its great, vast arms.

It is an old-fashioned parable, not complex. But the twenty-first century, too, is an unsophisticated time. While its people can't be so easily identified by their intentions, let alone their clothes, they are both identified and judged not merely by their intention but purely and absolutely by the clothes they wear, the markings and signs that signify an identification that all too often will be defended to the death. The so-identified will dispute this and assert that they do not defend the sign, rather the principle and truth it is meant to represent.

But if it is the sign that is believed to mirror without a flaw the invisibility of the human or divine truth it stands in front of, how else is its truth to be ascertained apart from it? The religious faithful proclaim their faith in their self-representation but die privately without it; the godless ones stumble upon grace when they have never been expecting it. In their case grace goes without a sign — one that all others can recognize — but who will trust in that grace without the signs history and opinion has furnished him?

It appears that those who battle over the sign (and they are many) do so over it alone, when no other indubitable evidence is forthcoming, and the signified remains obscure. Everywhere battle is waged over mere phenomena, appearance, the surface, as well as assumptions of trust. The world everywhere trades in the phenomenon, and noumenon goes dressed poorly, or not at all, and always easily misunderstood. Imagining they fight over the unseen and ungraspable, they fight (in a fact both banal and bizarre) over a veil, a piece of dusty ground once consecrated, over a word that, embedded in dense thickets of language, dares to describe the hierophant in one term and not another. The word is not the man, though it threatens his integrity, both as master of the Law and master of himself. The sign assumes extreme degrees of power. The unseen is so vulnerable to constant misunderstanding that it is only in the shoddy, various garbs of phenomenality that it can express itself, yet be hidden, find no refuge, and
finally retire again into that other world which defies the visible one to translate or comprehend it.

Yet where there is no phenomenon as a proof, there is a nothingness, and that, for most, is worse than misunderstanding what could be. For them, there is at least still a makeshift, rickety stage with gestures and familiar choreography, placards on which are repeated tired and diminished forms of language, on which they throw themselves around. And proceed, as in a perverse Punch and Judy horrorscape, to tear each other to pieces.

If so much of the authoritative world relies on appearance for its judgments, how much of its judgment remains sound? And if the unseenness of truth is so often misrepresented, how is its voice still able to be accurately heard? Does truth exist as such, to our gaze, or is it always and only dwelling in an ontology more or less closed to consensual experience?

To the first question (and it is a further irony of religious belief) theism will answer that no phenomenal or merely human authority can vouchsafe any divine truth and that even the evidence of holy beings must be apprehended within and through a prior faith in them. Atheistic idealism will seek to arrive at universal truth, philosophically, precisely through and only through the efficacy of its signs. Subjective idealism will regard the epistemological project with some disdain, because all truth is to be found not in a universal cognitive framework that all beings – from New York cab-drivers to Hutu bushmen – can agree on, but in the revealed self-evident experience of the unique psyche, which has its own infallible reason of the intuition, as well as the heart and the mind.

Where then, within these general parameters, is the greatest adequacy to truth to be found? Or does truth escape a theistic, rational-philosophical or subjective-idealistic understanding completely? Is it, as the perennial philosophy and all great esoteric schools of mysticism – from the Advaita Vedanta and Sufism to Taoist-inflected Buddhism or esoteric Christian mysticism – assert, eternally unnameable, ineffable and ungraspable to the experience of the ego- and cognition-centred consciousness? Truth for them would reside in a totalised revolutionary shift of the fundamental ground of consciousness, radically other to the working of the prosaic mind and yet in perfect congruence and symmetry identical with that mind as well. It is a switch of the gestalt; perhaps, initially, a choice, a willing of awareness to be nothing but the pure freedom it always has been, and is.

The elaborations and ramifications conflux, as the evidence of at least two-thousand years of metaphysical argument is there to demonstrate. The question, for this enquiry, is not which of these 'great paths to Awakening' is the more congruent, or which form among them truth might more accurately take, from wave to wave of history. The only consideration here, for
very pedestrian reasons, is whether the immanent, let alone transcendental, dimension of liberated consciousness exists.

The question presents itself for the mundane reason that the present time sees an efflorescence of speculative belief in the historical context of a profoundly ambiguous degradation of natural and human potentials. The godless age quietly slips in its doubt towards a campfire burning in the night, giving off a bare promise of deliverance from the static chill of disbelief.

But disbelief is a far lesser contingency than the worsening conditions of environmental, economic and political inequity engendering suffering for many. It is necessary to know where human truths reside because the conditions are too precipitate to allow for either fictions or abstract resolutions. A human future does not depend on a conclusive answer that is, as it has ever been, not likely to be forthcoming. But it does depend desperately, at a nexus-point of critical global survival, on a revelation of clarity. Revelation, like revolution, is a deliberate awakening, not one given by grace. It is asserted here as the accurate correlative to the clarity required: a functional tabula rasa that questions both transcendence and its liberation, just as it places attention on the structures of consciousness as it already is and accords them provisional foundation. The Buddha himself, the archetypal ne plus ultra of a metaphysic of a totalised freedom from suffering, took the same caution and touched earth, biological facticity, as the witness to his apparent transcendence of biology.

If the Buddha's act of witness is intelligible, the Awakening it is believed to ground, and thereby fundamentalise, must also be made intelligible for the whole to be valued and thereby become transformational. The dharma of the Buddha, as it was understood not only 2,600 years ago on its first dissemination, but also as it manifests now in West and East, is perhaps the most compelling organism in the 21st-century jungle of speculative metaphysical faith. It is neither a theism nor completely bound to traditional religious orthodoxies. It isn't purely a philosophy, though it engages with Western metaphysics as a genuinely fruitful challenge to its traditional limitations. It is not a purely subjective project that denies a rigorous cognitive attention to stage and sequence, causality and necessity, or practice and discipline.

It is rather a thorough, systematic and profoundly edifying narrative that tells the story of the movement from suffering to a decisive and permanent liberation of mind, self and body. It is a structure of ideas and practices that deserve and need to be tested, challenged and interrogated for authenticity. The proposition it offers is radical and nothing less than a totalising answer to all sentient doubt: given its totalising aims, nothing less
than an equally radical and thoroughly receptive doubt is required to con-
front its potential truth-claims.

The dharma in its nature is something that swims in uncertainty, in
Zen's ubiquitous and illumined not-knowing, as its natural element. Such
not-knowing becomes, thereby, alchemised in selflessness and ignorance,
a form of very profound knowing: but that project swims perilously close to
bad faith, and an unseen self-deception. How much an intuitive and a-
logical sophistry, and how much a bona fide entrance into privileged places
of the mind depends purely and wholly on each mind that is thereby en-
gaged – and such privilege itself is hard, if not finally impossible, to meas-
ure by any other in conclusive terms. The mind of Jesus, of Buddha, is a
mind that walks past us in the street every day, and a mind that assumes to
a salvation of all other soul-minds in existence. Again, it is a bold proposi-
tion, and many have asked where is the line that divides such terms be-
tween psychological realism and morally-edifying mythology.

The present age demands a clearer response: that it will never receive
it is already a given, but neither the obfuscation of seemingly sophistic
paradox nor a reliance on scientific-cognitive evidence is enough to move
the mind toward acceptance. Acceptance itself is a misnomer: the mind re-
quires an authentic apprehension of pure faith, as well as an alert, clear,
unburdened attention to its own substance and kaleidoscopic contents. All
men and women in all times have been able to watch, faithful to their own
doubt, the nature of their mind; today there is a veritable renaissance of the
contemplative arts that suggests, in isolated and stoic splendour, a chal-
lenge to post-scientific ignorance.

Again the question remains: is there the light to illumine, not the few,
and by grace and good fortune, but the entirety, the sick and broken, the
armies of the hopeless in back wards and poverty, in intractable economic
and mental decline? Liberation, and its reality, is not a metaphysical ques-
tion, it is an ethical imperative if it declares its own efficacy. Those who
need it the most are those who suffer the most. The Buddha offered his
teaching of freedom to all sentient beings of all capacities in at least 84,000
different forms; in our time his teachings reach only the few who are al-
ready able to congratulate themselves on a new-found capacity for renun-
ciation. In the meantime, in the vast realms of the deprived, renunciation is
the element into which already they are born, suffer and die, and no re-
spect is offered them for the sacrifice, nor do they consider their disenfran-
chisement an achievement. They would never have learnt, let alone prac-
ticed, the arrogance and self-praise of self-abnegation.

A metaphysical truth, if it is such, must be able to answer to the rela-
tive conditions in which it speaks. Such propositions as those found in the
buddhadharma must do more than offer rational and intuitive sense. They must be congruent with reality.

One of the virtues of the age, at least, is a willingness to suffer without illusions, and for many it remains the single indubitable redemption of suffering, in this life, and not another. The liberation of mind promises far, far more. It will be for honest engagement, and honest testimony, to gauge how authentically such liberation is possible. Anything less than transparent confession is still obscure, anything more than fidelity to the subjective is already philosophy: we can say with Nietzsche that a suspension of the abstract is the necessary rapprochement with the self, and its world.

The Buddha demanded the same, and resisted cosmological and other explanations for man and his origin. The first task in that rapprochement, then, is a hard gaze onto the self and its existence in that real spurned world, that disjunction between the ideal and the real, the desired and the received, the expected and the unbidden. It is inside those interstices that truth comes alive, and foregoes faith. Faith, in those disclosures, would be period-costume worn over the skin of the actual, an extra weight, a gratuitous condescension to insight as it offers itself in the raw. The real challenge lies not in a leap of faith, but the courage to admit the fragmented, regretted, compromised real, devoid of the make-up of sentiment that serves to hide the ugliest wounds.

Humanity is a species of the walking wounded, and those who strike out for material or spiritual glory risk forfeiting the plumb-weight of humility, as well as the vision of the clear-sighted. The race needs healers, not winners; needs a freedom from pain, not the spoils of success. Spiritual belief seeks something other, not the life that swarms under its nose: who knows but that that life hides riches, not of the hereafter, but of the bare, fleeting moment. The only hands and eyes to see and hold them are not those of another, they can’t be given for free, and the only saviour is the one who stands inside these same shoes. All the others walk elsewhere, and each points in his own direction, all the signs being provisional. The bare voice that speaks, often in another language, deep in the hours of unawareness, is the voice of the unseen, and though it can’t see well or say the world beyond it, it is perhaps more blind than any other and is the only guide for the onward way. No other voice is there to speak as loudly, as surely, within you, even where it fails, stammers in exhaustion, all too often disappears entirely, and sometimes never returns.
In the liminal space where certainty and intention have both dropped away, where the most insistent of the self’s voices have lost the war of attrition against the vastness of not-knowing, nothing and everything seems possible of achievement. To float inside open-ended uncertainty – about self-nature, truth, or absolute wisdom – is to occupy a field of fertile negation. That is, it can be asserted that identity lies ultimately nowhere in designable phenomena – those things that at any rate have hitherto been taken as the bases for a working self-knowledge. Similarly, and just as provocatively, the existence of a salvific being or power is if anything marked by an ambiguity that speaks as much of constructed delusion as of indubitable presence. Nothing is certain apart from uncertainty.

The mind, the animal, the sinews of being soon tire and relinquish search: answers themselves are a weight not to be borne, and false ones even moreso. It seems far wiser, and truer, to live in the light of the knowledge of impotence, yet thereby of the essence of autonomy. The absurd man, it was considered, could survive by virtue of a willing capitulation to hopelessness combined with a will to enact ultimate impotence as provisionally useful endeavour. The recognition of the sentence allows the numbered days to be given over to the happy fiction of a moral agency: such meaning, in the face of evil and injustice, is meaning enough.

So it remains, for the mind of the twenty-first century. Morality, for that mind, remains a psychic structure that bifurcates experience and human action within it into one or another side of a dual divide. It evidences most gratuitously the proliferation of conflict over and against religious, racial, economic and ethical evil, defined freely by either side. Humanity wants to be moral, but perennially requires an enemy to be so. Righteousness without a front of resistance is rhetorical, and a million ready wills hunger for the cause that might set them against the assumed force of oppression, so that another battle for truth, liberty, democracy, justice or God might be won.

The slave revolts and sets up as the new master, and the oppositional duality that is the single most ubiquitous yet speciously reductionistic weapon of the mind keeps the bloody, rusty cranks of history turning. As God’s will speaks, another tens of thousands of malnourished children die, disenfranchised ‘minorities’ move beyond any relation with enfranchisement at all, and the ecological balance of the biosphere buckles under exponentially increasing blows of abuse. It is not apocalyptic, which is only another projection of extreme duality: it is merely a breathtaking capacity for quotidian forgetfulness, a looking the other way, that allows for a split-identity nar-
ervative of functionality (along with a stunning negligence of those in need) to
drag interminably through its moves until a next, and a next, inevitable cri-
sis.

No single mind would want to pretend to a redemption of such a cir-
cumstance, should it in (absolute) truth not exist. Different kinds of spiritual
idealism straddle with a kind of perplexed discomfort the inequivalence be-
tween their spiritual-metaphysical desired outcomes and the continuing re-
pudiation of an ethically-apportioned world that continues to see the weak-
est become weaker still, and the most morally equivocal still more powerful.
For many, of even the deepest faith, the inequity (let alone metaphysical
disparity) of the contingent and ideal becomes too great a moral chasm to
broach. Contemporary Western faith has, for more than a century, become
a tentative negotiation with culpability, recognising the necessity to take re-
ponsibility for global injustice not in God’s name but in that of the dignity of
the species.

It is a tired litany to repeat, here as anywhere, how far good intention
can be read historically as a species of failure: today we salvage what is
left of the philanthropic programs of earlier dual divides between master
and slave, colonist and colonised, codifier and codified. The contemporary
language of war and its various forms of aftermath places faith in the effi-
cacy of such historical measures: democracy, once installed, is able to 're-
instate' the liberty of a people, and the 'restructuring' of human freedoms al-
ows for the 'reabsorption' of diverse elements into the 'rehabilitation' of the
whole. It is up to the redemptive master to 're-make' reality, and remake it
as a primary proof of unification.

Conflict itself, as its end aim, advertises the vision of unity, of broken-
ness-made-whole, in its ideal eye. The weak requires the strong, and only
the strong have the means to institute the resurrection of all original goods.
If power was unable to avert the loss of equilibrium between competing ills
before, now it will fight solely on the side of the good of all, the unitary vi-
sion that, itself a utopia, remains a metaphor that each oppositional pole
has as a single term to justify their non-unitary self-interest. The dream of
wholeness, the mandala principle, becomes not merely the unspoken guid-
ing figure of a lone, struggling self, but of a collective psychic entity: a na-
tion, as well as that nation’s enemy. A collective identity burns, even to the
death, for unitary consciousness, but requires the subjugation of the Other
in order to bring the phantom of totality to a Frankenstein-life. Every reli-
gious denomination, excepting perhaps the Buddhist, calls for the salvation
of his brother, depending on his brother's submission to his faith.

Religious man seeks universal brotherhood but stumbles painfully in
the shackles of his own adherence to a dualistic conceptual, linguistic and
religious model of truth. The model itself, over thousands of years, barely loses its sheen, while millions have died, as so many disposable rags, for the sake of its immaculacy: Christian or Communist, it is not the model itself that has necessarily counted, but the sheer human willingness to bow down before its universal judgment and submit to a willing, and even unwilling, martyrdom in its name.

Who has benefited from such exertions? If so much religious as well as secular response to worldly suffering proves so often to be an unintended displacement of the sources of that suffering so that the response to poverty, for example, becomes an exercise in microeconomic adjustment to an existing structure able to continually defer responsibility, exactly where responsibility for poverty may be placed remains a considerable question. The seemingly intractable global crisis of inequities of wealth, self-determination and power, racial and cultural sovereignty, or economic and intellectual hegemony, turn in cycles of never-completely realised causal indeterminacy. No one is certain, or even clear, where the formal bases for irresolvable conditions lie. International forces for regeneration and reformation attempt, with negligible success, to provide the groundwork for the new shifting of a paradigm. Yet the prospects of the day, the hours of drudgerous work, underpaid labour, material discomfort and spiritual desolation – this more recognisable world lags far behind the idealism of the voice of privilege.

The spiritual project of a metaphysical schema such as is to be found in Buddhism, for example, reduces such indeterminacy to the agency of the singular self, and with that self, the agency of consciousness. The material reality of all experience is to be rationalised by virtue of the consciousness that is able to so perceive it. For many cultural groups this is ancient, received wisdom, for better or for worse: there is not, for the Hindu caste-system, an ontological disparity between spiritual and material conditions – rather, they coincide.

Similarly, if all material reality might be determined, for the Buddhist accumulator of positive karma, by virtue of the purification and generosity of individual consciousness, and thereby of that individual's actions, then the ethical path of freedom and benefit for all beings indeed lies clearly ahead. I suffer precisely as much as my spiritual destiny requires me to, in order, at best, to overcome it. That destiny is, absolutely, determined by the choices of my conscious volition.

Without interrogating the extreme confusions implied in these various models of subjective idealism (those questions regarding the existence and agency of the will, and the functioning of that will in a predetermined structure of both mental and material worlds), it is not hard to recognise at the
centre of metaphysical speculation the reduction of ultimate agency to the self and the self that conceptually constructs its lived-reality. The central implication to be drawn from the essential solitude of such responsibility in its relation to the material world is that consciousness, before all else, is primary. This emphasises that mind ('Mind') and mind alone is the definitive site of agency in the project of a radical transformation of the self and the world.

Similarly it would not be amiss to claim that the master term of the contemporary dissemination of the buddhadharma is Mind, under which all ontologically subordinate, or derived, phenomenal things and experiences are ultimately subsumed. To the mind of awakening, that is, all things – conflicts, fears, desires, wars, obstacles, limits among them – are circumscribed within the self-reflexive consciousness that integrates them into itself and, in a redemptive sense, transforms them into grist for the spiritual mill. Thus, earthly toil and suffering, however absurd, is spiritual capital: a chance for the purification of those failings and delusions that maintain the actually-free mind in its bonded state of ignorance. Within the consciously-recognised frame of that earthly reality then, the contemporary Buddhist engages in purificatory and ritual acts of positive karmic investment as the most ultimately efficacious strategy for transforming the mind and all its perceptions, and thereby the 'real' condition believed to be experienced by the identity – the (ultimately illusory) 'self' – of that mind. Such ritual purification is a wholly solitary project; it involves no other, in particular no other in need, at all.

When more than a hundred thousand people die in the 2004 South Asian tsunami, it is a compassionate response of some millions of the Buddhist faithful in the affluent West to generate collective mantra or prayer and dedicate the subsequent collective merit to the victim or survivor as the most meaningful form of benefit they are able to extend. Some among them will donate material aid or voluntary time to the sufferers as well. But very few of the same Buddhist practitioners will endorse a global economic revolution, even rhetorically, in order to reinstate a degree of justice to the perennially weak, and meek, of the earth, unable to provide themselves with adequate preventative defense, medical care or emergency relief, in either peace or cataclysm. Recognising the often compromised value of material aid to the world's suffering, the spiritual practitioner puts his faith in a transcendent causal agency: by influencing the ills and ignorance of the collective human mind, change and benefit is necessarily wrought there. To place trust in material benefit alone is ultimately naive and even counter-indicative: in the final analysis only the evolution of the consciousness of the species will have a chance of saving the species.
The intention, even the arguably percipient psychologism behind such idealism, is compelling; all the moreso where its manifestation in practice might appear to the irreligious as irretrievably blinded. But it would be not quite true to dismiss the spiritual project, in this context, as self-aggrandising delusion; the spiritual faithful are also those most commonly to be found at the frontline of service, in the dysentery pits and volunteer encampments of the stricken and the dispossessed. Spiritual faith, as much now as through all history, might well be there, or believed to be, working its miracles of unfathomed beneficence.

It is difficult, however, to fail to recognise the depth to which so much materialist, spiritual, rational-economic or karmic rationalisation of human suffering bespeaks a categorical confusion of ethical grounding and collectively-willed agreement in alleviating suffering. Humanity under its own terms does not have consensus on which dimension of its trichotomy to concentrate resolution. It swings between political, economic and religious narratives in sanitising its experience and, again, perpetuates the various dualities of self and other, matter and mind, history and destiny in seeking true agency for transformation. It draws its object lessons from the past in confronting the contingencies of the present in order to shape (through choice, through emphasis) the kind of future it desires to know. In all three (at least) of these movements of mind requiring independent kinds of reflexive will, it may be that self-determination, both individual and collective, remains largely epiphenomenal to absolute history, a fictional function, that is, of the ignorance an epistemically-rupturing discourse such as Buddhism never tires of repeating as the original source of dis-ease.

Perhaps, for the same reason, the head-scratching of 'the reasoning animal' in the face of his own perplexity is part of the same fiction of self-determination: he will never be able to free himself from his materially contingent, and suffering, state, until that time when he is able to recognise his own ignorance for what it is, and newly engage it with the spiritual gnosis that alone will bring him into a true form of knowledge.

To that intuitive conviction, the only answer to global suffering (poverty, social degeneration, war and disease have all been evoked, among others) is the spiritual answer: the answer that by its nature is another kind of 'answer', requiring a criteria for enactment and confidence that, if it doesn't merely challenge rational-instrumental reason, actually trangresses it at its foundations. To enter into the spiritual solution, and the redemptive superstructure it explicitly promises, is to invest in a different kind of mind, entire. It is to leave a reductionistic dualism and its inherently antagonistic frame of reality – the 'flatland' of strife – behind and enter into a mode of conceptual suspension, until the will that is not merely yours, but that of
God, Goddess or Source as well, is able to apprehend which action, in any contingent case, is the true, the good and the beautiful. Neither political, economic, psychological nor even biological determinants can possess the absolute view such a renunciation of will appeals to. Only truth, or only God, can. But who is to hear, and then broadcast, for those who can't hear, the word of God?

III

The desert-explorer, in her search, comes across a pair of footprints and soon recognises them, perhaps inevitably, as her own. She has come full circle, as have all her questions and her doubts, with their provisional answers. But the explorer must move on, if that is the condition of the search, and leave these (old) footprints, as well as all other (new) ones, behind. She must travel into the featureless, as if it was possible, a landscape without evident landmarks, guideposts or assurances of rescue. Her unknowingness carries her into the further part of the journey.

The featureless ground is, for the Buddhist, the ground of emptiness. It is a ground that is not-a-ground; for the same perceiving subject nor is it a ground wholly without features, even if little of what appears promises the kind of epistemological certainty so much of the Western angst around proof is bound to. The path, as the meditator and non-meditator alike can attest to, is rife with intimations of disclosure at every step of the way, even if the reflexive mind is not always able to assign decisive meaning to the signs that flash through its various levels of apprehension. The secular 'spiritual path' of the moment has been comfortably reified into just such an attention to the promptings of the psyche, attached as it might be to one or another of the traditional contemplative disciplines.

The primary experience, however, remains prior to the conceptual frame with which it is, at best, provisionally guided or, at worst, forcefully misrepresented. Western Buddhism, in its first full flourishing, is no less at the risk of such misrepresentation than other, perhaps more dogmatically inculcated, metaphysical frames; the Buddhist framework is itself able to confidently dismiss a wealth of contemporary discourse and be uncritically appropriated as a universally untouchable logos, no less fixed than mediæval Christian dogma: more True than the truth.

It is unclear, for every practicing individual, where the realm of subjective, even idiosyncratic, religious experience ends and its congruence with the essentialism of ancient tradition begins. Individual people, after all, become nominally religiously identified because they assume, failing com-
plete certainty, that their experience is in both explicit and personal terms co-extensive with, and normativised within, an ancient religious truth. The Buddha's experience, it is further assumed, is an experience that is able to be newly known by all forms of sentient consciousness, but especially that privileged human one. In the seventeenth century, too, Spinoza contended that in the acquisition of a true form of knowledge, and only through that knowledge, was the bondage to the passions that constitutes the heart of human misery able to be overcome. True happiness, true freedom and the true wisdom that is their foundation were for Spinoza, as much as for the Buddha and his particular metaphysic, disclosures of universal truth offered necessarily via the model of consciousness he was able to offer his (and all) time. Where Nāgārjuna's metaphysics are transmitted to the mind of the twenty-first century, most notably by the Tibetan Gelugpa school, it is similarly assumed that this, and not another, cognitive frame is the medium of the highest value for the contemporary transmission of the mind of the Buddha.

Whether or not this is true is not the most immediate concern here; that it is still an assumption for many minds in their daily interface with the contemporary world (however a deeply-held or intentional one) is. It is of concern, not because it might be right or wrong, whatever those terms might turn out to mean in the context of a subjective idealism, but because the nature of the mind that so organises itself could, paradoxically, and by virtue precisely of that self-organisation, be ignoring its actual nature, as it is.

A similar call has been heard by different voices: those of Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, Zen teaching generally, Stephen Batchelor or the more recent popular voices of Ken Wilber or Andrew Cohen. Their preeminent concern for the authentic experience of the unfettered mind is one that moves still in a trickster's hide among the great assemblies of the religiously stamped and approved. Buddhism, perhaps uniquely, was always able to throw the joke back by knowingly allowing that Buddhism itself is an 'empty' word, the entire edifice of cognitive argument a cloud of emptiness, every single historical master an empty turdpie and that anyone was welcome to pointlessly blather and defame to their heart's content. The true dharma, it has always been known, is untouchable, is not even the dharma, is so hard and durable with Truth that like a diamond there is nothing else hard enough to shatter it. Buddhism's saving irony could be one of its lesser-celebrated foundational truths as it grows out of its Western adolescence is taken at different times and places too seriously.

In the passing landscape all forms, models, archetypes, individuals, gods, goddesses and tropes of language stand out for the eager eye of the
self. A million more surround, invade, come between them – from cybernetic transfigurations, cryogenic immortalisations, technobiotic enhancements and AI utopias to neo-shamanic pre-rational regressions, psychedelic custom-designed neurotherapies, recreational pharmacological self-medications, born-again conversions, neo-Romantic tribalisations, crystal-gazing consumerisms and quasi-transcendental transpersonal ego-restructurings. The genre that is itself a bona fide treasure-trove of genres already has its own marketing division, official demographic and history of comedic impersonations. Even the buddhadharma, at this unclassifiable time, has its recanters and recovery-spokesmen, doubters and debtors. For the American ex-monk of the Burmese Theravada, Alan Clements, 'enlightenment' is a word that signifies a condition that doesn't, perhaps hasn't ever, existed. The best Zen teachers, too, will ridicule the Buddha's awakening and continue to work for the full enlightenment of every sentient being, as many as are the sands of the Ganges. Awakening is not a thing to be attained, is not attainable.

The explorer moves into such worlds with a high seriousness that has its tongue firmly planted in its own cheek, lest it stumble in its own quicksand. Outrageousness and sheer heartbreak bolt through the dark nights of the real like thoroughbreds outdoing each other for the gates of hell. Patent geopolitical absurdity, exploitation, acts of premeditated or arbitrary violence slather the veils of the actual across morning papers, every day, until such a time as the world as it has always been known should stop. It is the necessary and determined working-out of causal karma, and will continue until such a time as the collective mind has reached an adequate point of purification. But that can only happen if preceded by an adequate degree of self-interrogation, able to take upon itself the responsibility and hard discipline required for the 'intellectual love of God'.

Theoretically, a global population engaged in dharmic purification is capable of transforming human destiny forever. Historically, however, that might well never occur. Karmic purification, in practice, becomes reliably a project only of the self, that is, another project of the self, along with all the others. Insofar as it is a genuine project it is more intentionally a project for all the others, before the self, but again, the dividing-line between this self and all others becomes progressively harder to define. It becomes a project more accurately made on behalf of the process itself, given the absence of an unequivocal teleology. Every destiny is the irreplaceable heart of the entire unfolding. All events and all value-claims, including the most morally abhorrent, appear to be equal partners in the enacting of the virtual karmic movie, and you will know your own dividends when you discover which side of the barbed-wire fence you are on. All this, it becomes clear, is the wholly
ordinary nuts and bolts of the spiritual path, and nothing to be afraid of.

Just as much as these, naturally, are the mythological dark nights of spine-racking doubt. Such nights are what junk-food and vapidly amusing mainstream movies are made for. Mahatma Gandhi and Mickey Mouse and their derivatives each have the right answer, depending on the question. It is important to recall, also, as Sartre suggested, that the actual sense behind most questions is that they don't in fact desire an answer, or only that one that has already been readied for it. Spiritual questions, too, as the Doctor Spock of postmodernism suggests, are also not merely questions and Freud and Wittgenstein look over his shoulder and agree that the status of the question is as much a symptom as a noise without a meaningful predicate. Where, then, does the explorer, wandering in the same formless desert, brimful of all these kind monsters, lay her weary load?

There is nothing amusing in her weariness; she is genuinely tired. The Buddha has already advised her: right here, right where you are, is where the load is to be dropped. The tool, then, if a tool for a kind of relinquishment is required, is meditative discipline. Therein lies the dewdrop, simple sublime, and meditation the metaphor, as well as the practice, for achieving another kind of hold on the contents of Mind. It is a kind of hold that opens up an authentic field of new exposures: beyond black-and-white as well as colour transmissions. Neither one, two nor three-dimensional exposures of what her mind consists of but a direct interface with a frequency that, if it was possible, doesn't have any recognisable features at all. Such is the sign of emptiness. Physiology, however, responds: bodily sensations of boredom, delight, bliss, even ecstasy. Something is being done properly when life itself lights up.

Progress is there to be made. If the great inland sea hasn't yet been found, that might only be because in the secular mind that thirsts for it, it has already been abandoned as a mirage, a place where life can't be lived, and where there is no water to sustain it. With such blessings, the search continues. Sea or desert, what difference, on the far horizon of Mind?

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Edmond Jabès opens his little book, *Desire for a Beginning, Dread of One Single End*, in characteristic style:

...a book – he said – that I'll never write because nobody can, it being a book:

– against the book.
– against thought.
– against truth and against the word.
– a book, then, that crumbles even while it forms.
– against the book because it is incapable of thinking its totality, let alone nothing.
– against truth because truth is God, and God escapes thought; against truth, then, which for us remains legendary, an unknown quantity.
– against the word, finally, because the word says only what little it can, and this little is nothing and only nothing could express it.¹
The fragments collected below are an attempt to develop what might be called, adopting Maurice Blanchot’s turn of phrase, a “philosophy without philosophy,” that is to say, a philosophy that chooses to go without the metaphysical support of objective, supra-perspectival truth and without the institutional backing of the academic establishment. A philosophy of this sort is a “weak philosophy” in Vattimo’s sense, as it has given up the traditional philosophical ambition of providing a systematic, precise and thoroughly “rational” account of the fundamental features of the world. What emerges, then, is a way of thinking and writing which, in the manner of Jabès, produces books “against the book,” “against the word” and “against truth,” and thus looks towards literary and artistic exemplars for its inspiration. The exemplar I put forward here is Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel, *The Poor Man of God* (first published in Greek in 1956).²

* * *

I hesitate to write, to add a single word or an iota more, as if anything needed to be added to this wonderful myth, “this legend, which is truer than truth itself” (3).

Kazantzakis frames his story with a short Prologue, and so will I.

Every so often we come across something or someone – a Gospel, a poem, a novel, a film, an extraordinary saint or an extraordinary sinner – that completely changes the course of our life. Some sixteen years ago, as a naïve first-year undergraduate student at university studying the great texts of philosophy and religion, I felt deeply unimpressed and alienated by the secular and materialistic culture of the academy, manifesting itself in an almost exclusive reliance on scientific modes of thinking with little appreciation for the dimensions of spirituality and faith. At least that’s the way things struck me then. And so I returned to Kazantzakis, for I had already begun reading many of his writings in my last year of secondary school and, especially, over the summer break before the opening of the first university semester. But what I returned to was Kazantzakis’ *The Poor Man of God*. I would skip lectures and tutorials, forget to have lunch and tea, miss my bus rides home, because I was totally enthralled and engrossed in this novel.

Sitting under the shade of a tree on a bright autumn day, surrounded by yellow and brown leaves and the wide green expanse of the campus lawns, almost on my own while everyone else was busily taking notes in the classrooms and lecture theatres or playing cards and chasing boyfriends or girl-
friends, I would be pouring over the pages of Kazantzakis’ record of the life and times of this fool for Christ, Francis of Assisi. I must have appeared strange, if not mad, to my classmates, to my family and relatives, for the more I would feed upon and assimilate Francis’ words, the more my soul would be nourished and grow aflame. I was gradually coming to life, and I knew things would never be the same again.

As I would read, I would imagine Kazantzakis in his Villa Manolita in Antibes, bent over his desk writing with a Giotto reproduction of Francis behind him. This was to be his last novel, assuming that the semi-autobiographical Report to Greco – his last major work, completed the year before his death – does not count as a novel. The seventy-year-old author of The Poor Man of God was by then a widely travelled as well as a widely acclaimed writer, with a store of novels, travelogues, essays and plays behind him that had already begun to attract an international following. He had also begun to attract the ire of the religious authorities. In the same year he wrote The Poor Man of God (1953), the Orthodox Church in Greece sought to prosecute him for sacrilege owing to the content of Freedom or Death and The Last Temptation, while the following year the Vatican placed The Last Temptation on the Index of Forbidden Books. Ironically, in the midst of such ecclesiastical opposition, Kazantzakis would reignite his love for Francis, one of the most venerated saints of the church. With his wife, Eleni, he would spend the summer of 1952 in Italy, retracing the steps of his beloved Poverello in Assisi, where the couple “wandered in shady lanes singing the Fioretti.” On his return home to Antibes, Kazantzakis would write in a letter to Börje Knös:

In Assisi I lived once more with the great martyr and hero whom I love so much, Saint Francis. And now I’m gripped by a desire to write a book about him. Will I write it? I don’t know yet. I’m waiting for a sign, and then I’ll begin. Always, as you know, the struggle within me between man and God, between substance and spirit, is the stable leitmotif of my life and work.

The sign, as happened often in Francis’ life, appears to have come by way of illness and suffering. Kazantzakis was soon beset by various physical ailments requiring hospitalisation, including a severe eye infection, perhaps like the one that afflicted Francis (323). Although he had already begun writing the novel on Francis in late 1952 from Antibes, he left the manuscript half-finished in order to undergo medical tests in Holland for a prior condition. In the months that followed, however, Kazantzakis experienced a
harrowing series of medical problems, particularly with his right eye (which he was eventually to lose altogether). It was during this time that the novel on Francis took an entirely new shape:

Now, in the course of my illness, this work has been growing steadily richer inside me. I took notes, wrote Franciscan songs, created scenes, and the work kept constantly expanding with the great wealth [of new material]. I shall rewrite it from the beginning with new impetus… As much as I could, I’ve tried to take advantage of the illness to rewrite it inside of me; and so I hope that I transformed the illness into spirit. (Letter to Börje Knös, written from Paris on June 12, 1953.)

But it was not in spite of his illness that Kazantzakis’ created this powerful work, but because of it. As he himself pointed out some years later to his long-time friend, Pandelis Prevelakis, who was bedridden at the time: “This immobility may prove fruitful. Whatever is best in The Poor Man of God, I dictated to Eleni at the time of the fever.”

Creativity does not come from well-planned and efficiently run think-tanks, seminar workshops, conferences or projects headed by professional, highly-trained academics and business leaders. Creativity comes, like an unmerited gift of divine grace, to the ‘loser’ relentlessly working away at some obscure problem, hidden from view and derided by all.

It is only the creative genius who has “poetic license,” and this because such a person has suffered more than any other for what they have accomplished.

Critics have not failed to notice connections between Albert Camus’ apparently dispiriting thoughts about “the absurd” and his recurrent physical illnesses. But attempts to “psychologise away” Camus’ philosophy of the absurd are misguided, for what they overlook is the fact that it is primarily through pain and suffering that the truth of the world is revealed – something known to artists of all times.

The best philosophy is always borne out of great suffering, not comfortable and relaxed armchair theorising. Wittgenstein recognised this well, and also embodied this principle in his own life and thought, as Norman Malcolm has highlighted:
As he [Wittgenstein] struggled to work through a problem one frequently felt that one was in the presence of real suffering. Wittgenstein liked to draw an analogy between philosophical thinking and swimming: just as one’s body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an exertion to get to the bottom – so it is with thinking. In talking about human greatness, he once remarked that he thought that the measure of a man’s greatness would be in terms of what his work cost him. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein’s philosophical labours cost him a great deal.9

I look into those black, beady and piercing eyes of Kazantzakis that are painfully strained over his manuscript, and notice large tears blurring his sight and smudging the ink on the pages. Just as Brother Leo, when recounting the life of Francis, would be guided by the tender hand of his spiritual father, so Kazantzakis tells us that “everywhere about me, as I wrote, I sensed the saint’s invisible presence” (3). And we, too, when reading this work, feel that whispering to us in one ear is Brother Leo, whispering in another is Kazantzakis, while right before our very eyes stands a pale and emaciated figure, with bare, bloodstained feet, wearing a dirty coat that has been patched and repatched a thousand times, and who is joyfully dancing and singing in a rapturous voice: Francis, God’s sweet little pauper.

I have never met another person such as him, no matter how hard I have looked since I first laid eyes on him. Tears would also roll down my cheeks as his great humility and gentle kindness would transform whatever they touched, both friends and (especially) enemies, the poor as well as the rich, the wicked as well as the righteous, both humans and animals, from the most fearsome snake to the least significant ant.

The truth is, though, that the truth about Francis, the truth that is Francis cannot be described and explained in a way that adequately captures his “essence,” that which makes him utterly unique. “Francis runs in my mind like water,” admits Brother Leo. “He changes faces; I am unable to pin him down… How can I ever know what he was like, who he was? Is it possible that he himself did not know?” (25, 30).

Truth is like that. And the ultimate truth, Truth Itself, that is, God, always evades neat and accurate formulations, much to the consternation of philosophers and theologians.
Indeed, I have never heard a philosopher or theologian describe God as precisely and clearly as Francis:

“Brother Francis, how does God reveal himself to you when you are alone in the darkness?”

“Like a glass of cool water, Brother Leo…I’m thirsty, I drink it, and my thirst is quenched for all eternity.” (26)

Other times, Francis would say:

“God is a conflagration, Brother Leo. He burns, and we burn with him.” (27)

And Francis would indeed catch fire: “Put yourself out, Brother Francis,” poor Leo would cry, “put yourself out before you burn up the world!” (26)

These metaphors and images are immediately understood by the heart, but are reluctantly admitted, if they are at all, into the intellect.

Hence Francis’ advice: “The heart is closer to God than the mind is, so abandon the mind and follow your heart: it and it alone knows the way to paradise,” (209, cf. 356) advice not easily accepted by the more learned brothers of Francis’ group, such as Ruffino and Elias.

Pascal, Pensées:
“Le coeur à ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.”

“All of his works,” Anselm Kiefer explains, “are but aspects or traces of a theme that in human concepts, in language, is not representable. All of painting, but also literature and everything that is connected to it, is always but a circling around something unsayable, around a black hole or a crater, whose centre one cannot penetrate. And whatever one takes up for themes has only the character of pebbles at the foot of the crater – they are path markers in a circle that one hopes gradually closes in around the centre.”

The mind, with its sophisticated proofs and refutations, wishes to augment its authority, to “spread itself out and
conquer the world not only by means of heaven but also by force” (300), whereas the simple, illiterate heart has no such ambitions, but desires only love and peace.

“But isn’t this taking things too far?” protests the scholar. The same question could be asked about virtually anything Francis does. The path of learning, however, is not necessarily rejected outright, but nor is it advocated as a path that is as valid as any other.

*Man’s knowledge is nothing but ashes.* (361)

Francis, therefore, angrily seizes a book he sees a young novice poring over and throws it into the flames, telling the novice that the only Easter day on which his (Francis’) congregation did not see the Resurrection was when a visiting theologian from the University of Bologna came to deliver the sermon. (357)

The learned Germans, Kazantzakis wrote in one of his travelogues, if presented with the choice between two doors, on the one written ‘Paradise’ and on the other written ‘Lecture about Paradise,’ would unhesitatingly rush to the latter.¹¹

Francis: “Instead of being crucified, I simply think about crucifixion” (211).

The same novice is given permission (by Brother Giles) to preach a sermon, but on one condition: “You must mount the pulpit and start crying Baa! Baa! like a sheep. Nothing else – just Baa! Baa!” (358)

Had he followed this advice, Francis no doubt would have said to him what he had said some time earlier to Brother Leo, after the latter had risen to speak during a meeting of the brethren. Some of the brothers had already spoken eloquently against the Rule that Francis had drawn up, but when Brother Leo rose to speak he could only stammer a few words, became completely confused and then burst into tears: “No one else spoke with such skill, such strength,” Francis said. “Brother Leo, you have my blessing.” (305)
…and it won’t do harm if your words are broken with weeping – tears on occasion carry the weight of speech.
– Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* 3.1.158

The loquaciousness of the scholastic brethren compared to the silent, wordless communication between Francis, Bernard and Pietro (404): the difference between the God of the philosophers and scholars and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When Francis breaks the silence, he does not reach for lengthy tomes and tractates, but for the lute: song and dance.  

*Music*: the greatest and most mysterious force in this world; no other form of expression or communication even comes close in potency and poignancy.

Music as the most important source of religious experience.

It has often been said that music provides the most cogent proof of the existence of God. But nothing could be further from the truth in the case of much music. No greater truth, however, could be told of music at its best.

God is a fire that burns but also purifies. Like the scorched landscapes in Anselm Kiefer’s paintings, the destruction is never entirely negative, but always holds out the promise of renewal and re-creation.¹²

*The God of Kazantzakis – a philosopher’s God?* In light of the recent proliferation of attempts to interpret Kazantzakis’ fiction through the lens of Whiteheadian process theism (led by Daniel Dombrowski and Darren Middleton¹³), it should be recalled that Kazantzakis was consistently opposed to the kind of “logocentric” language found in much process theology. The writings of leading process philosophers and theologians, including A.N. Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne and David Ray Griffin, read like most other works in speculative metaphysics: the language is abstract and propositional, there is an emphasis on precise definitions and distinctions as well as on dense and rigorous argumentation, and in short the aim is the systematic elaboration in as literal a way as possible of a worldview in consonance with the latest findings of science. But all this is foreign to Kazantzakis: his works (particularly his novels and plays) are passionate narratives infused with poetry and paradox, analogies and parables, dreams and symbols, thus yielding multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings.
Even his most overtly philosophical work, *Salvatores Dei*, resembles a lyrical poem more than a metaphysical tractate. It is not so much that Kazantzakis chose to express himself in this way, but that he felt compelled to do so: the deepest reaches of reality, and the reality of God above all, could not be expressed otherwise without distortion. There is a danger, therefore, in speaking of “Kazantzakis’ narrative fiction as a mythopoiesis of process thought”, as Middleton does. For this gives the impression that the literary fiction of Kazantzakis can be “translated,” “formalised” and indeed “purified” without remainder into the system of process philosophy. Middleton is too astute a reader of Kazantzakis to succumb to this fallacy: “process theology,” he notes, “may not with impunity be spoken of as the kernel trapped inside the husk of Kazantzakis’s fiction”. Others, however, have not been as careful, and it is unfortunately not uncommon to find philosophers using works of literature as nothing more than sources for abstract principles or doctrines. But this is reductionism of a very crude kind, attempting to still the dance and song of a Zorba or a Francis into something mechanical and monotonous.

There is, in addition, that famous letter Kazantzakis wrote in January 1908, soon after arriving in Paris to pursue postgraduate studies:

At present I am studying philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes.

I want to formulate an individual, personal conception of life, a theory of the world and of human destiny, and then, in accord with this, systematically and with a specific purpose and program, to write – whatever I write.

As is well known, Kazantzakis found just such a “theory of the world and of human destiny” in Bergson’s account of evolution as the product of a dynamic impulse, the *élan vital*. However, as Bien points out, Kazantzakis’ attraction to scientific rationalism did not last long: “His [Kazantzakis’] mystical temperament, his aestheticism, and his intellectual quarrel with science [as expressed in his 1909 essay, “Has Science Gone Bankrupt?”] all kept impelling him increasingly toward intuitional rather than scientific language, faith rather than proof.” And so, although Kazantzakis initially (that is, up till 1913) sought to buttress Bergson’s speculations with empirical evidence, he quickly came to think of Bergsonian vitalism in more mystical fashion whose ‘truth’ is not amenable to scientific confirmation and disconfirmation. Indeed, it was the anti-intellectualist tendencies in Bergson’s own
philosophy that influenced Kazantzakis to elevate art above both science and philosophy, to think of art (as he put it in an interview in 1935) as “the only ‘human method’ that can...suddenly reveal life’s mystery to human eyes.” The mature Kazantzakis, then, would have repudiated the kind of ‘rational’ philosophical system developed by process theists, and to ‘translate’ Kazantzakis’ fiction into such a system is to attempt to do what that very fiction claims cannot be done.

A disparity therefore exists between literature and theology (or at least the sort of theology that seeks to systematise, explicate and precisify the language of faith), as Middleton highlights when comparing the theologies of process thinkers with the fictional works of Kazantzakis. The discourses of literature and theology represent, in Middleton’s view, “competing” and “conflicting” voices, “they appear to trespass upon one another’s ground”. But these two ways of thinking and writing, adds Middleton, can be brought together into a mutually enriching, albeit uneasy, alliance. Like Apollo and Dionysius in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, literature and theology may represent “the dynamic collusion of two complementary yet antagonistic forces or activities, with each being responsible for creating, destroying, and re-creating the other.” In this dialectical relationship, each discipline needs and feeds off the other. For one thing, literature cannot do without theology, for “without ‘theology’s’ disciplined ordering of experience, fiction has no guard against the dangers of practicing a ludic randomness by which it is impossible for us to live.” There is much to be said for this view. The quest for discipline, however, has a habit of arresting the play of our structures of signification and succumbing to our craving for the kind of stability and security that can only be supplied by a transcendental signified. This is not necessarily an objection, at least if a creative imagination requires the very tension produced by placing the desire for coherence, order and rational systematisation in opposition with the desire to trespass these constraints.

The visible as the surest sign of the invisible. “The only way we can divine the appearance of God’s face,” says Francis, “is by looking at beautiful things” (60). God condescends to our material limitations, appearing to us in the form of a beautiful night sky, a glass of refreshing water, or a consuming fire.

But do we have any material limitations? We are given to believe that nothing is more real than the matter we are enclosed within: the stars, mountains and rivers, our bones, hair and skin. We are imprisoned in this world
of matter, and there may well be no escape. We are given over to doubt as to whether there truly is any such thing as “the spirit” or “the soul,” these being remnants of medieval metaphysics and psychology that have been overturned by the investigations of science. But what if, at least for a moment, we were to consider something utterly heretical: nothing material exists, everything is spirit!

Francis whispers to us, as he did to his constant companion, Brother Leo: “The canary is like man’s soul. It sees bars round it, but instead of despairing, it sings. It sings, and wait and see: one day its song shall break the bars.” (69)

It is as flame that God appears to Francis’s mother, Lady Pica, a flame that once burned within, making her feel like bursting into tears, dancing in the middle of the yard and rushing into the street, taking to the road and never returning to her parents’ house (62-63).

When Francis would pray, a great flame would lick his face. (184)

Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot: “You cannot be a monk unless you become like a consuming fire.” 22

Anselm Kiefer, the alchemist, knows this well. He shows how creation and destruction are one and the same in bringing forth powerful symbols and imagery by cracking, breaking apart and scorching the canvas and other materials; seeking and liberating the spirit within matter by applying the fire of purification.

*Aperiatur terra* 23

“Let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour and let justice spring up at the same time.” (Isaiah 45:8)

Destruction and re-creation

violent upheaval and spiritual renewal

Fire

apocalyptic and redemptive
haunted by memories of the past...the tragic in history...time, history, and memory...celestial metaphysics...mythic journeys...charred landscapes...struck with wonder at the horrors we are capable of inflicting upon each other...heavy, daunting, uncomfortable, grandiose, melancholic, deeply disturbing...

Like the alchemists of old, Kiefer searches for the philosopher’s stone which transmutes the basest metals into gold and gold into spirit. Kiefer attempts to achieve this transmutation through the use of lead, one of his favourite materials: “I feel closest to lead because it is like us. It is in flux. It’s changeable and has potential to achieve a higher state of gold.” Lead, he adds elsewhere, “has a life of its own. It’s quite spiritual material. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that lead has a spirit. Whatever material I work with, I feel I’m extracting the spirit that already lives within it.”

The living God, the eternal flame that scorches the earth and lights people’s souls on fire. Francis’ painful “nights of fire” – shivering with a raging temperature and wrestling at night with all manner of demons and saints – were to deliver him from his prodigal past and set him on an extraordinary new path. This fiery experience would be consummated with the words that Francis asked his mother to write on the back of a painting of the Crucified:

On Sunday,
the twenty-fourth day of September
in the year 1206 after the birth of our Lord,
my son Francis was reborn. (75)

I am reminded of another great soul, Blaise Pascal, a remarkably gifted man who lived only to the age of 39 but made many important contributions to mathematics and the physical sciences. Like Francis, Pascal was both deeply human, often succumbing to frivolous and worldly pursuits, and deeply religious: always struggling to reform his ways, suffering terribly from physical ailments (and from persecution by civil and religious authorities) but convinced that suffering is the natural state of the Christian. Most memorable, however, was his “night of fire.” After narrowly escaping death from a horse-carriage accident on November 23, 1654, Pascal underwent an intense religious experience (“light flooded his room”, according to some accounts). He would not breathe a word of what happened to anyone, but instead recorded the experience on a piece of parchment and had the note sown into the lining of his coat, thus keeping it close to his heart wherever he went. The note began with the following words:
The year of grace 1654.
Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr and others in the martyrology.
The eve of Saint Chrysogonus martyr and others.
From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past midnight.

FIRE
The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.
Not of the philosophers and scholars.
Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.

From then on Pascal renounced mathematics and science, devoting himself passionately to religious contemplation and writing. He would on occasion slide back into the study of mathematics, but whatever he wrote during this time he chose to write anonymously, employing pseudonyms so as to avoid the reprehensible desire for reputation that marked the life of the scientist even in his own day.

Francis’ burns, the effects of his intimate contact with God, were nevertheless painful and the cause of much suffering. Francis’ body would become one open wound as a result of his ascetic struggles. Brother Leo, himself no stranger to the harsh realities of a beggar’s life, was astounded by the lengths Francis would go to. In reference to Francis’ feet, for example, Brother Leo states: “Never in my life had I seen feet so distressed – so melancholy, feeble, gnawed away by journeys, so full of open wounds – as his. Sometimes when Father Francis lay sleeping I used to bend down stealthily and kiss them, and I felt as though I were kissing the total suffering of mankind” (27).

The Two Ways. One is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffered.
– Søren Kierkegaard, journal entry for 1854.

Francis not only patiently endures suffering, but also seeks it out: he incites people to attack him by telling them that the more stones they throw at him, the more blessed by God they will be (110); tormented by demonic
thoughts, he beats his flesh mercilessly all night long with a knotted cord while sprawled out on top of bitterly cold snow (340); and he implores Christ: “Let me feel thy sufferings and holy passion in my body and soul; let me feel them as intensely as is possible for a sinful mortal” (496). But he is not driven by vanity or arrogance to attain new heights (as the bishop and others claimed: 118, 242), nor is he driven by an inhuman masochistic temperament, as some contemporary critics have thought. Rather, Francis is motivated by the conviction that only through suffering can redemption be found. For Brother Leo and the common man, pain is nothing more than a physical sensation to be avoided: “I was a man,” Leo reflects, “a reasonable man, and a wretched one. I felt hunger; and the stones, for me, were stones,” while “the stones that people threw at [Francis] were like a sprinkling of lemon flowers” (155). For Francis, in other words, pain and suffering are a providential sign that one is on the road towards fulfilling the supreme obligation to “transubstantiate the matter that God entrusted to us, and turn it into spirit” (4). Tom Doulis, in an article on “Kazantzakis and the Meaning of Suffering,” put it well:

Whereas for the ancient tragedians suffering meant wisdom, and for Dostoyevsky it meant pity and love, for Kazantzakis suffering means certitude in being chosen for salvation by the love of a compassionate and interested Creator. It exhibits to man the strength and resiliency of his nature by showing him how little he needs comfort and security.

However, this is not to engage in theodical “justifications” of suffering, a project I argued against in Chapter 2. Rather, it is to point to a practical response that can be made to the vicissitudes of life, one in which it is the sufferer himself who confers meaning onto his suffering, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, as it were (as opposed to attempting to decipher the “objective” value or meaning of his suffering).

Ascent. To climb a series of steps. From the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering. God sits at the summit of hunger, thirst, and suffering; the devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life. Choose.

However, pain, in Francis’ view, also affords an opportunity to identify with the sufferings of Christ and of every human being: he takes their sufferings upon himself, not to lighten their load (or not merely for this reason), but as an expression of a profound sense of solidarity and responsibility. Francis
recognises, as did Father Zosima (in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*) that, “In truth we are each responsible to all for all, only people don’t realize it, but if they did, we should all instantly be in paradise!” This is why, when Francis’ brotherhood fell into disarray, Francis could sincerely say, “It is my fault. I am the one who sinned, who craved women, food, a soft bed, and who filled his mouth with the goat’s flesh” (278). And when Brother Leo confesses his sins to Francis, Francis punishes *himself* (484). That is also why, according to Francis, paradise cannot exist as long as hell exists, for “how can anyone be completely happy when he looks out from heaven and sees his brothers and sisters being punished in hell?” Therefore, if one is saved all are saved, and if one is lost all are lost (390).

Francis’ logic is impeccable. Solidarity in suffering, solidarity in sin.

God is the great companion — the fellow-sufferer who understands.

– A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*  

And then
that great little sparrow from Assisi arrived
playing his lute merrily
and seeing me
immediately shrunk to the ground with a sigh.
He did not tell me
what to do and what not to do
where to go and where not to go
how to do this and how to do that
– he just sighed and sat next to me.

Identification with
the defeated
the forgotten
the excluded
and reverence for all life
was also the legacy of Albert Schweitzer
– “the Saint Francis of our era” (in Kazantzakis’ dedication).

Contrary to the common perception of Kazantzakis as an otherwise pro-
gressive thinker who was unfortunately unable to come to terms with the
modern egalitarian ideal of women as having equal value and status to
men, Kazantzakis has Francis furthering the aspirations of his mother, not
father (172); he has Francis overcoming his initial reservations in welcom-
ing Clara into the life of poverty, and then helping her find a hermitage
(353-54, 359); and, most of all, he has Francis conversing lovingly with Sis-
ter Clara and the other sisters at the convent of San Damiano’s in an at-
mosphere “overflowing with sweetness and compassion,” making Francis’
heart “blossom luxuriantly in the feminine air,” and giving outsiders the im-
pression that the convent had gone up in flames. “It was the first time,” we
are told, “the sisters had felt what an infinitely divine gift it was to be a
woman, and also what a responsibility” (384-95).31

Closer to the divine than the masculine, is the feminine.

Another heretical hypothesis: By the time Kazantzakis had completed this
last novel of his, he was well on his way towards making a radical depart-
ure from the philosophical theories of his past. To be sure, the
Nietzschean and Bergsonian ideas that informed much of his earlier work
remain present in The Poor Man of God, but the concepts and slogans
have now been emptied and are filled with new content, this time the con-
tent not coming from a preconceived and systematically worked-out phi-
losophy, but from the flesh and bones of Francis himself. The vision that
Francis, the Lamb of God, dictates to his biographer is one of perfect love
and peace, a love that prays for the forgiveness even of Satan (391), and a
love infused with a humility and gentleness that runs counter to the “Life is
war, toil, violence!” doctrine often espoused by Kazantzakis in the past (cf.
280-81).32 Francis, not surprisingly, had a deep effect on Kazantzakis, and
it appears that Kazantzakis had begun in the final years of his life to move
away from the “heroic nihilism” of Salvatores Dei – “We come from a dark
abyss, we end in a dark abyss”33 – even though this nihilism was always
tempered by a Bergsonian activism that challenges us to fashion meaning
in an otherwise meaningless world (hence the qualifier “heroic” in “heroic
nihilism”).34 Kazantzakis, in other words, was making steps towards a more
optimistic vision, though perhaps one that continued to be tinged with the
tragic in light of the blood-drenched ascent that it involved. This is rarely
recognised by commentators who persist in taking Kazantzakis at his word when he wrote to Max Tau in 1951 that *Salvatores Dei* “is my credo, the core of my work, and even more, the core of my entire life”.  

Note that the nightmare of absolute nihilism comes to Brother Leo one night only after he had deserted Francis and spent the evening with the bandit, Captain Wolf, greedily eating food and guzzling wine. (473-80)

Despite the above comment to Max Tau, Kazantzakis did not view his novels as simply variations on the one theme, but as successive attempts to reach further and break new ground: *aperiatur terra*.

Letter to Börje Knös, January 30, 1952:

> I am obliged to see to it that each book of mine will be one step further ahead and higher. *The Last Temptation* took such a step. The new book must advance yet another stride. And this responsibility is a very heavy one…

And after *The Poor Man of God* was completed, the author himself was surprised at what he had given birth to. In a letter to Prevelakis, dated December 6, 1953, Kazantzakis wrote:

> [The Poor Man of God] is one of the works you won't like, and I’m puzzled as to how I wrote it. Well, is there a religious mystique inside me? Because I felt great emotion when I wrote it…

Brother Leo, like Nietzsche’s madman, spends his life searching for God. But the fact of the matter is that God is also searching for us. Francis cries out towards the heavens:

> “All day long I search desperately for You;
> all night long, while I am asleep, You search for me;
> when, O Lord, when, as night gives way to day, shall we meet?” (28)

But the search for God is not open to just anyone. Special qualities are required, the most important of which is laziness. Yes: laziness! Forget about what you’ve heard and been taught by well-intentioned but ignorant priests and theologians, the route to God is laziness. And here’s the proof, if proof is needed:
The labourer who lives from hand to mouth returns home each night exhausted and famished. He assaults his dinner, gobbles up his food lickety-spit, then quarrels with his wife, beats his children without rhyme or reason simply because he’s tired and irritated, and afterward clenches his fists and sleeps. Waking up for a moment he finds his wife at his side, couples with her, clenches his fists once more, and plunges back into sleep… Where can he find time for God? (39)

But the lazy person, as Brother Leo goes on to explain, has all the time in the world. He doesn’t bother looking for a job, he doesn’t bother looking for a wife, and so he avoids all the troubles that come with work, marriage and children. Instead, he can simply sit in the sun during winter, lounge in the shade during summer, and at night stretch out on his back on the roof of his house, gazing at the moon and the stars, while wondering: Who made all this? And why? (39).

Inevitably, however, curiosity turns to anguish, and the search for God takes on the importance of life and death. Upon this search hangs the salvation of one’s soul.

But where do we start? What road should we take in our search? In fact, as Augustine (following Plato) noticed, how can we search for something if we do not know what we are searching for? And how, if we do not know what we are searching for, can we be said to be searching for it at all? Self-proclaimed spiritual guides are not troubled by these questions, as they confidently claim to know the surest path to God. According to Brother Leo, however, it was only an obscure holy man living in a cave and blinded by weeping who could give the answer that was “both most correct and most frightening”:

“Holy ascetic, I have set out to find God. Show me the road,” Brother Leo asked.

“There is no road”, he answered, beating his staff on the ground.

“There is no road! What then is there?” Brother Leo asked, seized with terror.

“There is the abyss. Jump!”

“Abyss!? Is that the way?”
“Yes. All roads lead to the earth. The abyss leads to God. Jump!”
(41)

This is the only way to God.
The divine descent.

We don’t wish to admit that this is the only way to God, for we always try to take the easy way out. But there is a simple way to determine which is the way to God: the one that’s most difficult, the one that both descends and rises.
Initially, Francis recognised this, and sighed (129). Later, with experience that only suffering could bring, he would make the same point, but fervently and without dejection (325).

Trans-descendance: turning flesh into spirit.

There are two paths available to us, one entirely different from the other but perhaps both leading to the same destination. There is the straight and reasonable path of the respectable man, where God is found in marriage and children, in good food and wine, in cleanliness and health. And there is the crooked and incomprehensible path of the disreputable saint, where God is found in homelessness and poverty, in sickness and solitariness. Which path to take? (165-66)

Francis’ answer:

“Good God, to marry, have children, build a home – I spit on them all!”
(165)

Few ears would wish to listen.

One winter morning, Francis creates seven snow statues, each representing a member of his would-be family (including a wife with “huge pendulous breasts,” two sons and two daughters), and when the sun rose he commanded it to “beat down upon my family and melt them!” (341)

Ordinary happiness: the last temptation.

“To have nothing, absolutely nothing: that is the road that leads to God. There is no other,” Francis says to his bishop. (220)

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand…Take no gold nor silver nor copper in your belts, no sack
for your journey, nor an extra tunic, nor sandals, nor a staff…” (Matthew 10:7, 9-10)

Absolute poverty: to have nothing – not even God?
Meister Eckhart: “Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of ‘God’.
Brother Francis: “Lord, give me the strength to enable me one day to renounce hope, the hope, O Lord, of seeing thee.” (244)
(Poverty as a matter more of metaphysics than economics.)
From being to nothingness.

But to have nothing, to become nothing is at the same time to have everything, to be everything (and anything), because absolute poverty brings absolute freedom. (242)

Augustine: “Love, then do what you will.”

From nothingness to being.

The ascent: from one abyss to another,

and dancing and weeping in between. (284)

But it is the uphill path that brings perfect joy.
A constant “No!” to the small, insignificant joys (or temptations), so as to be able to reach the “Great Yes!”.

And what does this “Yes!” look like? Well, take a look for yourself:

Hungry and cold, Francis and Brother Leo find themselves caught in a rainstorm during one of their nightly sojourns, and so they rush towards a nearby monastery to seek temporary shelter. They are met, however, by a gigantic doorkeeper who not only refuses them entry, but also beats both of them to a pulp, leaving them half-dead. They lie asleep near the gates of the monastery till dawn, when they hear the doorkeeper approaching. The door is opened. They now have the opportunity to go in, to find a place to warm up a little and eat, but instead they decide to head off once more on their journey. “Francis was so happy, he flew.” (160)

Herein lies genuine freedom, the “Great Yes!”.

A hard lesson, and so it is not surprising to find a reviewer of Kazantzakis’ novel passing the following judgement:

“Recommendation: Beware of Nikos Kazantzakis bearing gifts.”

Look at me, I am without a country, without a home, without possessions, without a slave; I
sleep out on the ground; I have no wife, no children, no fine residence, but only earth and heaven and one sorry cloak. And what do I lack? Am I not without sorrow, without fear? Am I not free?

– the Cynic, as quoted by Epictetus

But there is always something, no matter how trifling it may seem, that prevents us from embarking upon this uphill path. For some it might be the weight of books and theological questions that prevent us from ascending (187-88). For others it might be some prized possession that one cannot let go, whether it be a house, a car, a wife, or even a small, richly decorated pitcher (200). Unless these idols are smashed into a thousand pieces, one can never see God.

“Name your idol, and you will know who you are.”
– Jean-Luc Marion

Francis dares to do what he finds most difficult to do: He finds a leper, embraces him and kisses him on the lips. (135)
He then carries the leper in his arms, covering him with his robe. When he later draws the robe aside, the leper has disappeared. It was Christ himself all along.
“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:35-36)
“This, Brother Leo, is what I understand: all lepers, cripples, sinners, if you kiss them on the mouth – they all become Christ.” (138)

Searching for God high and low, by day and by night, we soon forget what we were looking for, and then a flash of insight: “Who knows, perhaps God is simply the search for God” (43). God in all his fullness was always there, the voice within, closer to us than we are to ourselves. “It is unnecessary for us to run to the ends of the earth in his pursuit. All we have to do is gaze into our own hearts” (148, cf. 434).

This hidden and abysmal God that is sought but never found should not be confused with the garden-variety gods we are taught to believe in from
childhood.

In a delightful book, entitled *Kids’ View of God*, Candice Dunn and Rebecca Mann present many interesting, humourous and even insightful perspectives on God and religion that are had by children from four to nine years of age. What is most interesting, however, is how closely some of the children’s quotes resemble the thoughts found in the dense and technical writings of highly trained philosophers of religion: “If you’re naughty God curses you with a punishment from your mum” (Vivien, aged 7); “God knows everything that you do before you do it ’cause he’s hiding behind the door” (Alex, aged 5); “God has a special tracking device that beeps when you’re naughty and he knows who’s done it” (Jonathan, aged 9); “You know when God is around because you get a nice feeling in your heart” (Saskia, aged 9). I am afraid that many philosophers have not grown out of the religion they were taught as children.

This is the very religion we find practiced by many of Francis’ family and friends. Before setting out on one of his expeditions to sell various goods at a nearby city, Francis’ father, Pietro Bernardone, would customarily attend Mass and attempt to strike a deal with the local saint, Saint Ruffino. “You protect my merchandise,” he would haggle with the saint, “and I’ll bring you a silver lamp from Florence, a heavy embossed one that will make you the envy of the other saints, who have nothing but tiny lamps made of glass” (33).

This calculative, means-end rationality is widespread in moral thinking today, but was also not unknown in Francis’ time. “Why shouldn’t I eat, drink and be merry,” a villager challenges Francis, “for if I don’t get into heaven, I will have lost only one life, while if you don’t get into heaven you will have lost two” (458). How can one argue with that?

One more remarkable quote from *Kids’ View of God*. Children were asked to put a question to God, and along with some typical responses (e.g., “Can you help my grandpa get better?”), there is this gem from Eve, aged 4: “Dear God, I haven’t thought of a question yet. I will probably think of it when I’m dead.” That is precisely what Francis would say.

The impoverished doctrinal gods of the philosophers and the living God who grabs his followers by the scruff of the neck, and tosses them from peak to peak until they break into a thousand pieces (73). Initially, however, the demands are small and seemingly easy to fulfill. Later, more difficult
and arduous demands are placed on one, and eventually nothing less than the impossible becomes one's mission (84). “Go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of going or coming” (Derrida). 43

To begin with, Francis is given the task of rebuilding the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano. But afterwards he understood that much more was demanded of him: he was now to rebuild himself: “Francis, Francis – make Francis firm, rebuild the son of Bernardone!”, the voice commanded him (102). But how was he to rebuild himself? By demolishing his self, the self that was preventing the union with the divine; by kenotically emptying his self of pride, making a fool of himself, for Christ’s sake.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Absolute poverty: not so much having no possessions, but not being possessed by anything, above all, not being possessed by the "ego" and its hopes and fears. As Lewis Owens explains,

This ‘perfect poverty’…is in fact the only road that leads to ‘God’ and is achieved by overcoming an attachment to the ego. Self-overcoming and consequent self-realization therefore leads to ‘God’. This self-realization is achieved via a process of detachment from inauthentic attachment to the individual self-will, which harbors hopes and fears for immortality or extinction after death. 44

There once was an ascetic, Francis tells his brothers, who upon dying, ascended to heaven and knocked on the gates. “Who is there?” came the reply. “It’s me!” answered the ascetic. “There isn’t any room for two here,” said the voice. “Go away!” (309-310)

To forget who you are and what your name is, not to have any will and not to say “I” – that is true freedom! (427)

And so, at the very place where he grew up and where everyone knew him well, at the heart of Assisi, in the middle of the town square, on a Saturday evening when the citizens were beginning to gather outside, Francis rises up and shouts: “Come one, come all! Come to hear the new madness!” (109). And what was ‘the new madness’? “Love! Love! Love!” Francis
would proclaim, while dancing and jumping, and covered in blood from the stones and other missiles thrown at him by the jeering crowd (111).

Humiliation as the path to humility.

Each step in the ascent is one more attachment loosened, if not completely severed. Francis begins with the most powerful ties that bind us to earth, those of mother and father, lover and wife, friends and acquaintances. Having divested himself of these attachments, Francis removes the very clothes he is wearing and returns them to his father. Standing “naked as the day his mother brought him into the world,” in front of his father, the local bishop and a throng of curious citizens, he says to the bishop: “Until now I called Sior Pietro Bernardone my father. Henceforth I shall say: ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’” (117)

Reading the texts of the early ascetics, I have come to realize that perhaps the most essential lesson learned in life is the lesson of surrender, of letting go. It is a hard lesson, and one that is only reluctantly embraced by most of us. But I am convinced that this life is given to us in order to learn how to lose.

– John Chryssavgis

But as Bernardone himself wonders: What kind of God is it who separates sons and daughters from their fathers and mothers? (168)

An unfathomable abyss: a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

the Insatiable

the Merciless

the Indefatigable

the Unsatisfied

…the bottomless Abyss (173)

Love of God: divine madness.

Intoxicated with God

He would pray and pray

but every now and again
he would reach a dead-end
and what he could not pray
he would sing
and what he could not sing
he would dance
and what he could not dance
he would cry
but what he could not cry
would only die.

To those on the outside looking in, sanctity is indistinguishable from madness (122). Consider, for example, the comments of Kazantzakis scholar, Morton Levitt: “The ascetic strictures he [i.e., Francis] offers are so opposed to normal living that they are bound to repel us; we suspect that no sane man would follow such a fanatic and that no sane age could produce one.”

Abba Antony said: “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us’.”

Francis, God’s beloved buffoon.

2 + 2 = 22 (Kazantzakis’ formula for Francis)

“If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise,” wrote Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:18. And the fools for Christ’s sake followed the apostle’s exhortation to the letter. The holy fool would pretend to be mad or immoral, doing things that would be regarded as incompatible not only with an ascetic life, but with a Christian life in general. Thus, that wonderful holy fool from Emesa in Syria, Symeon, would do such things as take on the blame for the pregnancy of a young girl, even pretending to be ashamed of what he had supposedly done; and visiting a prostitute, giving everyone the impression that he had slept with her, when in fact he had only brought her food since he knew that she was starving. (One can imagine this prostitute reacting in the same way the prostitute in Damietta reacted after her failed attempt to seduce Francis [326-27].) During the day, Symeon would roam the streets, playing the madman, the fornicator, the glutton, the drunkard, the fool – and he would be treated accordingly. But after dark he would completely disappear from view, praying to God all night long in total secrecy and silence.
Abba Macarius said, “If slander has become to you the same as praise, poverty as riches, deprivation as abundance, you will not die.”

All this, nonetheless, is not enough. It is never enough.
We protest, “Enough is enough! I can’t go any further!”
But God demands: “You can! You must!”

Our body is the bow, God is the archer, and the soul is the arrow.

There are three kinds of souls, three kinds of prayer:

“I am a bow in your hands, Lord. Draw me, lest I rot.”

“Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall break.”

“Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break!” (270)

You are the crucified who crucifies
– Geoffrey Hill, “Lachrimae”

The perpetual ascent. Francis realises that we are to save not only our souls, but also the souls of our fellow brothers and sisters – in fact, we cannot do the former without doing the latter. Francis therefore sets out to go from town to town, preaching to his fellow Christians to return to Christ, for “the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”. (178-79)

But even this is not enough: Always attentive to the voice (or Cry) within, Francis casts his net wider as he is called to save the infidel Muslims, and he therefore sails to Damietta and preaches fearlessly to the Sultan. (315-319)

But this too is not enough: Francis fears that he is still not on the right road (332). He realises, with much sorrow, that he must surrender the reigns of the brotherhood he established to other hands (370-73), and he must even surrender the hope that after he has departed the brothers will continue in the path of total poverty and simplicity (399-400).

“But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone.” (John 16:32) The journey upward is lined with Judas kisses.

Francis exemplifies “the transformation of material defeat into spiritual victory”: success breeds satisfaction and
stagnation, whereas Francis’ failures (in converting the Sultan, in preaching to the crusaders, in keeping the friars united) spurs a restless but liberating struggle that enables him to remain faithful to the Cry within.

God calls us to go beyond our selves.

Ultimately, however, God calls us to go beyond God:
“Brother Leo, to be a saint means to renounce not only everything earthly but also everything divine” (20).

It is terrifying to see how quickly the divine ascent can turn into a descent. Francis briefly leaves his brothers in order to travel to Rome to seek papal approval for his new order, and in no time the brothers are quarreling, rebelling against Francis’ teachings, visiting houses of pleasure, eating and drinking to their heart’s content, even going so far as hunting down a goat on Good Friday, tearing it limb from limb and greedily devouring it: “They chewed hurriedly, swallowed, grabbed a new mouthful; then, as though they had become drunk, they began to dance round the severed head and twisted horns, blood and fire dripping from their mouths” (277). The human soul is a battleground between light and darkness, divinity and bestiality, and even one who has reached the heights of divinity – especially such a one – can, like a flash of lightning, fall into the mire of the inferno.

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (Luke 10:18)

The ascent continues. Obedient to the Cry within, Francis decides to marry. His bride? Lady Poverty. The borders are being overrun: hungry but full and rich in poverty, the brothers cheerfully celebrate a wedding feast without a wedding, a bridegroom without a bride. The new divine madness. (225-26)

Love is never “rational,” how much more an excess of love.

The new divine madness: Francis talks and communes with nature, conversing with birds, swallows and doves as though he were talking with his own biological brothers and sisters (290-91; cf. 522-23). And he can hear what the birds have to say to him in return. In Francis’ heart, an old chronicler has it, the whole world found refuge:
the sinner, the poor, the sick, the birds,
the wolves, the flowers.

“The swallows beat their wings happily, the doves cooed, and the sparrows came close to Francis and began to peck tenderly at his robe.” (292)

Before heading off, Francis makes the sign of the cross over the birds, blesses them, and then bids them farewell.

A tender and overflowing love for every living and breathing thing, for everything that suffers and even for everything that doesn't:

“God bless Brother Water,” Francis says as he sips a cup of water (367). One is reminded of his “Canticle of Brother Sun,” where he sings the praises of the Lord for creating Brother Sun (“radiant with great splendour”), Sister Moon and the stars (“precious and fair”), Brother Wind, Sister Water (“humble and dear and pure”), Brother Fire (“strong and merry”), Sister Mother Earth (“who sustains us and holds us to her breast, and produces abundant fruits, flowers, and trees”), and even Brother Death (“whom no living person can escape”). (563-64, 575)

Communion with nature is communion with God.

Spinoza: “deus sive natura”. 52

Australian newspaper cartoonist and artist, Michael Leunig, in a “Confession” published on his website, describes his sudden impulse one Saturday morning in the midst of the Vietnam War in 1969 to depart from serious political commentary in his drawings and instead to present his editor with “an absurd, irresponsible triviality” in the form of a man riding towards the sunset on a large duck and with a teapot on his head. This was to change Leunig’s approach forever:

In the wake of this drawing I at once began to express my most personal self with less embarrassment; to play with my ideas more freely; to bring warmth into my work; to focus on modest, everyday situations and nature as sources of imagery and to see my work as nourishing rather than mocking or hurtful. 53

This turn to personal expression and the free play of ideas, to a spirit of warmth and modesty, to a natural style that seeks to sustain and uplift rather than to outdo or defeat – why have philosophers been unable to
make such a turn?

What are these quirky characters and animals that Leunig draws all about? What does a picture of a teapot-wearing duck-riding man mean? Like Francis’ ravings, this is just stupid sentimentalism, childish and immature, even dangerous for a rational and intelligent person. Thus speaks the modern mind.

From an interview with Andrew Denton on the ABC show, “Enough Rope” (aired on May 8, 2006):

    Andrew Denton: Now once more for the beginners, what was the duck about?

    Michael Leunig: Well, I don’t know. I thought everybody would understand what a duck is about, and it’s just, there is the duck. And suddenly the whole nation seems perplexed about what does a duck mean? I think a nation is in trouble that cannot accept a duck.54

Out of touch with the world of nature, out of touch with themselves and their humanity, people must now be reminded of who they really are and where they really belong. Leunig therefore sees it as his duty to not so much point out the absurdities in contemporary social and political affairs, as may have been the duty of a cartoonist in days gone by, but to point out what is human. And as he notes, “it’s rather odd that I would have to do that, or feel compelled to do that. It’s as if I feel we’re losing our humanity all the time, and so you’ve got to keep trying to rescue bits of it to the extent you can, and that’s odd when you think about it.”55

Camus’ description of New York during a trip to the United States in 1946 – “the hundreds of thousands of high walls,” a “desert of iron and cement,” “a hideous, inhuman city”56 – brings to mind my first impressions of central Melbourne as I was being led by my father through the city streets as a seven or eight-year-old. I recall the feeling of being surrounded by enormous buildings that block out the sunlight, casting a gloomy, greyish haze around the thousands of pedestrians and cars. I can relate to Camus, then, when he writes in his journal: “Impression of being trapped in this city, that I could escape from the monoliths that surround me and run for hours without finding anything but new cement prisons, without the hope of a hill, a real tree, or a bewildered face…Terrible feeling of being abandoned. Even if I hugged all the beings of the world to my breast, I would remain unprotected.”57 (One of my recurrent dreams is exactly as Camus describes it: entrapment within the cement city walls.)
Michael Leunig presents a similar picture when describing his departure from his farm house, where he would feel rested and hopeful, to an inner-city hotel room in preparation for his television interview with Andrew Denton: “Soon I am funnelled away from my pastures of doddering wombats and installed in a cell in a concrete tower overlooking a Sydney expressway.” Later in the same article Leunig recounts how, immediately prior to the interview, he felt his memory “dismantled by expressways and sleepless nights in concrete towers.” Such dehumanising buildings are a regular feature of major cities, and even the outer-city suburbs – with their nameless neighbours, giant shopping malls, polluted roads and artificial lawns – are often inimical to a life of spirituality and reflection. Leunig summarised the matter perfectly when he said,

The city to me is developing problems which I can’t much deal with anymore. I feel too cramped and violated somehow when I see these great monuments to a kind of crass commercial greed. Life’s just becoming too hard in the city for me and for many others. I think we haven’t made our cities very well at all. I don’t think we know how to take care of ourselves as well as we perhaps once did.

A brilliant idea from Camus, which occurs to him upon entering his room at a small inn located “a thousand miles from everything”:

During a business trip a man arrives, without any preconceived idea, at a remote inn in the wilderness. And there, the silence of nature, the simplicity of the room, the remoteness of everything, make him decide to stay there permanently, to cut all ties with what had been his life and to send no news of himself to anyone.

The ascent continues, the long ascent of a wild, inaccessible mountain,

at the summit of which,
amidst cold, rain and snow,
awaits God. (443-44)

“To increase by nothings.
Lightweight. Lightweight,” he said.

“What nothings are you talking about?” asked, one day, a disciple.

And the sage replied: “The mind sets its goal ever farther.
O vertiginous push upward; but what is up unless a perpetual denial of down?"

And he added: “Down here was nothing and up there is nothing – but between, light strains through.”

…I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.
– Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Carrion Comfort”

at the summit
of the holy mountain
after sleepless nights and incessant struggles
to transmute darkness into light
Francis is consumed by fire
Mount Alvernia is ablaze
hands and feet bleeding profusely
a deep open wound in his side
gasping for breath
crucified
and resurrected
at the same time
for crucifixion and resurrection
are one and the same (498-503)

Like Brother Leo, I too peer
out of my window, feeling despondent and sad,
and then notice a sparrow
making its way towards me:

And it was you, Father Francis, it was you dressed as a tiny sparrow. (598)
NOTES


2 The novel was entitled in Greek O ftohúlis tu Theú (The Little Poor Man of God), and was published in Athens by Difros. Kazantzakis, however, had originally proposed the title, Pax et Bonum, this of course being a favourite expression of Francis’. Although the work was first released as a book in 1956, it had already been published in a series of instalments by the Athenian newspaper Eleftheria from June 1954. The novel was translated into English by Peter Bien and the translation was published in 1962 as Saint Francis in the United States (by Simon and Schuster) and as God’s Pauper in Great Britain (by Cassirer). I prefer the title of ‘Poor Man of God’, as this is closer to the Greek original. Generally, I follow Peter Bien’s translation, and the in-text page references are to the 2005 Loyola Classics edition (published by Loyola Press in Chicago, with an introduction by well-known Catholic troubadour, John Michael Talbot). Occasionally, however, I depart from Bien’s rendition, particularly when a more literal translation has seemed preferable. The Greek text I rely upon is that published in Athens by Helen Kazantzakis in 1981.


4 I say ‘reignite’ as Kazantzakis had already fallen in love with Francis during visits to Assisi in the 1920s, though at that time he tended to view Francis through a political lens as “a great, idealistic communist” who recognised “that the source of every evil is private ownership and forbade…his disciples to have any property whatsoever, small or large” (quoted in Peter Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 1, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.82). Kazantzakis recounts his impressions of Assisi in Report to Greco, trans. Peter Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), pp.177-87, 374-82, and in Journeying: Travels in Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Jerusalem and Cyprus, trans. Themi Vasilis and Theodora Vasilis (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), pp.9-13 – the latter was written as a newspaper correspondent during a trip to Assisi in 1926 when Italy was under fascist rule. However, Kazantzakis’ earliest contact with the Franciscan tradition may have occurred during his brief stay (in 1897-1898) at a school run by Franciscan friars on the island of Naxos (see Report to Greco, pp.92-103), or even before that, during his upbringing in Crete, where Saint Francis was a popular object of devotion.

5 Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, p.513.

7 Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters*, p.519. The material that Kazantzakis would have drawn upon in his novel would doubtless have included his very own translation, completed in 1943, of the biography of Francis written by the Danish poet and writer, Johannes Jorgensen. (Jorgensen's biography was originally published in 1907, while Kazantzakis' translation was published in 1951.) Kazantzakis describes an encounter with Jorgensen in *Report to Greco*, pp.377-82.


12 See Lewis Owens, *Creative Destruction: Nikos Kazantzakis and the Literature of Responsibility* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), where the central theme in Kazantzakis' later fiction is said to be "a dialectic of destruction and creation; a dialectic which, modelled on the process of Bergson's *élan vital*, sees destruction as a necessary prerequisite for renewed creative activity" (pp.7-8).


15 Middleton, *Novel Theology*, p.45; see also pp.98-106, 151-61, 212-17. In resisting such a reduction to metaphysical first principles, Kazantzakis' fiction has much in common with recent work in postmodern and postmetaphysical theology, as Middleton indicates in *Novel Theology*, pp.38-47, 192-98, and especially in his more recent *Broken Hallelujah: Nikos Kazantzakis and Christian Theology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), ch. 6, which includes a comparison between Kazantzakis and Caputo.


23 This is the title of a recent exhibition of Anselm Kiefer’s works at White Cube Gallery in London, 26 January – 17 March 2007. For the catalogue to this exhibition, see *Anselm Kiefer: Aperiatur Terra* (London: Jay Jopling/White Cube, 2007).


27 See, for example, the highly unsympathetic reading of *The Poor Man of God* in Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance: The World and Art of Nikos Kazantzakis* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1980), ch. 7, which describes the novel as “the least successful of Kazantzakis’ fictions” (p.142) owing largely to the presumed extreme, life-denying asceticism of its protagonist. A similar criticism is made by Knut Walf, “‘My’ Francis of Assisi?,” trans. David Smith, in Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán (eds), *Francis of Assisi Today* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), pp.65-72, esp. pp.68-69.


31 This is not to deny that there are traces of male chauvinism in Francis or in Kazantzakis’ other works, but it is to reject as hyperbolic and unjustified Morton Levitt’s view that, of all the protagonists in Kazantzakis’ major novels, “Francis is probably the worst male chauvinist of them all, the one whose attitudes toward women are most unnatural” (*The Cretan Glance*, p.146).

32 James Lea concurs in seeing a progression in Kazantzakis’ political views from the defence in the 1920s of an amoral and violent approach where the end justifies the means to a position which places spiritual revolution above violent revolution and is expressed best in the novels of the 1940s and 50s. See James F. Lea,

33 This is the opening to Kazantzakis’ The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises, trans. Kimon Friar (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p.43. This was first published in Greek in 1927.

34 Peter Bien emphasises the dialectical relationship between the Buddhistic or nihilistic and the Bergsonian or life-affirmative elements in Kazantzakis’ Salvatores Dei and in his oeuvre more generally: see Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 1, pp.133-43.

35 Nikos Kazantzakis, “Six Letters of Nikos Kazantzakis to Max Tau” (in Greek, trans. Helen Kontiadis), Nea Estia 102 (Christmas 1977), p.308. This letter was dated 15 September 1951, and was originally written in German.

36 Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, p.509. The novel Kazantzakis wrote after completing The Last Temptation was none other than The Poor Man of God (at least according to the chronology given in Peter Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 1, p.xiv).

37 Quoted in Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, p.549. A word of caution: unlike Middleton, I am not calling for a ‘rehabilitation’ of Kazantzakis as someone whose thought can be placed within "the permissible limits of Christian reflection". Nevertheless, I think Middleton is correct to reject Bien’s ‘post-Christian’ interpretation of The Poor Man of God as embodying a purely immanent conception of deity, and to see the novel instead as working out a panentheistic view of God as transcendent-yet-immanent. See Middleton, Novel Theology, pp.113-117, 220-21, and for Bien’s most recent statement of his post-Christian interpretation of Francis, see his Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 2, pp.498-99.

38 Peter Bien takes freedom, and in particular the process by which freedom is obtained, to be the central theme of the novel. See Bien, Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit, vol. 2, pp.454-56.


42 Candice Dunn and Rebecca Mann, _Kids' View of God_ (Sydney: Murdoch Books, 2006).


44 Lewis Owens, _Creative Destruction: Nikos Kazantzakis and the Literature of Responsibility_, pp.94-95.


46 Morton Levitt, _The Cretan Glance_, p.143.


57 Camus, _American Journals_, p.52.


59 Interview on “Compass”, ABC TV, 25 December 1997; transcript available...

60 Edmond Jabès, *Desire for a Beginning, Dread of One Single End*, p.43.

Elizabeth Burns Coleman

Breasts, Body, Canvas is an evocative book, providing a new and interesting interpretation of contemporary women’s painting from the Central Desert. This kind of painting is devoid of iconicity that explicitly refers to the landscape or to sacred stories and the women who paint it prefer not to discuss stories in relation to them. The paintings therefore resist our understanding of what Aboriginal art is about, because we generally understand Aboriginal painting as a kind of map of landscape, or iconic representation of the sacred. The book argues against this understanding of Aboriginal art – the power of the work, for Biddle, is not in its symbolic meaning, but in its affect. As such, it is a book that contributes to debates about how we should understand the development of highly abstract forms of contemporary Aboriginal art, how this can be considered a specifically ‘intercultural’ art form, and why we consider this art to be so powerful.

Central desert art has changed significantly since 1971, when the elders at Papunya painted murals at the school, and later on board. These were the first paintings of a highly successful arts movement. We now associate this movement with dot paintings, yet dots have not always been prominent in this art. Howard Morphy (1998: 293-4) has pointed out that the emphasis on dotting occurs as part of a second wave of painting about a decade after the movement began. According to Vivien Johnson, dots became an important element of painting after communities began enforcing secrecy restrictions on displaying sacred motifs (1994: 34-6). Johnson suggested that the dots replace sacred motifs, and are a process of attenuating the references to the sacred. And there is some debate as to whether the dotting has any sacred significance. For instance, Christine Watson suggested that at least some dotting in Balgo women’s art was used ‘as a
purely aesthetic device’ (2002: 253). Andrew Crocker thought dots were important mainly on aesthetic grounds: ‘For many painters the dots are still secondary; for the talented they comprise an important part of the composition’ (cited in Myers, 2002: 68). Fred Myers, however, considers a more plausible explanation for the inclusion of dotting is the motivation to make images ‘flash’, as Morphy (1989) argued in relation to cross hatching for Yolngu people. The optical brilliance or flash, according to this theory, is the aesthetic expression, or emanation of ancestral power (2002: 68).

Biddle’s work operates within this explanatory framework of ‘flash’, and extends it. She attempts to explain how these abstract dot paintings emanate ancestral power, and why they are such powerful works of art. It is a book about what we encounter when we encounter Aboriginal art. Biddle contends, ‘Central Desert artworks literally bring to life country, Ancestors, people. Moreover, they do so by literally enlivening us, the spectator. Painting brings history into the present as a lived experience and response….An energy emanates from contemporary artworks by women, a life force that is irreducibly bodily, palpably visceral, mesmerising in its effects’ (12). These are strong claims that seem to extend beyond claims of ‘what Aboriginal people believe’, to claims of ‘truth’ about their art. Yet the book does not proceed as you might expect. We find an emphasis on ‘affect’ rather than argument.

Biddle’s explanation of the term ‘affect’ is not exactly clear, as she surveys its various uses by theorists rather than attempting to explain what she means by it in a coherent fashion. She states that she does not mean that the works transmit Aboriginal sensibilities, or are expressive of their feelings. Rather, affect concerns physical responses. ‘Put crudely, affect is generated not in the representation of emotion, but because of its capacity to engender response’ (15) This response is involuntary, and at once physiological and social. Affect concerns our life as embodied beings. We may feel our humiliation, our anger, excitement, and so forth, our responses include the tensing of muscles, or an intake of breath. In art, they are ‘trans-situational’ in the sense that we may experience pains and pleasures that are removed from our own. Biddle’s mode of writing attempts to echo the mode of production of the work; it seeks ‘to evoke in the reader something of the sense of the lived life-world from which these works derive and of which they speak’ (24). The book is separated into four chapters, ‘on writing’, ‘the imprint’, ‘on skin’ and ‘on breasts’. Each chapter ranges across modes of delivery from the explanation of anthropological ideas to history, yet at the same time it evolves as a series of inter-related metaphors, illuminated by numerous plates and the discussion of the work of the artists.
The dominant understanding of Aboriginal art is as a primitive form of writing, and the standard means by which we interpret Aboriginal art is by ‘decoding’ its symbols. This encourages us to look at paintings as symbols, that is, as a means to understanding something else. We look through the paintings to their meaning, rather than at them. Contemporary women’s paintings ‘markedly lack Dreaming stories’ and the artists resist explaining them. Because contemporary works deny us this satisfaction of icon and story, we are forced to look at them anew, to the manner in which they are painted. For Biddle, while not representational, such works are communicative. To understand this, we need to know something of how the mark is understood, and produced. Biddle explains that the corporeal marks the Ancestors left on country in the Dreaming are the same as the signs and symbols used in painting. In Warlpiri, these signs and symbols are called kuruwarri, ‘a complex term meaning “mark, trace, ancestral presence and/or essence, cicatrice, birthmark and/or freckle”’ (58). Such marks are believed to have power; the power to rejuvenate country and species, to control fertility and health, or to regulate social relations. This is true not only of the marks made on the country, but of those on the body, as skin is materially the same ‘substance’ as country as it is equally a medium in which Ancestral traces reside. ‘Skin is made text-like by Ancestral imprinting. The cutting of the head, and other forms of scarification, in mourning and bereavement ceremonies, the holes made in nostrils at initiation, and, of course, circumcision and subincision, indicate the degree to which the surface and contours of the body are made by ancestral marks and potencies’ (60). ‘The techniques of painting turn canvas to skin to country’ (61).

This leads Biddle to discuss the process of marking, and the preparation of canvas. Biddle points out that, in preparation for ceremonies, Walpiri people rub oils into their skin prior to the application of ochre and design. This process is called maparni, which the Warlpiri Dictionary defines ‘to anoint [with oil (JARA)], paint, grease (with fat/oil), smear, rub on, rub with’ (61). Of these meanings, she suggests that the notion of anointing implies an act of transforming the profane into the sacred. Anointment is not merely an action, as ‘smearing’ or ‘rubbing on’ are actions; it is performative, and changes the nature of what is anointed. Just as the body is prepared for ceremony, the canvas is prepared for painting. (62). Similarly, the ground is prepared for ceremonies. Not only are sticks and stones that may hurt the feet removed, but the site is brushed and raked and smoothed (64). Marks are not made merely on this surface, but in this surface, and are signs of ancestral presence. The Dreaming is not past, as it is repeated and recreated in the process of imprinting. It is, in Derrida’s terminology ‘iterable’: repeated and repeatable (66).
This argument operates on the basis of an analogy. Biddle says that these processes of preparing skin or ground for ceremony, and canvas for painting are not only similar, but the same. The sacred nature of these paintings rests on the nature of marking, which is produced onto a surface that has been ‘anointed’. Yet there is also a significant difference between the preparation of the body or ground for ceremony and the preparation of canvas that Biddle does not acknowledge. Preparations for ceremony involve the process of presenting sacred symbols; symbols that do not necessarily appear in the dot paintings. This raises the question of why we should interpret ‘maparni’ in this context as meaning to anoint, rather than as to smear, or rub on, or rub with. To justify this, Biddle uses an argument from best explanation. She acknowledges that some advisors taught artists always to prime the canvas first, but argues her interpretation presents the best explanation because, in her experience, artists always prime the surface even if this is unnecessary because it has already been primed by the arts advisor. I agree this is one way to make sense of an interpretation – but it strikes me as an overly intellectualised one. There are people who think it necessary to warm the pot before making a cup of tea, or to pour the milk in last, or first, or to wash up in the order of glass-cutlery-china, because that is the way they have been taught to do it. In fact, we need no other reason, though we may seek explanations for our behaviour after the fact (and there may be a good reason, or may have been a good reason in past circumstances that no longer hold, such as living in a cold climate and wanting to keep the tea pot hot, of which we are not aware). There is no additional argument here – and one can’t help wishing she had asked the artists what they thought they were doing.

Yet the discussion of imprinting the surface or ground is also one of the most interesting and suggestive elements of the book. Biddle writes, ‘A debt to the difference between ‘background’ and ‘mark’, between ground and stick, between absence and presence – these are differences necessary for writing, for the constitution of meaning itself. This debt to difference, this debt to and detour via something else for the production of meaning, is precisely what is occluded in Western metaphysics generally and in notions of writing particularly…But it is a debt Warlpiri and Anmatyerr/Alyawarr women appear actively to acknowledge’ (67). The mark, as imprint, is both Ancestral presence, and what reactivates Ancestral presence. In early acrylic painting, the dotting follows the line of the imprint or mark in such a way that the mark disappears; instead, the shape of the mark and its apprehension as a figure is manifested in and through the trace that surrounds it. (68) ‘This sense of kuruwarri as imprint is further evident in how kuruwarri marks are put and reput. Thick indelible lines –
half circles, line, shape, will be painted and repainted. Ochre will be dragged and redragged on breast...Replication is not only functional but serves to demonstrate a greater commitment to tracing and retracing as a practice, turning the trace into a mark itself.'(69) The signs of the ancestors disappear because they appear in and through the repetition. The shimmer, or optical flash, of contemporary Western Desert paintings is produced through this dotting process, and Biddle suggests, the efficacy of the kurruwarri marks depends on the creation of the shimmer. Making use of Glowczewski (1991), Biddle claims that the rhythmic, repetitious marking and remarking press the kurruwarri in. Dots simultaneously push or poke the canvas, at which they become the deepest point of the canvas, and at the same time optically float above it, creating movement between two realms above and below, human and ancestral. (72)

One of the strengths of Biddle’s approach is that there is some credibility to the idea that the metaphors we use to understand a practice or activity do influence the way in which we experience that activity. For example, in Metaphors We Live By (1980: 4-5), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discussed the metaphor ‘argument is war’, and how we ‘win or lose’ arguments, as well as understand them as war in associated phrases like ‘she demolished the argument’, ‘her criticisms were right on target’, ‘her claims are indefensible’. As they pointed out, if we did not think in these terms, there would be no sense in which an argument could be attacked or defended, and if we lived in a culture in which an argument was viewed as a dance, and the participants as performers rather than opponents, we would view and consider arguments differently, indeed, it would be strange to say that they were arguing. So, when Biddle suggests that contemporary women’s painting should be seen as a form of writing and a specific kind of imprint, and introduces the metaphor of canvas as skin, then we should pay attention to how this activity is thought of, and experienced, differently by Warlpiri and Western artists and audiences.

The third chapter brings these ideas together. The surface of the body, which is rendered virtually the same as the surface of the country, allows for the exchange between human and Ancestor and the human and land. ‘Dots and lines are not the fillers, additions, or a secondary outlining. They have...become the practice’, Biddle writes (79). They make us feel not as a result of their representations but because of the affect of the imprint. The boundaries of skin are dissipated, between black and white, between land and people, people and Ancestor. It is for this reason that Biddle considers painting such an important medium of cross cultural communication. Yet, as she points out, skin is also a form of relatedness to country: skin names differentiate between Aboriginal people and land, and colour differentiates
between black and white Australians; the skin of the country is black. The paintings demand a recognition of Aboriginal people ‘that is not simply skin deep’ (94).

Where the first two chapters open up an exciting concept of marking and its relationship with affect, in the final chapter we are presented with an affective reading of breast. It is here that Biddle turns to the fact that these are women’s paintings, and that the breast is the primary site for Ancestral imprinting. This aspect of the paintings has, Biddle states, received little attention, and so we begin reading with great expectations. Biddle discusses what she describes as five ‘axioms’ of ‘a breasted ontology’, but here my patience ran out. The first axiom is that the works by these women stem from marks made on the breast. Yet, the axiom also appears denied in the premise of the book, which seeks to understand paintings without designs. And in the chapter on skin, in which Biddle discusses Kathleen Petyarre’s painting, the only connection to breasts is made as part of an extended metaphor:

A spatiality of movement and feeling is evoked here – a rippling across a surface, an undulation, wave-like, sometimes turbulent, sometimes lulling, almost audible, so tangible are the rhythmic pulsing ridges, hills, sand dunes left as a stick is pulled through the ground, ochre drawn on breast. The “lines” here enact sound…in the way that texture always incites other sensory experiences and specifically, it carries sonic resonances, for example the ‘brush-brush’ of corduroy is “heard” and not just “seen”.

Here it is the rhythmic sound of the singing of women that is suggested, the rising and falling of the breast and repetitious song cycles of Ancestral activities in voices that intone as much as they sing. (82)

Call me insensitive, but I think I do hear the brush of corduroy, without inverted comas. Moreover, I never see this sound. And while I think I understand the idea that the surface of the paintings ripple and undulate, and this could be like undulations of songs or intonation, I do not hear the song in the painting. I do not understand where breasts come into it, except that they, like many other things in the world, also undulate.

The second axiom is that ‘the breast marks as it makes and makes as it marks’. This involves the claim that ‘the breast is figured as a writing instrument’. Yet it is difficult to make sense of this claim. One wonders, ‘what do the breasts mark? What do they make?’ By way of explanation, Biddle presents another metaphor of sensory conjunction: the marks are ‘as felt as they are seen, as material as they are visual’ (99). Biddle discusses the
markings on the breast, and representations of breasts in a series of paintings, but not the marks made by the breasts. Then, I think I find the explanation: ‘What makes these breasts potent is the way they are inscribed and, in turn, inscribe. What makes them generative…is the way they repeat an initial Ancestral imprinting of country.’ But, I still don’t know what breasts inscribe.

The third axiom is that ‘the breast mark expresses a relationship of attachment’, a specifically female conjoining subjects, in particular of infant to mother. ‘The literal incapacity to breastfeed oneself, or breastfeed oneself, is here enacted by the very conditions of inscription – one cannot and does not paint one’s own breast in Yawulyu.’ (100-01). ‘The literal imbibing of nipple, skin – the physical “latch on”, mouth to breast…will make the subject socially and culturally subject to others. She will remain throughout her life indebted to, defined by and in relation to the bodies of others – and specifically here, the materiality of country as breast, country as body’ (101).

Axiom four develops this into the idea that it is country that is fed, and it is country that feeds, and axiom five is that ‘to view these works is to participate in their workings’. This appears to be based on the kind of lack of distinction between subject and object in the experience of art that Heidegger writes about. Biddle writes, ‘the dots have the effect of making invisible the operation that made them possible: the incapacity to differentiate self and other’, and then later ‘the effect is to merge subject with matter – a merging not only of Ancestral body with country, not only of Ancestor ‘skin’ with ‘surface’ of the body, the skin, of the viewing subject. These works captivate literally. Our bounded bodies, like that of the Ancestors, dissipate. In viewing these paintings, it is impossible not to become immersed in the fleshing enfoldings of their animation. A certain dissolution of the self occurs…’ (104). Impossible?

While there is much to admire about Breasts, Body, Canvas, the end is not uplifting, or illuminating. Its affect in this reader is the enervation produced by an over-extended, exhausted metaphor. Biddle fails to show that ‘Central Desert artworks literally bring to life country, Ancestors, people… by literally enlivening us, the spectator’. It is hard to know what she means by the term ‘literal’, and the term, which is used liberally throughout the text, is at best understood metaphorically. Indeed, the entire thesis appears best understood metaphorically, even if you are also prepared to ‘believe in’ the Dreaming, and the Ancestors. A metaphor, as has often been pointed out – is literally false. But the reason we appreciate one is that, paradoxically, it shows us something true. At times this book presents a glimmer…
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But Wait, There’s More offers an overview of the Australian advertising industry during the twentieth century. The text has been adapted from a doctoral thesis that its author, Robert Crawford, completed at Monash University in 2002. Crawford’s book is an ambitious one, and it contains many fascinating and nuanced insights. There are also some areas throughout the text that clearly deserved further discussion.

Crawford’s book opens in 1900, when advertising in Australia was in its infancy. During this period, the relatively small number of advertising agents in this country faced an uphill battle trying to dismantle their “shady” image as purveyors of “dishonesty and deceit” (6). They also had a limited number of outlets (usually newspapers) in which to advertise. Crawford covers the growth and achievements of these agencies through two world wars, various rises and falls in the Australian economy, and the changing (though frequently sceptical) attitudes of consumers towards advertisements. But Wait, There’s More concludes in the year 2000. By this stage, advertising had been transformed dramatically by “technological developments” such as the television, VCR and the internet (255).

Crawford’s central argument is that the “significance” of the advertising industry in Australia has been overlooked (5). “Over the course of the twentieth century,” he observes, this industry “went from a disorganised collection of advertising agents eking out an existence on newspaper commissions to a multibillion-dollar enterprise” (5). Advertisers have had to overcome persistent negative perceptions about their profession, as well as a range of broad-ranging social, economic and technological changes in or-
der to continue “convert(ing) audiences into consumers” (3). In other words, the ongoing success of the Australian advertising industry has been “neither assured nor did it come easily” (5).

Crawford’s decision to focus primarily on advertising agencies is a wise one given the breadth of his chosen topic. As he puts it, these agencies have been hugely important because without them there would have been “no advertising industry” (4). His prose is, though, interspersed with reprints of advertisements that circulated throughout Australia during the twentieth century. These include a 1930s advertisement that contains the slogan “drink beer … it’s good for you!” (93), the “Life Be In It” ads featuring the slobbish “Norm” that first appeared during the 1970s (181), and the 1980s AIDS advertisements that featured the scythe-wielding “Grim Reaper” (227). The inclusion of these advertisements provides a unique insight into the different images and messages that have been used to sell products over the years.

Overall, I found the section dealing with advertising during the 1930s to be the strongest. This decade saw the rise of the ‘Great Depression’ within and outside Australia. Crawford thoroughly explains the various strategies which advertisers adopted to sell products during this “time of economic hardship” (70). I also liked the comparison he drew between advertising and the cinema. Crawford argues that “in the way that the cinema offered a temporary reprieve from daily hardships … advertisers presented fantastic and fanciful images” (73). These included images of nubile men and women frolicking on sunny beaches. Such imagery, he writes, “contained an obvious message – consumers could partake” in a trouble-free and financially stable existence “if they consumed the correct brand or product” (73).

Also, Crawford’s analysis of women and advertising in Australia is extremely astute. That “women were recognised as an important and lucrative market from the industry’s earliest days” is no new insight (150). Crawford charts the changing attitudes that advertisers took towards female consumers throughout the twentieth century, and the responses of feminists towards the use of demeaning stereotypes of women in advertisements. Additionally, Crawford points out that by the 1990s, a considerable number of women had jobs within advertising agencies. They were still, though, unlikely to occupy senior positions within these agencies and this has been cited as one reason for the persistence of the aforementioned gender stereotypes in advertising imagery (165).

Problematically, a large portion of But Wait, There’s More focuses on the first half of the twentieth century. Crawford even includes a whole chapter on “famous admen from 1900 to 1950,” despite the fact that these dec-
ades are given ample discussion in several other chapters (33). Conversely, he only briefly mentions the changing nature of advertising and consumers in the 1990s. I refer specifically to his discussion of the internet. I agree with Crawford that the internet has “emerged as a key advertising medium” which “in many ways differs little from past advertising forms: spam emails for junk mail … sponsored banners for press advertisements” (256). Yet he does not go a step further and explore the myriad similarities and differences between these “forms.”

Consider, too, Crawford’s reference to the emergence within the 1990s of ‘generation X’ (broadly defined as men and women born between the mid-1960s and the late-1970s). Crawford correctly points out that members of this so-called “generation” were “characterised by (their) jaded and altogether cynical view of the media industries” and were thus “difficult” for advertisers to sell products to (257). He does not, though, mention that the concept of ‘generation X’ was devised by advertisers to describe a young and media-savvy social group. Crawford does not mention the various techniques advertisers used to market products to this group. Nor does he discuss the creative ways in which media-savvy consumers of all ages have responded to such advertising (I am thinking here of practices such as “culture jamming,” which has been most famously analysed by Naomi Klein in her 2000 book No Logo).

Finally, I was struck by the frequent comparisons between advertising and prostitution. Crawford quotes the author Bryce Courtenay (himself a former “adman”) as arguing that “advertising men are whores …. Servants to people who know less than us, we are obliged to do what we are told, and we invariably back down in a fight” (3). Similarly, in the Foreword, Phillip Adams writes half-jokingly that advertisers are “whoring in a very big brothel” (iii). There may well be some similarities between the selling of one’s creative and intellectual services and the selling of one’s sexual services. However, there are also many important differences between them. In not suggesting these differences, Crawford risks endorsing the simplistic and politically dubious stereotype of advertisers as corporate “hookers” (iii).

As a whole, But Wait, There’s More offers an engaging perspective on the trials and tribulations of the Australian advertising industry between 1900 and 2000. The text does, as I have suggested, focus primarily on the first half of this century. Nevertheless, Crawford’s book is still a fitting testament to the survival skills that advertisers have developed and which they will no doubt continue to utilise through the twentieth century.

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Neil Young is an ideal object for popular music scholarship, not only because of the volume of work that he has produced over his long career – William Echard’s study, for instance, cites no fewer than 40 of the albums Young produced between 1966 and 2003, a figure that does not even cover his entire output – but also because of the eclecticism of his work, which allows Echard to draw on a wide range of theoretical models in searching for the “stable” Neil Young identity that he believes underpins Young’s music. As a result of these dual considerations, Echard’s book would have been capable of serving not only as a comprehensive introduction to Neil Young’s music, but also as a study of contemporary popular music scholarship. In the first respect, the book succeeds. There are, however, a number of significant weaknesses with Echard’s study that ensure it fails on the second count.

Untangling Neil Young

At the outset of his book, Echard positions himself as what he calls a “scholar-fan” who “is trying to find something out about how the music works, but in an intellectual frame where the distinctions between text and interpretation, knowledge and action, are necessarily blurred” (3). Nonetheless, the strongest sections of this book are those when the fan in Echard takes precedence over the scholar, such as in the chapters dedicated to untangling the seemingly random eclecticism of Young’s music, which
ranges from garage rock and soft rock in the late 1960s through to electro-pop, rockabilly, and country music in the early 1980s. Echard argues that, despite these stylistic changes, Young is essentially a rock musician who seeks to expand what Echard calls the rock “stylistic family” into areas that other rock musicians do not go (65).

Young’s eclecticism is illustrative of what Echard calls Young’s *dialogic* approach to making music (57f). According to Echard, Young “makes use of established stylistic clichés in order to simultaneously assert his place in a tradition [of rock music], but also his autonomy from that tradition” (64). As a result, Young’s work can “be read as a continual attempt to slip through interpretive loopholes” (152-3). According to Echard, this explains why the element of “surprise” and Young’s ability to “defy categorization” have been so prominent in the reception of his music (64f). Thus, as Echard writes:

> When in 1983 Neil Young suddenly dressed and sang like a rockabilly artist … previous assumptions about his persona were shaken by the force of this other voice. And yet this moment occurred as part of an utterance made by Neil Young himself, and so a play of alterity and assimilation was set up. When we look at Neil Young reception in the long term, we see that very often this kind of surprise is reabsorbed into a newly stabilized persona. After a while, intermusicality was no longer a destabilizing factor, but became a fixed part of Neil Young. He was expected to surprise, and his stylistic diversity was taken as a mark of authorial integrity (65).

Echard thus concludes that the strong authorial persona of the rock musician underpins Young’s “exceptional ability to work with the dialogic nature of cultural fields” (83). Paradoxically, Echard also notes that throughout his career Young has sought to defy precisely this ossification of his eclecticism into a new “identity” such as the one that Echard’s study imposes upon him. Nevertheless, “Young is,” Echard writes, “a canonized figure and an icon of rock music. He has an ambivalent relationship to both of these tendencies, but on balance that ambivalence, even though it exists on many levels, often folds back into a kind of authenticity and reinforces the same ideologies it questions” (83).

**Entangling William Echard**

The paradox of identity relating to Young results in a kind of insincerity underlying Echard’s analysis. On the one hand, Echard states that he wants to avoid trying to “pin him down” (2), but on the other he celebrates
Young’s defiance of categorisation – indeed, the primary purpose of Echard’s study is to discover how to categorise that defiance. In short, for all that the book is motivated by the fan pole of the scholar-fan dichotomy, Echard’s analysis of Young’s music is ultimately made subordinate to his scholarly desire to find a way through the “complex web of convergent and divergent readings” of it (197).

There are two obvious weaknesses with the scholarly aspect of Echard’s book.

The first lies in the elaborate vocabulary that Echard draws on in his work. This is no doubt partly due to the inherent difficulty of talking about what we hear, but nonetheless Echard’s analysis often gets swamped by the sheer number of musical terms he must introduce in order to say what he wants to say.

The second weakness mirrors the first. In those sections of the book (particularly chapter four) where the scholar takes precedence over the fan, Echard’s discussion is mired under the vast theoretical apparatus that, while enabling him to untangle Young’s music, only ends up entangling itself in the process. For example, by way of prefacing his most sustained treatment of popular music theory in the book, Echard writes:

My theoretical orientation has been deeply influenced by my encounter with [Young’s] music…. I have been led to develop or adopt a particular set of concepts in large measure because of my need to say certain things about Neil Young. And while the theoretical framework will subsequently take on a life of its own, it will always reflect the repertoire that inspired it (108).

This is indeed – and unfortunately – all too true in Echard’s case, for the vast theoretical framework that he constructs in order to say what he wants to say about Young’s music ends up becoming just as eclectic and unruly as the music that it is meant to untangle for us.

Disconcertingly, I believe that Echard recognises this, since on several occasions he seeks to provide the reader with guides on how to read his work. I believe that facilitating this guidance role was the primary motivation for Echard identifying himself as a “scholar-fan,” along with his suggesting that we should therefore expect a book that will in some parts be “too academic for some fans and other parts too casual for some academics” (3). And when Echard writes in the introduction to chapter four that his theoretical apparatus, inspired as it is by listening to Young’s music, will necessarily reflect Young’s music, this reads more like an apologia than a programme for what is to come. For while Echard argues that the eclecticism of Young’s music is evidence of what he calls Young’s “waywardness,” or
his willingness to “roam widely within the stylistic family of rock, seeming sometimes to stray outside of it altogether, but again in a manner which ultimately reasserts rock’s centripetal fortitude” (75), I cannot say the same of Echard’s theoretical apparatus, which merely roams widely. To my mind, then, the criticism that Dave Marsh directs towards Young’s music, which Echard cites, could equally be directed towards Echard’s analysis: it is “‘less diverse than erratic, his stylistic charms the result of lack of commitment rather than successful eclecticism,’ and in the end ‘[he] lacks [a] coherent, consistent world view’” (55).

As such, while the fan in Echard ensures that his book succeeds as a comprehensive introduction and guide to Neil Young’s music, the scholar in Echard too often gets bogged down in setting up, rather than actually defending, his argument, and as a result this book does not succeed as a scholarly work.

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The publication of the Heidegger’s lecture courses from the time of his publication blackout (1915-1927) is nearing completion, and a number of new translations of the lecture courses are currently ‘forthcoming’. Becoming Heidegger brings to light a large selection of other material by and regarding Heidegger including essays, lectures, formal and informal academic correspondence from before and during this period. Most of the texts have been seen before—in particular, all but a few pages of John van Buren’s collection, Supplements, from 2002, is newly translated or “paraphrased” here—the collection, however, brings together much of what has been published in isolation with comprehensive introductions, copious notes, three appendices, a very succinct glossary, an up-to-date bibliography, and four indices. Becoming Heidegger will not be made obsolete as quickly as Supplements.

For those who have already read Supplements there are still a few gems. The discovery of an anonymous transcript from Heidegger’s 1924 lecture tour, specifically of the lecture Heidegger gave on December 3 at Cologne in front of Max Scheler, the new head of the Kant society there, is of particular interest because it runs together the familiar readings of the Nicomachean Ethics 6 and Of Interpretation with remarks on the Rhetoric. Another newly discovered lecture on ‘truth’ from 1926 provides a contemporaneous formulation of the material dealt with in §44 from Being and
Time. These two lectures together provide great insight in the length of the gestation of Heidegger’s lectures ‘On the Essence of Truth,’ the first of which was published in 1930.

Heidegger’s remarks about the effects of the First World War are intriguing if only as a demonstration of the high literary style for which the young Heidegger was well known. ‘Recent Research in Logic’ (1912) and ‘Question and Judgment’ (1915) provide useful sources on an early engagement with Neo-Kantianism and Phenomenology.

The text is also full of entertaining biographical knick-knacks. Appendix C provides an excerpt from Löwith’s 1926 satirical autobiography that presents rather unflattering though amusing portraits of Privy Councilor Endlich (Husserl) and Professor Ansorge (Heidegger). Löwith gives a marvellous sketch of Heidegger at his desk:

> A black-and-red woven wool jacket of the kind generally worn only by peasants, but not by professors, shielded the body of this rigorous thinker from the cold. His legs were always elaborately wrapped in a blanket and his feet stuffed into a foot-muff, whose motley composition out of leftover scraps suggested less its aesthetic sense than the superlative frugality of the housewife who was at the same time the ‘woman of the house.’ She had also provided a colorful scarf for the neck of her thinking man, not out of tender loving care but rather out of congenital proficiency, with a sober regard for the requirements of a thinking household. Among the other dispenses of heat were to be found a glowing over, steaming tea, and the smell of an old-fashioned tobacco pipe. This manifold supply of heat was needed to endure the ‘frigid air of the philosophical concept’ (a favorite expression of the thinker).” (425)

And more thought provoking accounts of the manner of Heidegger, who seems to have caused most people to respond first of all regarding the originality of his personality. Here we see a man who avoids eye contact, and “if someone temporality forced him into a direct look by speaking to him, then this extremely unharmonious face, jagging angularity in all its features, would become somewhat reserved, wily, shifting, and downright hypocritical.” (425)

More sober portraits of Heidegger are drawn in Appendices A and B. The first contains reports on Heidegger’s doctorate and habilitation and correspondence relating to Heidegger’s employment applications and Marburg appointment. The second contains 60 pages of selected correspon-
dence regarding the Husserl-Heidegger relationship, Malvine and Elfride included. Certain remarks may even suggest that Heidegger refused to publish on the basis that he thought that Husserl would not help him get an appointment if he knew how much he had ‘publicly burned and destroyed Ideas’. Heidegger writes to Löwith in May 1923, “And after I have published, my prospects will be finished. The old man will then realize that I am wringing his neck—and then the question of succeeding him is out.” (372) And to Jaspers, “…Husserl has become entirely unglued—if, that is, he ever was ‘glued,’ which more and more I have begun to doubt of late.” (373) After Heidegger succeeds Husserl at Freiburg in April 1928, the relationship between Heidegger and Husserl soon becomes openly tense and the correspondence ends with letters by Husserl in 1934 bitterly decrying his former student.

If one has not read Supplements then Becoming Heidegger contains much more valuable material than all that I have mentioned above. The retranslated texts on Dilthey, Luther, British Empiricism, Kant and ‘The Concept of Time in the Science of History’ are all fundamental. There are also some texts associated with the Duns Scotus habilitation in both Supplements and Becoming Heidegger which differ in selection. The review of Jaspers is also included as it is in both Supplements and Pathmarks, the van Buren translation is “paraphrased” in parts to make the language “more readily accessible to the reader” and “the errors that have crept into the extant English translation have been corrected here without comment.” (110) The most important text is no doubt the once lost Aristotle Introduction from October 1922, first published in German in 1989.

On the whole, the collection provides a new capacity to overview the professional and theoretical career of the early Heidegger. All of Heidegger’s lecture courses are published with minimal notes. Becoming Heidegger, with 116 pages of notes, seeks to counter this. The 12 page annotated glossary in particular includes detailed genealogies of the terminology and should now be an indispensable tool to all those reading early Heidegger.

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In accessing this review, you have engaged with an information machine. It is this engagement, that of the human and the machine, and how it has refigured our understanding of culture, politics and the self that is the central contention of Mark Poster’s text. The text presents us with an exploration into the ubiquitous nature of information machines that permeate our daily existence. Technology has a profound effect on culture. He argues that “culture cannot be seen as separate from technology” and as such “many assumptions long held in modern society require revision” (9). This guiding principle frames debate throughout the text by interweaving the role that the advent of information and communications technology has upon globalisation, politics, identity, media, art and culture.

The text is divided into three sections, each taking a thematic approach to the role that information machines have had upon the human experience. In the first section, Global Politics and New Media, Poster explores the developments of the conjunction between media and technologies that refigure how we position ourselves within the world.

Poster suggests globalisation is brought about by the development of communications and information technologies. He draws on the example of “Evil Bert Laden,” which comprised the image of Bert from Sesame Street with Osama Bin Laden in protest marches from across the Middle East and South Asia. The image of Bert was removed from its cultural context and refigured in a new way. A part of globalisation is then about the assem-
blage of images and ideas, which are fragmented across the globe. The mechanism that enables this transmission is the global information and communications network. Poster considers the ramifications not just of the way that information is transmitted but what role it plays in enabling a transformation of culture. He raises questions about the role that media plays in culture, focusing on new media. Poster seeks to explore the linkages between humans and machines, providing “the cornerstone of possible new planetary cultures,” a globalisation (24).

Poster develops his position on contemporary globalisation in relation to postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory has been centred upon face-to-face communications, focusing on the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. When rendered through the lens of global communications systems, postcolonial theory is problematised. In facilitating the deconstruction of Western ontology, the concept of the tool stood at a distance from the human, appearing as other, as pure object. However, information machines as tools refigure the relationship between human and machine, subject and object. This refiguration inserts itself into the process of culture and as such refigures the subject and object into a new formation that Poster defines as the humachine (36). The construction of a digital public sphere mediated by information technologies enables engagements with people to be mediated, not confined to proximate physical spaces. The self, given the advent of information machines and a global communications network, participates in global discussions. The advent of these digital subjects destabilise territorial identities, as subjects are free to construct themselves in any manner in relation to others. Poster sees this (re)construction as rendering new formulations of cultural exchange.

Poster turns to the political, engaging with recent work from Manuel Castells, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Their work proceeds from the position of emerging global integration. However, Poster’s reading has a different angle, in that he sees globalisation as the assemblage of humans and networked digital information. The combination of human and machine is ‘an intimate mixing of human and machine that constitutes an interface outside the subject-object binary’ (48). Poster contends that networked digital information and human assemblages transform the fundamental conditions of culture (52). The internet presents a site that departs from the Newtonian space-time formulation of earlier communication to a site that represents virtual presence as space and time approach zero (55). Poster argues that new media produces a specific materiality, and as such any critique needs to be focused with this in mind, as opposed to a Marxist rendition that focuses upon labour power in relation to information technologies.

Poster explores the historical development of the citizen; he focuses
on how humans are transformed by information machines, with particular emphasis on the role that science and technology have had in relation to globalisation. It is not just figures of capitalism and imperialism that guide theories of globalisation; another central figure that needs to be considered is the connection of human to machine. Poster explores this connection through the “human-machine interface” that must be developed in order to formulate new political communities. It is not “a replica of the agora but … mediated by information machines” (72). The citizen today marries the “autonomous individuality of modernity with the postmodern neotraditionalism of identity politics” (75). Poster argues that this is rendered concrete through the internet in that it deterritorialises exchanges from the body, yet reterritorialises them in a manner different from other media. Television, print and radio are fixed broadcast media and as such are easily controlled by the nation-state. The internet, by contrast, is decentralized; it does not lend itself to control by the nation-state, but is the site of production of postnational political formulations. This is due to its architecture, the shift in space-time it represents, coupled with the new relation of the human to the machine. Poster floats the concept of the netizen, a person that adheres not to nature alone, but to machines – the connection of local and digital identity.

The second section of Poster’s text explores the culture of the digital self, developing from the refiguration of the political and the cultural brought about by information and communication technology. Poster turns his attention to the way the subject is reconstituted in light of information machines.

Poster states that the formulation of the subject’s identity is based on a Foucauldian framework of a technology of power, which regards identity as instituted by discourses and practices. The subject is transformed through the mode of information. Information machines problematise this relation by allowing the subject to exist outside of the boundaries of a corporeal space. Poster states that identity can be constructed by the whole nature of the technical apparatus that envelops the subject, but because of this very fluidity, it is also open to attack. This is evident in the crime of identity theft. The changed nature of the ‘online’ self has divorced identity from the corporeal nature of the subject; it is this very fact that can allow one’s identity to be compromised, left vulnerable and open to theft.

Poster presents a relationship of human to machine that is more pronounced in the emergence of the refigured relationship to culture. The transition from analogue to digital has problematised notions about art, aesthetics and media theory. Poster explores this first by invoking Benjamin’s critique of cinema before extending it to encompass information technologies.
Art cannot be seen as a delimited object, instead ‘it is an underdetermined space in which subject and object, human and machine, body and mind, space and time all receive new cultural forms’ (126). Information technologies facilitate a refiguration of aesthetics. Poster touches upon hypertext, which introduces new forms of narrative rupturing traditional linear forms. This is coupled with the ability to produce, distribute and consume data at high speeds replacing television, that one-to-many medium, with collective consumption and production. Poster outlines the nature of the internet as many-to-many such that it destabilises traditional conceptualisations of media.

Poster presents media as the site that transforms the way subjects engage with cultural objects. Information technologies have transformed the structure of information but also alter the way that humans relate to the reception and transmission of information. Poster explores the way that ethics have been refigured in light of information technologies. Drawing upon Levinas and the face-to-face, Poster claims that new media disrupts such relationships as people can engage without being in proximity to each other. Poster states that the engagement with new media alters the human condition, which has a profound affect on received notions of understanding while also destabilising traditional media in the process. He questions notions of the ethical in relation to information technology, inscribing a Nietzschean notion of a new formulation of ethics that accounts for the human–machine interaction. This is an ethics that has to move beyond merely good or evil, good or bad.

Moving on from ethics, Poster focuses on the body, more specifically the interaction between human and machine. Poster’s analysis is developed from psychoanalytic theory, starting with the formulation of bodies and their categorisation and continuing through into formulations of media and the mediated body. It is this body, immersed in media from birth, which is involved in a different process of development. His case is the analysis of the television show *Teletubbies*. The show is targeted towards infants and plays out a virtual existence where villains are portrayed as objects such as vacuum cleaners. New media has resulted in children growing up in a more media concentrated environment, surrounded by information machines and immersed in mediated cultures.

Poster problematises the subject-object relationship by exploring the way that information machines transform the subject, breaking down this relationship. In the third section of his text, Poster turns his attention to the way that information machines transform commodities. Poster argues that information machines and networks destabilise traditional production and distribution of a number of commodities, especially cultural commodities.
Poster notes that the advent of digital cultures has been problematic for traditional renditions of property. The relationship of human to machine has opened up a wide range of new practices that are social, political and cultural. The attempt for modernist institutions such as governments to control virtual activities is problematised by the very nature of the connections that occur on the internet. When contrasting production and distribution on the internet, one finds that traditional models of looking at goods, especially cultural items such as music and films, are rendered obsolete by technology. Poster states that with the digitalisation of culture, traditional tangible goods such as records and videos are becoming less relevant with the instantaneous distribution and access to a range of goods made available through peer-to-peer file transfer. Media companies however are attempting to exert control over these commodities through recourse to the legal system in order to compel users to purchase the product. The developments of these technologies have brought about a new mechanism for the distribution of goods and enabled a reworking of space, which in Poster’s construction resembles Foucault’s concept of heterotopia.

Taking the new condition of the subject as a relation between media and technology, what then does it mean to explore the terrain of virtual existence that permeates the subject in the day-to-day? Poster explores Lefebvre’s conception of the everyday and the role that new media play in relation to the transformation of the subject. The relationship between subject and object is central to the modern experience; however, Poster problematises this by stating that in between this division machines reside. The relationships between individuals and machines have developed over time. This is developed in the evolving relationship that humans have had from radio through to computers, evidenced by the increased use and central role of information processing machines in society.

Networked computing gives rise to digital objects and a new relationship between objects and the consumer. As such, Poster contends that the consumer is not just a consumer anymore; access to technology also positions the consumer as a producer. This puts into question the relation between producer and consumer, as the distribution and reproduction (copying) approaches zero cost. Evidence of new forms of commodities can be seen in the development of open source software.

The final area that Poster explores is the relationship between advertising and information machines. Drawing on the 1969 novel *Ubiq* by Phillip K. Dick, Poster states that this text presents the protagonist in a strange world of consumption. The extension of technology has enabled ubiquitous exposure to advertising and by extension consumption. Poster develops this position as a possible point of reference to the domain we are currently
situated in. It is media in *Ubiq* that develops connections between “religion, the ultimate spiritual force, and consumption” (261).

Poster provides comprehensive coverage of the effects that information and communications technologies have had, not just in transforming the way we conduct ourselves daily, but in destabilising a number of issues that have up until now been relatively fixed. New media has altered the human condition, which is evident in the refiguring of the human-machine interface. As the pace of technological development increases, we can only see more of the effects played out. The text as a whole is well written and engaging; its main limitation is that it will date fast. Poster’s *Information Please* delivers an excellent foundation for those interested in the connection between theory and technology. It opens up a number of fields of research that revolve around the human–machine connection.
With *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Henry Reynolds has exceeded his intention of turning Australian history “inside out.” Through fragments and excerpts pieced together from a range of archival information – diaries, journals, newspapers, official documents – and oral narratives, he has presented the last two hundred years of the history of this continent from the perspectives of indigenous people. This radical retelling of history, although fragmentary, compels the reader’s respect and admiration for those Aboriginal people who fought, at great cost, to co-exist on this continent on their own terms.

Contrary to dominant historical accounts which fail to acknowledge black resistance, give this issue cursory attention, and/or represent the indigene as passive and easily overcome, Reynolds highlights strategic Aboriginal resistance to Euro-Celtic encroachment on traditional life and natural resources. He claims, “Black resistance in its many forms was an inescapable feature of life on the fringes of European settlement from the first months of Sydney Cove until the early years of the Twentieth Century” (67). This text produces credible evidence to consistently substantiate this claim. Invasion and colonisation of this continent was no easy feat, as a pioneer wrote in 1869: “every acre of land in these districts [Sydney and its surrounds] was won from the Aborigines by bloodshed and warfare” (67). As such, the question this information raises is this: how or why was this fun-
damental fact suppressed for so very long and for what purpose? One can only imagine, given the information produced by Reynolds on Aboriginal opposition, that it is an inconvenient truth that could lead to a political-legal quagmire.

Initial gestures of hospitality and peace offered by the Aborigine to the white settler when misunderstood and exploited by whites turned into resentment and also fear. The increasing struggle to maintain traditional lands and lifestyle under mounting pressure motivated attacks, banditry and open conflict against white settlers and settlements. The response of Aboriginal people was not homogenous. Aboriginals challenged Europeans in different ways, employing different methods. They also actively responded to and devised creative ways of circumventing the challenges posed by white settlers. They were adept at adapting to changing circumstances whilst simultaneously seeking ways to retain traditional culture. “They opted for Aboriginal values, settlement patterns, family life, rhythms of work even when that choice meant a miserable level of material comfort” (157).

Yet, there is no hyperbole in stating that every area of Aboriginal existence was severely and irreparably disrupted. Reynolds details some of the disruption in this way:

Increasingly the newcomers impinged on accustomed patterns of life, occupying the flat, open land and monopolising water. Indigenous animals were driven away, plant life eaten or trampled [by cattle, horses and sheep that were introduced] and Aborigines pushed back into marginal country - mountains, swamps, waterless neighbourhoods. Patterns of seasonal migration broke down, areas free of Europeans were over utilised and eventually depleted of flora and fauna. Food became scarcer and available in less and less variety and even access to water was often difficult (72).

Increasing pressure on Aboriginal life led to for example, fighting among clans. In other words, under conditions of increasing stress, Aborigines turned on themselves. Some black women were initially exchanged with the new settlers but later were “deliberately cheated, raped and abducted” by European men. Affectively, the Aboriginal population declined “from about 300,000 in 1788 to not much more than 50,000 in little over a century” (127). However, Reynolds tells a parallel story that overshadows and attends the disruption outlined.

Reynolds’ text begins with the first sightings by Aborigines of the European landings. News of these visitors travelled very quickly around the continent. Nevertheless, chance encounters with Europeans inspired fear,
curiosity, imagination, and much thought and discussion within indigenous communities. Soon, the exchange of gifts – “shells, ochre, stone artefacts, spears, woven bags, gum and other items” – was replaced by commodities introduced by the Europeans. Tobacco became a habitual favourite. At first, Aborigines believed the Europeans were temporary visitors. Gradually, the Aborigines had to come to some understanding of who these people were and what motivated them. They also had to figure out the ways in which Europeans organised themselves in radically different ways to themselves, and then find ways in which to respond to these terrifying new creatures (human and animal). The fire power of the former was particularly dangerous and contributed to the Aboriginal belief that Europeans “possessed a powerful and malignant magic [which] may have been a factor in limiting Aboriginal aggression” (29).

Early on, the Aborigines were hospitable and optimistic, but they turned hostile when their efforts were exploited and their survival became uncertain and insecure. They were curious, about European artefacts for example, and also astute: they planned and engineered countless schemes to meet communal demands. They were willing to co-exist with the new ‘other’ but were also determined to retain their traditions and customs. They were innovative: European tools were adapted to new uses in their communities; new words were coined to deal with new goods and ideas; and new food sources such as sheep, cattle, and flour were included in their diets. Some attempted to negotiate with Europeans but these attempts proved fruitless. Some adapted, while others took casual labour to supplement traditional lifestyles. Still others found refuge in Christian missions. And a great many took offence.

The “Aborigines reacted quickly and creatively to the settlers” when provoked and/or threatened (168). They categorically resisted assimilation and declined servitude. Aboriginal warriors gathered, deliberated, conducted patient surveillance, and used guns garnered from previous raids to ambush assailants, loot properties and inspire trepidation within isolated colonial properties. Their superior skills of bushcraft guaranteed success. A squatter “on the Gwydir in 1989 believed that the whole British army would be unable to apprehend one tribe in his district: ‘so well aquainted are they with every thicket, reedy creek, morass, cave and hollow tree, in which they can secrete themselves, and so inaccessible to a horse of any white man’” (107). Whilst some of these raids were provoked by revenge for European evils committed against kin and clan, many of these excursions were a response to dwindling food supplies and loss of lands that were traditionally used for hunting and gathering, socialising and ceremonials. Reynolds notes how: “All over the continent Aborigines bled as profusely and died as
bravely as white soldiers in Australia’s twentieth century wars” (200). The Other Side of the Frontier implicitly honours the dead of this unrecognised war and explicitly pioneers the inversion of the last two hundred years of Australian history in favour of an Aboriginal-Australian history.

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The thesis of this book is clearly stated in the introduction: “the thinking of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy can (and perhaps in a significant sense must) be understood as ways of addressing the problem of presentation as framed by and inherited from Kant’s Critique of Judgement” (4). Ross identifies in Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy a fundamental “aesthetic attitude” that leads them to “steer philosophy in an aesthetic direction” (1). The same aesthetic attitude that characterises Kant’s Critique of Judgement, that is, the “search for a satisfactory mode of relation between the forms of material nature and human freedom,” which results in an aesthetic use of language, becomes the framework for these thinkers’ approach to philosophy. Ross argues thus that this “aesthetic steering of philosophy” is best understood as an “adaptation of the specific and technical employment of the notion of presentation [Darstellung] in Kant’s Critique of Judgement” (1).

First presentation must be defined: in Kant’s third Critique it is “the name he gives to the problem of how to define a mode of relation able to reconcile freedom with the constraints of materiality. The exigency of this relation follows from the need of finite beings to render in aesthetic or sensible forms what would otherwise be impotent, errant ideas” (2). Presentation is thus the name Kant gives to the mode of relation between the intelligible and the sensible. “Representation” (Vorstellung) is defined by Kant in terms of the schematising powers of the subject, its powers of appercept-
tion. These powers are however unable to provide a moral, comprehensive orientation for the self. "Presentation" [Darstellung] suspends the claims of the subject’s powers over material forms and “inquires instead about the ‘favours’ that the subject enjoys and that are extended to it by the material forms of nature” (3). It thus allows, for Kant, for a comprehensive orientation of meaning. The specific field of experience where this meaning is to be sought is neither cognitive nor practical, but aesthetic. The problem of aesthetic presentation is thus made more fundamental than any ontological issue.

Ross argues that Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy “generalise” the characteristics Kant had given to the aesthetic – still a specific mode of experience within a typology of different spheres – and bring them to “bear on things in general” (4). But why focus specifically on these thinkers? The aesthetic features of experience described by Kant underpin, as Ross notes, a number of theoretical positions within modern philosophy: critical theory, for example, uses the aesthetic for projects of social criticism (cf. Adorno); other examples are Lyotard’s use of the category of sublime, Derrida’s founding his deconstructive project on the indeterminacy of meaning deriving from Kant’s third Critique, the nineteenth-century notion of aesthetic Bildung as basis for political projects (cf. Schiller); even Marxist theory depending “on the aesthetic dimension of experience in order to discharge the function of criticism as well as to model an alternative anthropology and the social arrangements that could support it” (7). The influence of Kant’s third Critique, which first credited aesthetic experience with critical capacity, is well known and documented. However, according to Ross, Heidegger’s, Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Nancy’s paths to philosophy are crucially different from the aforementioned examples: the question raised in the Critique of Judgement becomes in these thinkers – and in them only – the “core problem for philosophical thinking” (8). Their respective philosophical projects can thus be read through the Kantian question of presentation. Presentation, though, no longer refers in these thinkers to the sensibilisation of ideas, but rather to the problem of the construction of the meaning of sensible experience without the armature of ideas. The problem of presentation is thus re-oriented from the coordination of sensible forms and ideas to the problem of the immanent articulation of the meaning of experience. The originary site of experience of meaning is identified by these thinkers in art or literature, hence, Ross argues, their reflection on the topic of presentation engages in an “aesthetic steering of philosophy” (166).

Another issue accompanies Ross’ investigation: the question of Kantian presentation is seldom connected to the enormous interest in the category of the aesthetic that frames important themes in movements as differ-
ent as hermeneutics, deconstruction, and phenomenology. Moreover, Kant tends to be considered a negative figure in the literature on Heidegger and French deconstruction. Ross’ goal is thus to fill this gap and contrast this assumption in secondary literature. Therefore, the book, first, argues for the general claim that the Kantian topic of presentation is an enduring topic within contemporary European thought, and, second, attempts to show in a new light, through the topic of presentation, the work of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy.

The book develops in three parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part examines the stakes of the problem of presentation through a reading of Kant. The two chapters of this part focus respectively on the two parts of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, “Critique of Aesthetic Judgement” and “Critique of Teleological Judgement.” Aesthetic presentation is identified in Kant as the characterisation of man’s practical being as a moral being. As a consequence, the person with a moral disposition is seen as an aesthetic object; thus the problematic of aesthetic presentation in Kant’s philosophy is defined as a “moral-aesthetic anthropology” (60). Ross concludes putting forward the argument that “Kant’s *Critique undoes its aim of presenting moral subjectivity by casting this subjectivity in the form of an aesthetic object*” (12).

The second part is devoted to a reading of Heidegger through the question of presentation, which is identified not merely as a theme among others, but rather as the reflective impulse that drives and structures Heidegger’s thinking. Ross argues that Heidegger, in rethinking the Kantian topic of presentation, intensifies aesthetic experience in the direction of a primary ontological relation to being (61). Chapter three analyses Heidegger’s reading of Kant and interprets his “turn” [Kehre] as a consequence of the discovery of the topic of presentation in Kant’s third *Critique*. Chapter four focuses on Heidegger’s analysis of the artwork and of technology as a consequence of this reading of Kant and thus as an analysis on the relations of presentation.

The third part devotes one chapter to Lacoue-Labarthe and one to Nancy, strongly relying on their relationship with Heideggerian thought. Like Heidegger, and following his impulse, these thinkers consider the question of presentation as the key question of thinking. However, unlike Heidegger, they are faithful to the context of aesthetic in which Kant first posed this question. Chapter five interprets presentation as the chief orientation in Lacoue-Labarthe’s approach to philosophy in aesthetic terms. The intelligibility one finds in aesthetic experience is given a foundational status as a resource for the definition of philosophical concepts. In particular, Ross reads Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique of Heidegger’s “inadequate analysis of presen-
...ation” as the consequence of a notion of the political as the founding of an identity able to precede and guide presentation, and which will end up in his notorious engagement with National Socialism. Chapter six argues that Nancy’s philosophy can be considered a radicalisation of Heidegger’s theses on the work of art, which is used as a generic account for his ontology. Here again reflection on aesthetics forges a vocabulary able to capture the genesis of meaning and thus to deal with ontological problems. The crisis of meaning in our era thus is taken up as the breakdown of the metaphysical coordination of ideas and sensible forms.

The book concludes – albeit a bit too briefly – by identifying the limits of this approach to philosophy: outside this aesthetic “path,” the projects of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are difficult to follow. The topic of aesthetic presentation constitutes the privileged direction in which these thinkers orient their ontology, but it also engenders constraints and obscures any other possible path of thinking. Moreover, within this path it seems difficult to reach a point of resolution: “there is no end to the problem of presentation” (167). “Other paths are open to philosophy,” Ross concludes, but this is a topic for other books.

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Allow me to set the scene. An author, famed for his journalism and political engagement (including known communist sympathies), is invited by a group of peace activists to come to Melbourne and speak at a congress they are holding. Upon arrival the author is promptly refused entry to Australia, although he has the appropriate visa. He has not technically committed an offence, but the federal government is concerned by what he might say at the peace congress, and is worried that it could offend the sensibilities of a certain world power as well as give credence to a cause to which the government is antipathetic. The government is determined to deport him at whatever cost, the Attorney-General declaring to the media that the man in question “would not set foot on the soil of the Australian Commonwealth.” Sound like another episode in Howard’s Australia, with the government eager to stamp out the possibility of sedition coming from a foreign intellectual, who might criticise our ally, the USA, like Scott Parkin? It is not, but rather the welcome that greeted the Czech Egon Kisch upon his coming to Australia as the invited guest of the Movement Against War and Fascism. The year was 1934, the Attorney-General was not Phillip Ruddock but Robert Menzies, and the world power whose offence the government wished to prevent was none other than Nazi Germany.

The government was ultimately unsuccessful in its attempts to deport Kisch, and far from denying him public exposure and keeping the profile of his cause to a minimum, the Kisch incident became a major news story both in Australia and abroad. Things escalated early when Kisch, after be-
ing confined to ship and refused permission to land, leapt from the deck railing onto the pier below in front of the gathered media, onlookers and supporters. The drop was some six metres and he broke his leg in the process, but managed to get to his feet and take one agonising step before collapsing in a bundle of pain. Kisch had made a mockery Menzies’ stern prediction that he would never set foot on Commonwealth soil, and endeared himself to the Australian public through his defiance.

More drama lay ahead for Kisch as he was whisked away by police to face a dictation test, in Scottish Gaelic of all things, a cynical employment of the White Australia policy where new arrivals could be tested for proficiency in any European language. Nevertheless Kisch and his supporters eventually prevailed in the courts, and he spent most of the four months he stayed in Australia a free man, hobbling around on crutches with his leg in plaster. He was able to travel the length of the country, speaking to many audiences, despite being prevented from addressing the congress he had come for in the first place. Upon his return to Europe he published a book entitled *Australian Landfall* (*Landung in Australien*), written in the style of literary reportage for which Kisch was famous. This is an excellent book, a minor masterpiece even, and it is to be strongly recommended for its wry humour and penetrating insights into Australian life, circa 1934.

That what befell Kisch could happen in contemporary Australia (in Scott Parkin’s case it did, and he was even refused his day in court), and indeed, that the Howard government’s behaviour would have been worse than their 1930s predecessors, is one conclusion to be drawn from Thorne’s book, *A Letter to Egon Kisch*.

Thorne’s is a volume of rhymed, metered verse, taking Kisch as its silent interlocutor. Ostensibly Thorne seeks to update Kisch on modern Australia, and he does this by providing a brief account of federal politics since Kisch’s time. He introduces certain “mod cons” such as mobile phones, computers, the Internet and Email and describes the commercialisation of sport. He makes the obligatory joke about Shane Warne and infelicitous text messages. Thorne’s real aim, however, is to viciously lampoon Anglo-Australia, its delusions and smugness, while apportioning much of the blame for its excesses at the feet of Howard (who Thorne occasionally refers to as the Lying Little Rat, or LLR for short) and the spin doctors of a conservative media. Thorne’s name proves most fitting and *A Letter to Egon Kisch* is a poetic polemic, make no mistake. Its cover is a striking hot pink, as if Thorne is keen to pre-empt dismissals of his work that reduce it to the hackneyed phrase, “a commie pinko rant.”

Thorne wants to show that the racist impulses that allowed the White Australia policy to survive for such a long time are still with us today, but
that they are submerged under a hypocrisy of political correctness. Despite the establishment of a broad multicultural society Thorne contends that what it means to be truly Australian is a racial question, decided literally by the colour of your skin, although it could never be couched in those terms. Thorne writes:

Ah, there’s the rub: the rub of 15+.
We lie around on beaches to get tanned,
but underneath the skin what makes us us
is our essential whiteness. Dinkum Aussies
get their dark skins from lying on the sand
wearing not much except the briefest cossies.
Bronzed and bonzer! You don’t qualify,
if it comes naturally. You have to try. (33.)

The defeat of the republic in the referendum and the stubborn maintenance of the flag with its Union Jack in the corner are seen by Thorne as further evidence of this latent White Australianism. He gleefully scorns patriotic fervour, observing that every true flag needs a soubriquet (like the Stars and Stripes), so he dubs ours the “Cronulla Cape”, which every “racist rat-bag” can drape across their shoulders (32).

One of the most potent and hilarious passages in A Letter to Egon Kisch occurs when Thorne caricatures Anzac day. He observes that Gallipoli, long thought of as a sacred patch of Australian ground in the Dardanelles, is now attracting its fair share of young back-packer pilgrims. They tend to drink and be merry on the beach during Anzac eve, rather than wait in solemnity for the dawn service.

Footballs and frisbees fly where shells once flew.
The party’s on till dawn while the remains
buried beneath this holy barbecue,
their peace so shattered that they might revive
and in response to the arousing strains
of the Bee Gees’ anthem ‘Stayin’ Alive’,
burst forth, don’t quite. In future years
the Bee Gees will give way to Britney Spears
and then we’ll see the Anzacs resurrected.
They’ll think they’re back in Cairo and on leave.
The Turks might think they’re getting what’s expected
from death in war against the infidel.
Dead friend and dead foe both will then believe
that after what they went through in this hell
on earth the reward has fallen rather short:
to see and hear just one good-looking sort. (15-16.)

Thorne’s most venomous barbs are reserved for Howard and the media. There are Orwellian overtones in his characterisation of the unholy alliance into which both have entered. The Coalition practices a politics of fear, while, under the cover of the “War on Terror”, it steadily erodes democracy and the potential for criticism through anti-sedition laws (55-56). Media spin is the equivalent of double-speak, leading to the demolition of language while acting as the government’s mouthpiece, selling its policies through lies and disinformation (56). Thorne rages against what he sees as the terrible abuses of power that are happening right in front of us, and he is inconsolable in his fury.

Given that Thorne is addressing Kisch, a comparison between their two works on Australia is tempting. Kisch was an outsider who knew very little about Australia before his arrival, but quickly absorbed much during his short stay, making observations that have lost none of their insight or amusement today. He was a sympathetic and adroit observer, often letting his subjects do the talking, allowing the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of Australian life to come to the surface of their own accord. This makes his account of the government’s case against him even more damning in its farcical unfolding. There is, on the other hand, nothing sympathetic about Thorne’s tone. It is as one-sided as that of the conservative media columnists he has in his sights, mentioning both Albrechtsen and Bolt by name (47). Is he preaching to the converted? Certainly he seems less concerned about persuading those who may not share his views, which would include the mainstream of Australia, as masterfully ridiculing them. But there is no denying the skill and inventiveness by which Thorne crafts his poetry, sticking to metered rhyme throughout while achieving some splendid, memorable images and witty slurs. A Letter to Egon Kisch serves, ultimately, as a forceful and disgusted voice of dissent. Its outrage is perhaps fuelled more by a sense of the futility of calling for change in the culture of modern Australia than with any prospect of its attainability.
Thorne’s book is to be recommended as a wilfully skewed but legitimate portrait of Australia in 2007. Hopefully, alongside provoking debate about Australian values in general, it will also renew interest in the work of Egon Kisch and the peculiar events surrounding his arrival here. They could just as easily occur again today.

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CREATIVE WRITING
Desire

The slippery sand
oozes out the blue glass
smooth and opaque
the shape of an arrowhead.

Desire excavates the glass
at the ocean’s edge
she wipes it
(like a mother wipes dirt
off the sticky sweet
dropped by her infant)
and peers through.

Her world is
scratched
hatched from this
perspective.
A golden fish
brushes her leg
slips into the folds
of her floating dress.

He whispers warnings
of the ocean’s deception
she only hears
the impossibility
of blue.
nightwatchwoman

i can knit delicate yarns
yielding the finest lace
i am found within a circle
in a cycle within a sphere

wind-rattled windows
behind dead blinds
shut out night visions
around the empty house

i can drink like a hero
when cold sheets un-invite
in the dark beyond
the stark electric lights

blanket-wrapped curled-up toes
on the sofa alone, beneath
timeless ticking clock
pour the next one

i can caress the new born
steal the treasure of centuries
in the night long fight
i slash open my future chest

key strokes: screams
clicks: blood, thuds
race to level three
don’t let the dragons get me

i can stay awake all night
when dragons call
fight with shield and sword
along castle walls
inspiration

ammo ablaze
it bursts like Alleluia!
flames abound
at the absolute moment of
inspiration
like the stars and stripes
forever at the american legion

cloud chamber accommodating cosmic
rays like dandruff
reveals to Anderson the positron
of a Nobel prize future –
accretion of knowledge to the
mix and repetition
enables an about turn and
sets the world aflame
like the burst of white when
alkali metal skates water –
a muscovy duck taking flight
leaving a faint scent of musk

new ideas cry out to
damned Mut
across black night
seep into the muskeg
of life like antiserum
seeps into blood and
conquers the fool
i believe
i am –

so i continue

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Chinese Poems of Christopher Kelen

in a straw house by a blue stream
after Meng Jiao

justice and righteousness –
their hide-out this valley

like pine and like laurel
everywhere but still reclusive

some folk are solemn –
the farmer wearied by the plough
the woodsman by axe likewise

water winds clear in the streams
wind lingers in bamboo

blue the bank
and blue the mountain

sunset – a cold cricket cries
the thicket fragrant
all this in a single cup
call it the dusk snifter

it’s only through idleness
you’ll come to see
trumpets of war

trumpets of war
attend to this city
soon I will be soil

and reader
it’s true
for you too

so soon
we’re gone
why grieve for kings?

hours mar the mountain heights

the shadows of arrows
fall over the farms
winter river

nowhere on the winter river
lacks the bright moon

monkeys high in the wind
wail for it

drift of leaves
trees crowding cliffs

and down deep
where the river rolls

sorrows sleep with us
midnight sounds

the rapids wreck boats
once this moon sets
since the rebellion

birds in nests keep their heads down
the deers’ ears are all burning

tactics are the talk of the land
but a battle takes up so little room
it’s easy to
walk away from the dust
and the clatter, the rot

take a leisurely bend in the river
footsore you’ll rest where the breeze catches up
look high and join with the mountain in laughter

here comes an old poet alone
the empty town in open arms
hardly a pot to cover the fire

only children to meet him
each on a hobby horse
mounted well
and greedy for the wars to come

they hunger for their time

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I'm up first, before voices, it's cool and my line trickles in the water. I'm reading *The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk* – it's the loveliest book I've seen in ages, with a lilac spine and a picture of Nancy Drew on the front. This time Nancy meets Mrs Purdy, Nestrela, Miss Brownley and Doris who all become her friends. She looks for the red-headed man, wandering down unknown corridors, stopped only by a strangely cold hand.

I wish I was brave enough to find where the waves in my stomach which waltz into my room, into my stomach, come from. They are intruders; come some nights, don't turn up for months. Then they turn up four times in a week only to vanish like Nancy's red-headed man in the ship.

When the waves come, I'm paralysed – stopping cleaning my teeth, feeling the waves climb into my stomach, rock, just one, then another. They're quiet, white waves, little ones, not rolling waves that make a boat rock when we go to Pittwater – they're the kind that lap on the beach with froth tops. I watch them fall in my stomach. One, it crosses my stomach and falls sideways and down. Another one comes, is quicker and another – this one is slower and larger, takes up all my stomach, and I'm floating.

Then they're all gone.

"What is it darling?" Mummy asks, eyebrows creased.

"Waves– in my tummy..."

My words are spiked like the rose thorns, there, and there, and there, – part of me is watching mummy and part of me is standing in the bedroom.
I can see the top of my head.

I sigh.

“They’re gone.”

“I’ll make you some milk. Go back to bed.”

I lie in bed waiting for mummy and the milk, sleepy – waves, words, and the floating, a bad dream. One day later, it might come back, but now I had to think about what to do about Tabitha.

I bought *The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk* with my Christmas money from Granny – the ten-dollar note was flat green, neatly sitting inside my Christmas card that wished me a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year. She does it every year and smiles, when I smile in astonishment at so much money, think what I can do with it. Each year, I buy a new Nancy Drew book and a bottle of Molly Bushell red and white humbugs for the boat.

In the peacefulness of Coal and Candle creek this morning, there are seven quiet boats, a rocky cliff and my line, which trickles across the wood of the boat, down into the bluey-grey water. Occasionally, I lift the line, lift my eyes, look at the hills, and then test that the bait is still floating. I like hand-line fishing best because I can read, fish and eat humbugs all at the same time. There is no whirr of a rod, no splash, only a plop, only the waiting.

Later, Dad and Vivien row us to the beach before lunch – We search for shells and I learn the names, hard and funny on my teeth – pippis, whelks, snail, and jingle shells. I can’t decide which is my favourite – Some days I choose the orange pippis, other days I pick the clear bracelet jingle shells.

With my jingle shell, I make a monocle, like Mlle’s, in *Claudine at St Claire’s*. I peer at my family, light pink and sandy. My mother waves to me. She’s caught up her hair with an olive-green and black scarf so her short-waved hair won’t curl, won’t twist with the damp. She’s reading and pushes her sunglasses away, as they slip down her nose.

Dancing across the shadowy rocks, my sister Vivien races the tide, throws sand at the seagulls and twirls. She is light and free and I feel the breath of the girls, as they watch her jealously, flying fast along the beach, beating the seagull, my father, my mother to the picnic rug that mum has spread out.

My father asks,

“Can you see New Zealand?”

His words float clearly through the light-pink, summer air. I want to keep his question, but my favourite shell is flat, thin as a birthday crepe, is no container, and holds nothing. Soon the holiday will be over and school
will begin, the shells dry and sandy.

Today, through the shell, his voice is distinct. Today, I see only his smile and the movement of his eyebrows. I can't see the girls' smiles, can't see their faces. Through my shell their voices are thin, don't echo, today.

The day is soft blue and you can't tell that that afternoon we all got sunburnt, and that night, tossed, unable to sleep, with the waves.

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A Brew that is True

Nicola Scholes

I was the mug
you poured your decaf
into while you had a girlfriend
I dissolved tiny cubes of hope
to make palatable the lemon.
    When she left you
    a good year later
I could barely contain myself
    with fresh cream
I laughed like Buddha knew
I would sink my fine bones
    in hot soapy baths
    my belly massaged!
but you were still boiling
    letting off steam
scalding from the instant
karma she flung at you.
Being a mug I gave tea
    and sympathy entertained
patiently your condition.
    Six months later
you whistled you were ready
but for someone else, a new ccino.
You hope…
we can still share a friendly cuppa…
I can’t feel your marshmallow
apologies they orbit
my saucer but don’t touch
my rim
I could smash this pot that
I’ve kept waiting
but what’s the use of howling
to a flat white
moon

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