



*Sighs*  
*too deep for tears*

**SOCIETY FOR  
RELIGION  
LITERATURE  
AND THE ARTS**

**LECTURES 2001**

*Sighs  
too deep for tears*

RLA LECTURES 2001

Edited by Colette Rayment



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## *Acknowledgements*

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## *Preface*

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During the year in which RLA was mounting the conference, *Seeking the Centre*, it seemed only natural to cast an eye to matters and events somewhat removed from the geographical, philosophical and mystical foci of those considering the interface between religion, literature and the arts. We decided therefore to reflect upon human suffering in the face of severe political and personal (including psychic) duress. Hence we invited addresses on the themes of racism, political oppression, mental illness and personal grief. Speakers chose varied subjects: Donna Leslie spoke on Aboriginal art as reflecting the journey to Reconciliation, Barbara Hayes on her belief in the role of poetry in the quest for mental health, Peter Steele on poetry's capacity to enter 'chasms' of human experience such as the Shoah and, in Mabel Lee's case, Gao Xingjian's personal pilgrimage from oppression into the sanctuary of the self. Peter Pierce revisited the subject of his book, *The Lost Child*.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that since its inception RLA has slowly been in the process of moving such matters into the centre of its reflections. After all previous seminars and conferences have featured the sacrality of the land, Jewish spirituality, the quest for Asian influences on western religion, and as is well known, James Tulip and Michael Griffith launched RLA with at least one symposium on the poetry of Francis Webb.

Coming together as a series these lectures stand not only to assert literature's and art's unique ability to confront human suffering but something of their capacity to transcend it. When one looks into the face of suffering as these lectures do, there is some comfort in Peter Steele's speaking of poetry's 'intimate understanding and response', Donna Leslie's concept of art as a 'creative journeying towards wholeness' and Mabel Lee's reminder of Gao Xingjian's statement that in the face of oppression, 'literature allows a person to preserve a human consciousness'.

Victor Frankl hailed the endurance of suffering as a genuine inner experience indicative of spiritual freedom and ultimately of a meaningful and purposeful life<sup>1</sup>. These lectures bear testimony to Frankl's conviction.

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<sup>1</sup> *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1984, p. 87.