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Corpus Christi Plays and the Stations of the Cross: Medieval York and Modern Sydney

MARGARET ROGERSON

The metropolis of Sydney in 2008 may seem worlds away from the closely packed community of around 8,000 souls nestled within the walls of pre-Reformation York. This was a thriving medieval city, a town full of towers; after a building program that had extended over two hundred and fifty years, the Minster was completed in 1472 and its impressive gothic tower stood out against the skyline, proclaiming, along with the spires of the various religious houses and the numerous parish churches where the ordinary citizens worshipped, a society whose life was imbued with Christian spirituality.[1] Sydney's central business district in the 'noughties' has around 22,000 residents, a tally that increases to 4.4 million when you include the sprawling suburbs that surround it. And if you take a snapshot of the CBD using Google Earth's twenty-first-century satellite technology, you will find another, but rather different, set of towers: the iconic sails of the Opera House and the towers of commerce that cluster down to the shoreline of our famous harbour. This is not a city that speaks openly of religious affiliations, yet in 2008 it provided material for research into the devotional plays of medieval York—and indeed the religious drama of other cities in pre-Reformation England—when it hosted the Catholic World Youth Day Stations of the Cross on Friday 18 July.

Historian David Palliser has argued that 'it is almost impossible to measure spirituality from the records' of medieval York, a notable exception being the case of the 'text of the Corpus Christi cycle' of plays, whose 'undimmed popularity until the 1570s' implies that it 'struck a

[1] For an overview of York's religious culture in the late Middle Ages, see David Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 226-59.

responsive chord in many citizens'.[2] The people of York were religiously conservative and resisted Protestantism and the drive to suppress their traditional drama;[3] the Corpus Christi Plays were performed in 1569, the year of the Northern Rebellion, although York was politically cautious as well as religiously conservative and hence resisted the Catholic rebels, who aspired at that time to capture the city.[4] Still, the citizens clung tenaciously to their spiritual and cultural heritage and petitioned the council for clearance to revive the plays in 1580.[5] As it happens this was to no avail; but it was certainly not for want of an audience or for want of a community of willing participants that the York Corpus Christi Plays ceased to be.

The dramatic events both in Sydney in 2008 and York in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggest a 'measure' of the spirituality in the very different contexts in which they were created. The York Corpus Christi Plays and the World Youth Day Stations of the Cross do, in fact, share a number of other features in common: both were devotional events involving 'theatre', both focused on the narrative of Christ's Passion, the central icon of the Catholic faith, and both operated in procession on the streets for an audience of local people and visitors gathered for the festival occasion. Furthermore, these two dramatic undertakings involved clerical input and were performed by amateur players. In York the authors of the plays, although anonymous, are widely assumed to have been clerical men;[6] and again, although there is no concrete evidence as to who directed these plays, it is highly likely that this task fell to parish priests or to chaplains attached to the guilds that were responsible for the financing and administration of

[2] Palliser, *Tudor York*, p. 232. For an overview of the play cycle, see Richard Beadle, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', in Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 99-124.

[3] For discussion of York's late medieval Catholicism in relation to the Corpus Christi Plays, see Claire Cross, 'Excising the Virgin Mary from the Civic Life of Tudor York', *Northern History* 39 (2002), 279-84.

[4] Palliser, *Tudor York*, p. 55.

[5] Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds, *Records of Early English Drama: York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 390, 392-3.

[6] See Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, eds, *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. xii. Some scholars have suggested the possibility of lay authorship, see, for example, Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 207-14.

the York Plays and were obliged to present them whenever they were so instructed by the city council.[7] The texts of the prayers and reflections for the Sydney Stations of the Cross were written by Rev Prof Peter Steele SJ, Professor Emeritus in English at the University of Melbourne and an esteemed Australian poet, while the direction fell to the capable hands of Father Franco Cavarra, who trained as a TV and stage director and worked for many years for Opera Australia before entering the priesthood. The actors in medieval York were at least partly drawn from the membership of the guilds that sponsored the plays, and in the case of Sydney, the actors were young people from the local parishes, eager to serve God through their performance of the Stations. One major difference between the two productions is that the York Plays were spoken drama, whereas the Sydney Stations were presented as tableaux, a distinction that both Gail McMurray Gibson and Theodore Lerud have commented on. Gibson claims that medieval audiences would not have drawn this distinction between spoken play and 'visual spectacles' at all,[8] while Lerud uses the blurring of the two categories to argue his thesis that medieval plays were moving images that were viewed, like static images, as 'devotional aids' that were 'uniquely able to jog the mind toward spiritual understanding'. [9] That plays of this kind did remain indeed in the memory of late medieval beholders is supported by the testimony of a man of around sixty years old, who in 1644 was able to recall a play that he had seen some forty years previously in

[7] In the case of the royal entries of 1483 and 1486, Henry Hudson, parish priest of All Saints', North Street (and in 1486, parish priest at the church in Spofforth), was retained by the council to arrange for the plays/shows that entertained Henry VII; he was assisted by a team of parish clerks, see Lorraine C. Attreed, ed., *The York House Books 1461-1490* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1991), pp. 288, 298, 304, 479, and *REED: York*, pp. 130, 138, 145. It is clear that clerical men were regarded as experts in matters that we would now see as the work of directors and producers.

[8] Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 114. Meg Twycross suggests that in the early fifteenth century the York Plays may have been tableaux rather than spoken drama, 'The *Ordo paginarum* Revisited, with a Digital Camera', in David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek, eds, *'Bring furth the pagants': Studies in Early English Drama presented to Alexandra F. Johnston* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 105-31 (p. 111).

[9] Theodore Lerud, *Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 57, 62.

Kendal, where there was 'a man on a tree, & blood ran downe', a memory of the 'Iesus Christ God-man', who was the 'way to Salvation'.[10]

Following Lerud, this essay stresses the parallels between the tableaux of the Sydney Stations of 2008 and the scripted drama of the York Plays as 'devotional aids' in its examination of questions associated with the original participants in the York Plays, the medieval actors and their audiences. Part 1, below, explains the nature of the Corpus Christi festival and World Youth Day celebrations; Part 2 extends these findings to define medieval performers and 'theatre-goers' in relation to a form of lay piety known in the Middle Ages 'affective piety', which concentrated the thoughts of its practitioners on the humanity of Christ and the details of his earthly life.[11]

1

A Tale of Two Festivals

Corpus Christi Day and the *York Corpus Christi Plays*

Pope Clement V formally established the Corpus Christi festival in 1311 to celebrate the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, which had been validated by Christ himself at the Last Supper when he presented the bread and wine to the disciples as his body and blood (Mathew 26: 26-27). The date chosen for the feast was the Thursday after Trinity Sunday; it varied from 21 May to 24 June in accordance with the date of Easter, and thus it fell during the European late spring or early summer, making it ideal for outdoor activities. At the original foundation, the papal bull 'provided only for a mass and an office', but, as Miri Rubin states in her magisterial book on the topic, 'by the early fourteenth century' an outdoor procession 'was deemed the most appropriate mode' of celebration and 'in most towns and parishes a

[10] Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield, eds, *Records of Early English Drama: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 219.

[11] For an account of 'affective piety', beginning with St Anselm of Canterbury in the late eleventh century to its great flowering in the fifteenth century, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The* Book *and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 129-56.

processional enterprise dominated the day',[12] while other 'creative activities' were also associated with it:

> the writing of sermons, … formation of fraternities, interpretation of eucharistic themes in the silver and gold monstrances and in the fine cloth of canopies, in the composition of hymns, and in the orchestration of town-wide ventures.[13]

The initial foundation also provided for rewards in the form of indulgences of forty days for attendance at the office, while later grants were offered for participation in the Corpus Christi procession.[14] The cult of Corpus Christi was, as David Crouch puts it, 'the apex of the worship of Christ as God in man, and of the late medieval obsession with the physical nature of Christ's redemptive sacrifice';[15] in other words it was closely connected with the phenomenon of affective piety.

The earliest surviving reference to the Corpus Christi festival in York is dated 1322, when Archbishop William Melton commended it as 'the glorious feast of the most precious sacrament of the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ'.[16] In 1408 the York Guild of Corpus Christi was established 'as a confraternity of chaplains and lay persons, with the encouragement of the city government, probably to form the focus of the civic Corpus Christi Day procession'.[17] York in fact had three separate liturgical processions on the festival day, each presented within the jurisdiction of the groups responsible for them: one in the jurisdiction of St Mary's Abbey, one in the jurisdiction of the Minster, and the third, the one with which the Corpus Christi guild was associated, within the civic

[12] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 243.
[13] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 271.
[14] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 211.
[15] David J. F. Crouch, *Piety Fraternity and Power: Religious Gilds in Late Medieval Yorkshire 1389-1547* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000), p. 99.
[16] Quoted in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 200.
[17] Crouch, *Piety Fraternity and Power*, p. 161. Another function of the guild was the performance of the now lost Creed Play, which was presented once every ten years in place of the Corpus Christi Plays, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play', *Speculum* 50 (1975), 55-90 (pp. 57-70).

franchise under the general regulation of the council.[18] The festival and the way in which the city of York chose to celebrate it was also the subject of an impassioned Corpus Christi sermon delivered in 1426 by another William Melton, a Franciscan friar, who spoke of the relative value to the citizens and their visitors of the mass and office on the one hand and, on the other, the York Plays.[19] These plays, a connected series of short episodes, or 'pageants' as they were often called, were a creative civic-orchestrated 'town-wide venture'. They were presented on waggon stages that were drawn through the streets by their guild sponsors, and by the time of Melton's visit, had achieved status as the major attraction of the local Corpus Christi celebrations. Melton reminded his listeners that the indulgences now associated with church attendance had in some cases risen to one hundred days, but even this seems to have offered no real competition to the allurements of the plays, which while essentially good, he said, encouraged people to indulge themselves in less laudable social activities: 'feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness'.[20]

Northrop Frye provides a much more positive statement on the essential nature of the Corpus Christi drama that was presented in medieval York than Friar Melton; he describes it as a 'myth-play' that offered 'to the audience a myth already familiar to and significant for that audience … designed to remind the audience of their communal possession of this myth'.[21] As Frye goes on to point out, the 'characteristic mood and resolution of the myth-play are pensive, and pensiveness, in this context, implies a continuing imaginative subjection to the story'. Residents of medieval York and their visitors could witness representations of biblical narrative paraded through the city streets on the festival day: a moving panorama of the history of God's relationship with humanity from the early days of Creation to the Last Judgment at the end of time. There was a

[18] For discussion of these processions see Douglas Cowling, 'The Liturgical Celebration of Corpus Christi in Medieval York', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* 1.2 (1976), 5-9; Crouch, Piety, *Fraternity and Power*, pp. 160-95; and Erik Paul Weissengruber, 'The Corpus Christi Procession in Medieval York: A Symbolic Struggle in Public Space', *Theatre Survey* 38.1 (1997), 117-38.
[19] The text of this sermon is lost, but for a contemporary report on its contents see *REED: York*, pp. 42-4, 728-30.
[20] *REED York*, p. 728.
[21] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 282.

particular concentration on the Passion sequence, with sixteen of the forty-seven plays in the surviving manuscript of the York plays devoted to events between 'The Entry into Jerusalem' and 'The Ascension'.[22] Christ came as a visitor to the city, entering York as he entered Jerusalem;[23] and when Pilate speaks of his domain at the beginning of the Cutlers' play of the 'Conspiracy to capture Christ', he gestures towards the towers of the surrounding cityscape: 'To me betaught is þe tent þis towre-begon towne' (the care of this turreted town is entrusted to me).[24]

This was a 'myth' that the medieval audience understood as informing the context in which they lived, and in the process of playing, the landscape of medieval York was superimposed onto the landscape of the Holy Land. For the medieval audience Christ's sacrifice was their spiritual centre, and the play was another means through which they could contemplate and dwell on the human aspect of the agony he suffered. This was a public expression of affective piety in the very public domain of the city streets, where people, at other times, lived out their ordinary secular lives. When the play was done and the waggons safely stored in the city's 'pageant houses' to await their next outing, the medieval audience, walking through those same streets or in moments of quiet, in their workplace, homes, or parish church, could experience the 'continuing imaginative subjection to the story' of which Frye speaks.

World Youth Day and the Sydney *Stations of the Cross*

World Youth Day was established as an international pilgrimage by Pope John Paul II and was first celebrated in Rome on Palm Sunday 1986. It targets Catholic youth 'aged between 16 and 30, the generation … most disaffiliated from the church', its 'purpose … is to educate and energise

[22] For the most recent edition of the manuscript see Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290*, Vol. I, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Beadle divides the text into forty-seven plays, whereas the first scholarly edition by Lucy Toulmin Smith presents forty-eight, *York Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1885).

[23] Martin Stevens advocates the notion of 'city as stage' and York as Jerusalem in *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), especially pp. 52-62.

[24] Beadle, *The York Plays*, p. 213, l. 5.

young people to go out into the world to witness the Christian gospel'.[25] This purpose could be described using the terminology that Frye applies to the medieval Corpus Christi plays—a reminder of the 'communal possession' of the Christian 'myth' that will result, hopefully, in 'a continuing imaginative subjection to the story'.

The World Youth Day pilgrimage comes around every two or three years and brings people not to the shrine of a saint, the objective we would usually associate with pilgrimage, but to a host city charged in that year with the responsibility of putting together a program of devotional activities designed to reinforce and celebrate a shared faith. It resembles the Corpus Christi festival of the Middle Ages in the way that it generates a number of 'creative activities'—including the regular feature of a dramatised Stations of the Cross—alongside the masses that are, in this case, presided over by the Pope. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the globe attend, and despite the name 'World Youth Day', the event lasts not just for a day but a whole week; moreover, not all the pilgrims in Sydney for the 23rd World Youth Day in 2008 (14-20 July) were young, there were young and old from far and wide, some older Australians attending the historic occasion with their children and grandchildren.

This event is Olympian in its proportions. Indeed, the number of registered pilgrims in the year 2008—223,000, with 110,000 coming from 170 nations overseas—outstripped the Sydney Olympics of 2000 to make it the 'largest event ever hosted in Australia'.[26] It was also an expensive enterprise; the Federal Government contributed $35m as well as the cost of security, with the anticipated payback being that it would 'generate between $100 and $125 million for the state of New South Wales'.[27] The Olympic Games has its eternal flame and Catholic World Youth Day has its cross. The 3.8 metre high wooden cross goes back to the Holy Year of 1983, when Pope John Paul presented it to Catholic youth with the intention that it be

[25] Paul Collins, *Believers: Does Australian Catholicism Have a Future?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), p. 1. The same sentiments were expressed by Pope Benedict XVI at the welcoming ceremony, 17 July, 2008, *Dear Young People: Homilies and Addresses of Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey to Sydney, Australia on the occasion of the 23rd World Youth Day, 12-21 July 2008* (Strathfield, N.S.W: St Paul's, 2008), pp. 9-10.
[26] World Youth Day, Sydney 2008 website, http://www.wyd2008.org, accessed 30/5/09.
[27] Collins, *Believers*, p. 2.

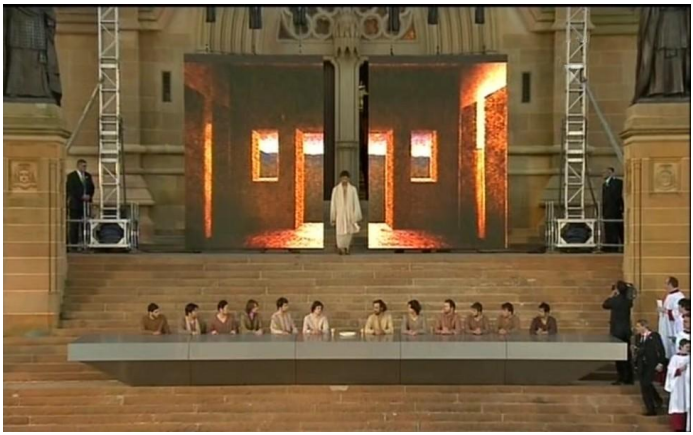
taken around the world as a symbol of Christ's continuously present sacrifice and love for humankind. The World Youth Day cross, like the Olympic flame, travelled through many countries and then around Australia to Sydney, where it featured in the Stations of the Cross, which came to life as a series of moving tableaux combined with Gospel readings, prayers, and reflections.[28] As the actors progressed from place to place, the cross directed them along the path that they were to follow.

The Stations of the Cross is a devotional practice that can be celebrated in various forms. Individuals can practice the Stations as a private meditation focused on pictorial imagery, or they can share such meditations with their priest and fellow parishioners. In another variation, many parishes celebrate a Stations of the Cross procession on Good Friday, which, like the World Youth Day Stations, presents costumed actors in tableaux, accompanied by traditional prayers and a text that narrates and explicates the events being depicted.[29] Sometimes the Stations become a scripted passion play as was represented in the acclaimed French-Canadian film, *Jesus of Montreal* (dir. Arcand, 1989).[30] The World Youth Day Stations, using the same technique as this film and the York Corpus Christi Plays, showed Jesus in Sydney-as-Jerusalem. His journey to the cross began with the Last Supper, appropriately presented on the steps of St Mary's Cathedral.

[28] See Appendix for a list of the titles and performance sites of the Sydney Stations and a brief description of the prayers and reflections that accompanied them. The Gospel texts were from the Jerusalem Bible authorised for use in the Australian Catholic Lectionary.

[29] For an account of one such dramatization, see Wayne Ashley, 'The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics, and Processions on New York City's Lower East Side', in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 541-66.

[30] For discussion of *Jesus of Montreal* see Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 174-80. Numerous other biblical films could be classed as versions of the 'Stations', such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 *The Gospel According to St Matthew* and Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).



Jesus enters from St Mary's Cathedral for the Last Supper

Jesus of Sydney establishes the sacrament of the Eucharist at a site that has spiritual significance for Australian Catholics, and as he progresses, the scriptural narrative is not simply an historical re-enactment displaced to a pretend-Holy-Land location, it is also placed within local, national and global concerns of our present time. At the Opera House, for example, after the Trial before Pilate, Jesus is tortured and scourged off-stage in a scene that recalls images of the notorious Abu Ghrahib prison in Iraq.

Jesus is raised aloft and lowered via a trapdoor for the Scourging that occurs offstage

The reflection on the scourging and crowning with thorns, although it does not mention the particular horror of Abu Ghrahib, certainly has the power to remind us of it:

> A cohort of soldiers—hundreds of them—mobbed and mocked Jesus in the same way that so many Jews and other ethnic minorities have been before and since his death. Scourging and crowning with thorns were forms of torture. To torture someone is to treat them as less than human, less even than an animal. This still happens in many places today. The tortured Jesus stands with and for anyone, without exception, guilty or innocent, to whom this is done. And he offers them life beyond their present suffering.[31]

At Cockle Bay, Station 7, Simon of Cyrene is an aboriginal man who is released from chains to help Jesus by carrying the cross; aboriginal women perform a traditional ceremony of mourning that prefigures the distress of Mary and the women of Jerusalem; and an aboriginal woman presents the reflection and finally the prayer:

> Lord, you tell us that whenever we help those in need, we help you … you will not always be obvious in those in need; the sick, the starving, the gaoled, the depressed, the refugee and stranger, may not fit our image of you and this too, is so true of many first nation peoples of the world, and indeed the aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples of this country. Help us to walk together as your sisters and brothers and to lighten each other's burdens.[32]

[31] Rev Peter Steele, *Stations of the Cross: Supporting Text and Prayers*, booklet accompanying the official DVD of the event (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2008), n.p.

[32] Steele, *Stations of the Cross*. This reflection refers to the Acts of Corporal Mercy that will be used to measure human contact at the Last Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46). These Acts form the basis of the York 'Last Judgment' in the Corpus Christi Plays.

The announcer at Station 7

These politicised comments, combined seamlessly with the spiritual message of the Stations, were presented to those assembled for the event in 2008 and broadcast live on SBS and Sky television for audiences around the country and to an estimated half a million viewers internationally. Those watching from distant locations saw the well-known tourist attractions of Australia's premier city: the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, and the magnificent harbour itself, which featured as Jesus travelled by barge towards Calvary and later formed the backdrop to the Crucifixion. Jesus had truly arrived in Sydney, just as he arrived in York in the fifteenth century. His presence in the city had a similar additional significance for local people as the events being portrayed occurred in the real-time experience of those who were there to watch and the words were spoken by Australian voices.[33]

The Sydney audience was not permitted to walk along the processional route with Jesus as the audience had done in Toronto in 2002, partly because of the long distances between the performance sites, and partly to allow for larger audiences to assemble at the various vantage points. This possible disadvantage was overcome by placing enormous football-stadium style screens at key sites to keep the audiences assembled there up to date

[33] The only voice that was not Australian was that of Pope Benedict, who received a pop-star-style welcome when he emerged from St Mary's Cathedral to read the prayer at the conclusion of the first station.

with the narrative before, and in some cases after, Jesus arrived at their particular location. Popular television presenter, Ray Martin, hosted the broadcast and orchestrated a royal-visit style commentary to cover the periods when the cast was moving between venues. Far from deadening the experience for those who were actually present at the event, the television coverage allowed them to experience all the Stations from their own fixed location. For me, waiting at the final site at Barangaroo for the Crucifixion, the television coverage was an important and integral part of the event. When the broadcast began at 3pm, people around me, many of whom had arrived at noon to secure a good position, sat down on the ground and watched the screen, then, when the cast was between Stations, those of us with maps were in demand to help other audience members work out where 'he' was now and how long it would be before he arrived. At the final site, we also had the added advantage of viewing the unfolding story in the context of the Calvary image, with the three crosses standing there throughout the afternoon to remind us of the spiritual significance of what we were experiencing.

Jesus on the way to Calvary

Television also allowed us to see the procession between the performance sites, something that was only fully visible via the camera; and larger than life close-ups at all the Stations added another means of engaging with the outdoor theatre event in a way that is culturally familiar and expected and also extremely moving.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus and Veronica follow Jesus

The Crucifixion

When the procession reached the final site at Barangaroo, the entire audience stood up for the presentation of the last Stations, a reaction that the arrival of Jesus and the rest of the cast seems to have had at other performance sites as well. The big screen gave the audience the chance of concentrating fully on the human agony of Jesus and the anguish of his followers as they stood at the foot of the cross, something that otherwise would only have been possible to the relative few who were placed close to the stage.

The raising of the cross

The simultaneous long view of the Crucifixion with the close-ups on the human suffering of Christ and the grief of the Virgin Mary and the disciples made available via the television coverage, promoted a context conducive to affective piety for the modern world. Around me people of all ages and walks of life joined in the responses and the traditional prayers, the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, as they grasped their rosaries and took in the images before them in the darkening night.

The invention of the Stations of the Cross is sometimes attributed to the Virgin Mary based on her experiences in Jerusalem after her son's death. Apocryphal writings record that she was a devoted visitor to the various places where her son had suffered in his final days on earth. In a late-fifteenth century text written for the nuns of Syon monastery we learn that after Christ's Ascension, Mary lived for just over fifteen years and that every day during that period of time she visited the fifteen places in and around Jerusalem where he had suffered, and at each place she remembered 'in her heart full inwardly what her dear son had endured and suffered … and then she kissed every place with the greatest meekness and reverence'.[34]

The Stations were initially associated with medieval pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where people could follow the Virgin's example, treading in her footsteps as well as those of Jesus himself. According to Jonathan Sumption's definitive work on medieval pilgrimage, the visitor to the Holy City could experience what amounted to 'a continuously repeated drama of the life of Christ', but this 'drama', Sumption tells us, was 'more than a mere passion play', rather it was an experience with 'something of the regenerative qualities of the celebration of the Eucharist'; an experience in which we find the 'origin of the modern liturgical practice' of the Stations of the Cross.[35] Medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem visited the sites associated with Christ's agonising journey to Calvary and offered prayers and meditations in which they recognised the enormity of his human suffering. They placed themselves imaginatively in the roles of people who were

[34] Sara Schwamb, 'Introduction to Lambeth MS 546, Fols. 1r-7r: The Fifteen Places Mary Visited after Christ's Ascension', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 18.4 (2005), 20-30 (p. 27).
[35] Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 93.

actually there at the Crucifixion, often identifying with the Virgin Mary and her maternal sorrow.

The medieval Stations involved a re-Crucifixion of Christ in the minds of those who practised them, and they became so much ingrained in the culture of the English Middle Ages that they appeared in various forms in the drama of the period. In the York Corpus Christi Plays, for example, they can be traced through the Passion sequence; in the eucharistic miracle play, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, they are presented in hideous detail as the Jewish merchants test the consecrated host to see if Christ is really present there; and in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play, the three Maries, as Scott Boehnen has argued, function as both historical witnesses to the Crucifixion events and 'pilgrims who have performed the stations of the cross':[36]

> MARY [MAGDALENE]. Alas, alas, for that ryall bem!
> A, this percytt my hartt worst of all!
> For *here* he turnyd ayen to the woman of Jerusalem,
> And for wherynesse lett the crosse falle!
> MARIA JACOBI. Thys sorow is beytterare than ony galle,
> For *here* the Jevys spornyd hym to make hym goo,
> And they dysspytttyd ther Kyng ryall.
> That clyvytt[h] myn hart, and makett me woo.
> (ll. 993-1000, my italics)[37]

The Maries enter 'wyth the sygnis of the passyon pryntyd ypon ther brest' (*s.d.* at l. 993) and, like medieval pilgrims, focus their recollections of the Crucifixion on the places in Jerusalem (*here*) where Christ suffered. They praise the cross as the means and symbol of redemption:

> THREE MARIES. Heylle, gloryows crosse! Thou baryst that Lord on hye.
> Whych be thi myght deddyst lowly bowe doun,
> Mannys sowle from all thraldam to bye. (ll. 1005-7)

[36] Scott Boehnen, 'The Aesthetics of "Sprawling" Drama: The Digby *Mary Magdalen* as Pilgrim's Play', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 98.3 (1999), 325-52 (p. 341).
[37] The Digby *Mary Magdalen*, in John C. Coldewey, ed., *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 219. All quotations are from this edition.

Finally they move on, now in real time as biblical characters rather than medieval pilgrims, to the tomb where the body of Christ has been laid 'To anoynt hym, body and bone' (l. 1013), and here they are met by the angel who announces that 'Jhesus is resun' (l. 1024).

In the same play the Queen of Marseilles, who has been converted by Mary Magdalene and then dies in childbirth (later to be miraculously revived), performs her own version of the Stations of the Cross, even though her body does not stir from the island where it has been left while the King continues his journey to the Holy Land. As D.K. Smith observes, while the King of Marseilles travels physically to Jerusalem, the dead Queen 'is allowed to experience her husband's travels as if she had gone along' and has 'envisioned al the holy sights without moving from her isolation':[38]

> QUEEN. O demvr Mavdlyn, my bodyys sustynavns!
> Thou hast wr[a]ppyd us in wele from all varyawns,
> And *led me wyth my lord i[n]to the Holy Lond*!
> …
> *I sye the blyssyd cross* that Cryst shed on hys precyus blod;
> *Hys blyssyd sepulcur also se I*.
> …
> For *I have gon the stacyounys*, by and by! .
> (ll. 1902-1910, my italics)

The Maries authorise the Stations of the Cross, offering through their compassionate visitation of the sites of Christ's suffering a template for an imaginative engagement with the events that those sites represent, for emotional encounters with the human agony of Christ that are at the heart of medieval affective piety. Through their example they invite others to conjure up visual images as they weep for Christ in his torment and rejoice in the triumph of the sacrifice that he makes, reconciling the inherent contradictions of the situation. In the Digby play the Queen of Marseilles follows their example as she performs her own Stations.

[38] D. K. Smith, '"To passe the see in shortt space": Mapping the World in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2006), 193-214 (p. 210).

2

Affective piety and medieval theatre: inspirations from Sydney

Theatre historians are often troubled by the fact that modern audiences for re-enactments of medieval plays in places like York are less uniformly attuned to the 'myth' that such plays present than were their medieval counterparts. They are thus unable to respond to them as reminders of it as a 'communal possession'. As Frye puts it, the 'appeal' of such plays is 'a curious mixture of the popular and the esoteric; it is popular for its immediate audience, but those outside its circle have to make a conscious effort to appreciate it'.[39] Sarah Beckwith takes this concern even further to claim that these plays are 'hard to make present to us and hard for us to acknowledge' even if '*we* … believe in the things that *they* believed in'.[40] In the same vein, Peter Meredith warned in the mid 1990s that no matter how much scholars think they know about medieval theatre 'we can't know how what was being played was perceived by its audience',[41] but in the second edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre* that came out in 2008, John McKinnell, a very experienced director of medieval plays, was much more positive, claiming that although 'we cannot repeat the performances of past ages … it is a mistake to exaggerate the differences between medieval and modern audiences—human nature', he says, 'does not alter all that much'.[42]

McKinnell's view is a heartening one, but it does not do to apply it too literally; the audiences for the modern reconstructions of medieval plays are a mixed lot and Beckwith's caution needs to be observed. If we take the modern waggon plays in York as a case study, we can argue that many attendees are drawn to them as a tourist attraction, others are interested in history, others are motivated by local pride, and even those who are people

[39] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 282.
[40] Beckwith, *Signifying God*, p. 190.
[41] Peter Meredith, 'The Fifteenth-century Audience of the York Corpus Christi Play: Records and Speculation', in Michel Bitot, Roberta Mullini and Peter Happé, eds. *'Divers toyes mengled': Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Culture in Honour of André Lascombes* (Tours: Université François Rebelais, 1996), pp. 101-111 (p. 109).
[42] John McKinnell, ' Modern Productions of Medieval English Drama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, pp. 287-325 (p. 321).

of faith can scarcely avoid attending at least partly in the role of modern 'theatregoers', interested in seeing how plays were performed way back then. Modern audiences cannot experience these deliberately reconstructed plays as a devotional marker of a religious festival observed by an audience with the potential to respond to it as a more or less homogeneous community. This is where productions like the Sydney Stations of the Cross can offer the theatre historian firmer grounds for speculation than any conscious efforts to reinvent original staging conditions. The context for the Sydney Stations was devotional, the live audience was made up of people who had registered as 'pilgrims', people of faith, who came understanding that they were there to take part in a liturgical practice, albeit one that happened on this occasion to be in the form of a spectacular theatrical presentation. The director of the Sydney Stations, Father Franco, summed up the distinction as he explained the nature of the event in the Compass program 'Stations of the Cross … The Making Of' that was broadcast on Good Friday, 10 April, 2009:

> It isn't by and large just a theatrical production. It actually is a prayer. And therefore there is another dimension at work. The disciplines are theatrical, sure. Acting, mime, music, lighting, text, costume, all those sorts of things. But then there is the other dimension which is the spiritual dimension.[43]

On the day of the Sydney Stations, the television cameras sought out the reactions of the audience as they entered this 'spiritual dimension'; and the results are illuminating for anyone with an interest in the devotional theatre of the Middle Ages in that they suggest what it might have been like for an audience of people of faith participating in a communal devotional activity in their city, with their visitors around them, in a context where there were other devotional activities: processions, sermons, masses and the like. Many of those gathered in Sydney to recall (using Frye's terms again) 'their communal possession' of the Christian story, did indeed show through their 'pensiveness' that they were experiencing a 'continuing imaginative subjection to the story'. Some, particularly when they were caught during the processional interludes between the performance of the actual Stations, reacted with delight when they saw themselves on

[43] Father Franco Cavarra, transcript of Compass: 'Stations of the Cross … The Making Of', hosted by Geraldine Doogue, broadcast on ABC1 7.30pm, 10 April, 2009, http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2525844.htm, accessed on 7/10/09.

television, indicating that this was a celebratory occasion as well as a sobering one:

Audience member watches Jesus and Veronica on the big screen—

and sees herself on camera

And one young television commentator, Jovina Graham, only just contained her tears when she spoke of the emotion that flooded over her when Veronica stepped forward to wipe Jesus' face as he made his way to

Calvary. To her it seemed to be 'the heart of everything it is to be Christian'.

Jovina Graham gives a commentary on the meeting of Jesus and the women of Jerusalem

Veronica wipes Jesus' face

More revelations came in the Compass program already mentioned, revelations that were even more exciting to me as a theatre historian in that they gave me insights into what it was like to be an 'actor' in this kind of

'theatre'. Father Franco was caught 'by surprise' in rehearsal by the 'spontaneous outpouring of emotion by the female leads' in his amateur cast. Veronica, in particular, stands out:

Veronica in rehearsal

The disciple John and Mary the Mother of Jesus in rehearsal

The tears that were shed by the actors in rehearsal and in the performance itself are not 'merely' actor's tears, rather they are the tears of the faithful as these young parishioners imagine themselves walking with Jesus on the road to Calvary; they have entered the 'spiritual dimension' and are there with him just as the Queen of Marseilles is with him in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play. They are performing the Stations for others to watch, but they are also concurrently performing the Stations for themselves as a devotional practice, performing, as Father France put it, 'a prayer'.

We can transpose this awareness of a 'spiritual dimension' back to the Middle Ages to argue that in medieval York, when as we are so often reminded, the fourth wall encouraged by the proscenium arch theatre did not exist to divide the stage from the auditorium, the audience and actors were similarly engaged in a collective imaginative exercise of affective piety, placing themselves within the biblical narrative in a way that both lamented the physical sufferings of Christ and praised them.

Nicholas Love, prior of Mount Grace Charterhouse, not far north of York, encouraged affective piety in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, his early fifteenth century translation of a Franciscan work, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.[44] Citing St Bernard, Love pointed out that lay people were 'symple soules', for whom 'contemplacion of þe monhede of cryste is more liking more spedefull & more sykere þan is hyȝe contemplacion of þe godhed'; he encouraged his readers to envisage 'devoute ymaginacions & likenessis' of the Incarnation, Life and Passion of Christ to reignite and cement their faith as something that was very real to them.[45] When it came to the Passion, they were instructed to separate in their own minds the power of the godhead from the 'kyndely(i.e. natural) infirmite' of Christ's 'manhede' (p. 161). Even though such separation was entirely fictional, it was an essential step in the true understanding of the magnitude of his sacrifice for humankind; as Love's story continued, the readers were exhorted to 'beholde how paciently he suffreþ him self to be takene, bonden, smyten & wodely (i.e. madly) ladde forþ' (p. 167), and so it goes on in indignation and horror, tearing the heart-strings, urging the

[44] See also Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Cycle and the Libraries of York', in Caroline M. Barron, ed., *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 355-70 (pp. 360-1).
[45] Michael G. Sargent, ed., *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 10. All quotations are from this edition.

reader to imagine themselves as contemporary witnesses on the road to Calvary.

Fifteenth-century English mystic, Margery Kempe, described by a recent editor and translator of her autobiographical writings as 'noisy, uncomfortable, and demonstrably pious',[46] was an enthusiastic practitioner of affective piety. When she first went as a pilgrim to Jerusalem in the early fifteenth century, she joined a group-tour led by some Franciscan friars:

> the friars lifted up a cross and led the pilgrims about from one place to another where our Lord had suffered his pains and his passions … the friars always, as they went about, told them what our Lord suffered in every place … [Margery] wept and sobbed so plenteously *as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eye* suffering his Passion at that time. Before her *in her soul she saw him verily by contemplation*, and that caused her to have compassion. And when they came up onto the Mount of Calvary, she fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder, *for in the city of her soul she saw verily and freshly how our Lord was crucified*. (p. 50, my emphasis)

As Claire Sponsler has pointed out, 'Margery's piety is remarkably demonstrative and histrionic', she is an 'expert in the arts of the theatre'.[47] In later visions back home in England, she imagines herself as an active participant in the Passion; she becomes one of the women of Jerusalem, she falls at Jesus' feet and is comforted by him; and she herself comforts the Virgin and urges her to follow her son as he progresses towards his death on the cross:

> [Margery] *thought she took our Lord Jesus Christ by the clothes* and fell down at his feet, praying him to bless her, and

[46] Lynn Staley, ed. and trans, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. vii. All quotations are from this edition.
[47] Claire Sponsler, 'Drama and Piety: Margery Kempe', in John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), PP. 129-43 (p. 130).

> therewith she cried full loudly and wept right sorely, *saying in her mind*, 'A, Lord, where shall I become?' … then answered our Lord to her, 'Be still, daughter, and rest with my mother here and comfort you in her' … she went to our Lady and said, 'A, blessed Lady, rise up and let us follow your blessed son as long as we may see him so that I may look enough upon him before he dies.' (p. 138, my emphasis)

Margery is an extreme case, her emotional outbursts made people around her nervous. She notably disrupted the preaching of Friar William Melton whose sermon to the people of York gave only luke-warm praise to the local Corpus Christi Plays.[48] Melton came to her home town of Lynn with a reputation for 'perfection of preaching' (p. 109) and was warned that Margery would be in the congregation that came to hear him and that she habitually 'weeps, sobs and cries' when she hears of the Passion, 'but it last not long' (p. 110). Melton suffered her outbursts on the first occasion but made it clear that she would not be welcome again. Despite the entreaties of two priests in support of Margery, he was not willing to be upstaged by her again: 'if she came in any church where he should preach and she made any noise as she was wont to do, he should speak sharply against her; he would not suffer her to cry in any way'. (p. 110)

Margery's histrionic weeping and vivid imaginings 'in her soul' make her an exemplar of both actor and audience in medieval devotional theatre. She can practice the Stations of the Cross both in Jerusalem and in England and she can conjure up images at the mere mention of the Passion. She is a perfect, albeit extreme, example of someone who undergoes 'continuing imaginative subjection to the story'. As audience, she weeps as she is moved by what she sees unfolding before her, as actor, she takes on the role of a woman of Jerusalem.

Margery's tears as a member of the audience at the Passion recall the complaints against devotional theatre in the fifteenth-century *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*.[49] Tears shed at Passion Play are dismissed in this treatise

[48] For the identification of Melton with the friar who objected to Margery's outbursts at his sermon see Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Longman, 2000) pp286-7, note to l. 4979.
[49] Clifford Davidson, ed., *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993). All quotations are from this edition.

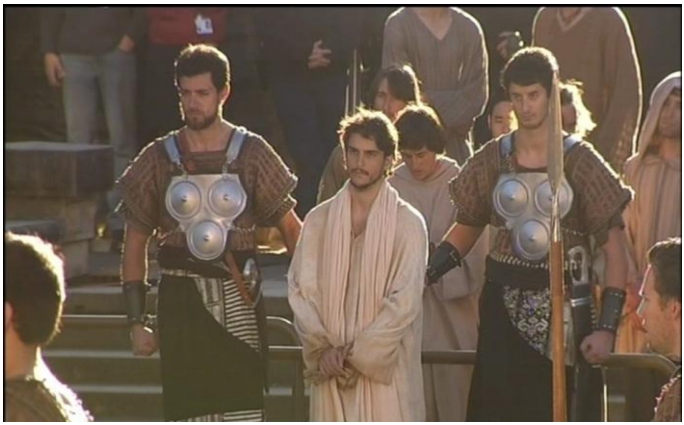
as shallow; those who are 'movyd to compassion and devocion, wepinge bitere teris' (p. 98) are accused of superficiality and are said to weep only for the 'pley of Cristis passion' and not for their sins or in deep contemplation of their faith: 'not principally for theire oune sinnes ne of theire gode feith withinneforthe (i.e. inwardly), but more of their sight withouteforth (i.e. outwardly)'. (p. 102) Actors are similarly dismissed as self-indulgent, they care not for what they are playing but for their own satisfaction: 'they puttun God bihinde and ther owne lustis biforn, as they han minde of God onely for sake of ther pley and also for they deliten hem more in the pley than in the miralis silf'. (pp. 109-10)

The author of the *Tretise*, clearly an opponent of medieval religious theatre, raises a number of complaints besides these, even down to the complaint that too much money is spent on them ('hideous coveytise'), money that would be better spent 'upon the nedis of ther negheboris'. (p. 111) In medieval York, according to the establishment viewpoint that emerges from the civic records, money spent on the Corpus Christi Plays was money that was well spent, to the honour of God and the honour of the city, [50]and for the benefit of the citizens and visitors who came to the festival.[51] The benefit may have been partly financial in that the play and the festival brought more people into the city and therefore fed the tourist trade,[52] but a clear definition of what that benefit was is available in a description of the play in 1422 that states that it was originally devised as a devotional activity and for the 'extirpation of vice and the reformation of custom'.[53] Like the Creed Play that alternated with it once every ten years, the York Corpus Christi Play was designed to be performed for the 'spiritual health' of the audience.[54]

While not all the actors would have necessarily entered into the same level of imaginative engagement with the subject matter that Margery Kempe did when she acted out the Stations of the Cross in her mind, and while not all members of the audience would have engaged with the sights she saw with such effusive weeping and roaring, it is possible that the kinds

[50] *REED: York*, pp. 11, 697.
[51] *REED: York*, pp. 28, 713.
[52] Alexandra F. Johnston, 'An introduction to medieval English theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, pp. 1-25 (p. 7).
[53] *REED: York*, pp. 32, 722.
[54] *REED: York*, pp. 88, 765.

of engagement evident in the Sydney Stations of the Cross also operated in places like York in the Middle Ages. Much of the evidence that I have presented here relates to the participation of female actors and audience members and to actors who took the roles of virtuous characters, but 'affective piety' can apply to role taking of a different kind. As Laurelle Levert has pointed out, advocates of affective piety 'sometimes encouraged [readers] to take on the roles of other characters (such as the soldiers) or even inanimate objects (such as the nails used to crucify Christ).'[55] This was what Kathryn Smith has described in her discussion of the fifteenth-century *Complaynt of Crist* as a 'rhetorical strategy' that 'was a powerful and effective tool for provoking a sense of contrition or penitence in an audience', reminding them that they re-crucified Jesus 'every day through vice and sin'. [56] Actors who played roles such as Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers—in York in the Middle Ages and in Sydney in 2008—were practising affective piety just as devoutly as those playing other roles. They dwelt on the horror of Christ's human agony and the way that humanity remains implicated in that agony in a manner that is no less conducive to entering the 'spiritual dimension' than the roles of the women of Jerusalem, the disciples, or Jesus himself:



The soldiers lead Jesus to his Trial before the Sanhedrin

[55] Laurelle LeVert, '"Crucifye hem, Crucifye hem": The Subject and Affective Response in Middle English Passion Narratives', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 14 (1998), 73-98 (n.p. in online version).
[56]Kathryn A. Smith, Art, *Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England: Women and their Books of Hours* (London: British Library, 2003), p. 160.

Appendix

World Youth Day, Sydney 2008. 'Stations of the Cross', Friday 18 July.

Station 1: The Last Supper (St Mary's Cathedral)
Station 2: The Agony of Our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane (Domain)
Station 3: Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Art Gallery of New South Wales)
Station 4: Jesus before Pilate (Sydney Opera House)
Station 5: Jesus is Scourged and Crowned with Thorns (Sydney Opera House)
Station 6: Jesus Takes up His Cross (Sydney Opera House)
Station 7: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus to Carry His Cross (Cockle Bay)
Station 8: Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem (Barangaroo 1)
Station 9: Jesus is Stripped of His Garments and Nailed to the Cross (Barangaroo 2)
Station 10: Jesus Promises Paradise to the Good Thief (Barangaroo 2)
Station 11: Jesus Entrusts Mary and John to each other (Barangaroo 2)
Station 12: Jesus Dies on the Cross (Barangaroo 2)
Station 13: The Body of Jesus is Brought down from the Cross (Barangaroo 2)

The actors do not speak. Each station begins with a prayer, led by the announcers:

Announcer: We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.
All: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Each station has a Gospel Reading as approved by the Sacred Congregation of Rites and Pope Paul VI in the 1975 Jubilee Year. This is followed by a reflection and a prayer by the announcers, and finally by the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary led by the announcers (Pope Benedict XVI read the Reflection and Prayer at the first station).

The text of the Reflections and Prayers was prepared by Rev Prof Peter Steele SJ, Professor Emeritus in English at the University of Melbourne and an esteemed Australian poet.

Margaret Rogerson teaches medieval English literature at the University of Sydney. Her recent monograph, *Playing a Part in History: The York Mysteries 1951-2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), examines the modern production history of the York Corpus Christi (Mystery) Plays in their local context and considers the relationship of this tradition to that of the Middle Ages.

Commutation Across the Social Divide

RODNEY STENNING EDGECOMBE

In this essay I shall record how, even in times of social inertia and repression, writers have found ways of redressing the inequalities of the status quo by plot devices or in mental exercise. Taken together, these add up to a motif of sorts—a moral and qualitative commutability between the privileged and the dispossessed, and of their narrative or actual commutation, as when a god disempowers himself to experience human life, or when a ruler sloughs the gown of office and enters the slums of his capital. This motif seems to have been nurtured in part by the radicalism lodged in the Christian gospels, even though the church establishment sought to efface it. For embedded in Christianity were several social propositions that the Roman authorities had to inoculate before they could embrace it as the religion of the empire. Take the canticle known as the *Magnificat*—

> 51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
> 52 He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted them of low degree.
> 53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away (Luke 1),

—which derives in turn from the song of Hannah in I Sam. 2:

> 7 The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up.
> 8 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, *and* lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set *them* among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the

> earth *are* the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them.

Whereas the frequentative present tense gives no moral purpose to the reversals in Hannah's song—they read like the impersonal whirlings of the *rota Fortunae*—the *Magnificat* is couched in the perfect, implying that the conception of the messiah *necessarily* issued in social change:

> [Mary] uses the past tense . . . not [to] describe God's past care for the down-trodden, but because God has already taken decisive action in the promised sending of his Son, and she foresees as an accomplished fact the result that will follow in his mission. If the Magnificat had been preserved as a separate psalm outside the present context, we might have taken it to be the manifesto of a political and economic revolution.[1]

The fact that we *don't* conceive it as such a 'manifesto' has less to do with questions of context than with the fuzziness of Jesus' actual teaching, and also with the expedient way in which the church chose to read it.

For a start, there are differing takes on its central tenet, 'The Kingdom of God.' Was this an imminent or a future event? To

> the people of Galilee the coming of the 'kingdom' meant that the mighty of this world would be brought low and the poor and oppressed would be lifted up. Since most of those who heard Jesus came from the poor and lowly, it is no wonder that what he had to say aroused their interest and revived their hopes.[2]

The same commentators note on the other hand that there 'are numerous passages in the gospels where Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God in

[1] G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St Luke* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 55.
[2] Howard Clark Kee and Franklin W. Young, *The Living World of the New Testament (*London, 1960), p. 96. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

language that suggests it has not come' (p. 123). Also, the proto-radicalism of the *Magnificat* offers no programme for effecting social change. Inequality still obtains, but with the shoe on the other foot. Indeed the very idea of a 'kingdom' is a regressive one, though, as Kee and Young point out, Jesus 'rarely followed the analogy through to the point of speaking of king and subjects' (p. 119). Another exegete has suggested, furthermore, that Mark 10.31 ('But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last first') 'may simply have been a proverbial saying about the unpredictable mutability of the human lot.'[3] The tense has shifted from the actualizing perfect of the *Magnificat* to a vague post-mortem future so as to shore up the credibility of the church. After all, it was clear for all to see that the birth of Jesus had *not* produced any significant change in the status quo.

While they lacked specificity of process and timing, some of Jesus' pronouncements remained discomfiting even so. G. H. Wells has remarked that:

> The doctrine of the Kingdom of Heaven . . . is certainly one of the most revolutionary doctrines that ever stirred and changed human thought. It is small wonder if the world of that time failed to grasp its full significance, and recoiled in dismay from even a half-apprehension of its tremendous challenges to the established habits and institutions of mankind.[4]

Christianity' derives from the Greek adjective 'christos' ('anointed'), which, translating the Hebrew 'masiah,' attached to Jesus the sacrificial purpose of that Judaic figure. This shifted focus from *what* he preached (moral tenets that ought properly to be called 'Jesuism') to what subsequent commentators, Paul of Tarsus among them, made of his violent death. In Paul's redaction of Jesus' teaching, the praxis of good works was subordinated to justification by faith. At the same time, the Nazarene's express rejection of materialism ('Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?'—Matt 7.31); the despair of a 'certain ruler' over the intemperate demands of Jesuism ('And when Jesus

[3] D. E Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 276.
[4] H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (1920; rev. and rpt. London, 1932), p. 526. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!—Luke 18.24)—such uncompromising positions were simply ignored, because, in Wells's words, his followers preferred to return 'to the old familiar ideas of temple and altar, of fierce deity and propitiatory observance, of consecrated priest and magic blessing . . . to the dear old habitual life of hates and profits and competition and pride' (p. 527). Paul was accordingly careful to preach a 'Christian' submission to the status quo—'Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling' (Ephes. 6.5)—and the *kerygma* displaced ethical teaching with talk of sacrifice and atonement, directing the gaze of the faithful away from Jesus' social mandates. Instead of advocating the *mundane* social change proclaimed by the *Magnificat*, Paul emphasized the doctrine of incarnation. Uninterested in having humans level with humans, he focused on the belief that a deity had levelled with humankind. Not that the idea of his slumming it on earth met with universal approval, for the Docetists resisted it altogether, and claimed that 'Christ only *seemed* to be corporeal, but that he really was not' (Kee and Young, p. 343).

In the struggle between these competing versions of the doctrine, the more concrete one gained ground and eventually solidified into orthodoxy. But even as that happened, the sense of condescension—a literal melding of deity and flesh ('cum'), predicated on an equally literal descent from heaven ('descendere')—was treated as a once-off event, not as a pattern for human behaviour. When Paul formulated the doctrine of *kenosis* or self-emptying—'And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (Phil. 2.8)'—he presented it as something unique and inimitable. And whereas Jesus had called the very issue of servitude into question by degrading masters and exalting slaves, Paul embraced it as an unalterable fact of society. He was much more impressed with his idea that a *deity* had volunteered for servitude. Even so, the 'Hymnus ambrosianus,' also known as the 'Te Deum,' contains a hint of the unease that the doctrine generated during the early days of the church: : 'Tu, ad liberandum suscepturus hominem, non horruisti Virginis uterum'[5]

[5] *Breviarium romanum ex decreto sancrosancti concilii tridentini restitutum S. Pii V pontificis maximi jussu editum aliorumque pontificum cur recognitum Pii papae XII jussu edita*, 4 vols. (Turin, 1949), 1:9. The translation in the *Book of Common*

Here the bristling horror of 'horruisti' all but overshadows the negative particle of the litotes—and this sense of compromised divinity would eventually lead theologians to refurbish and reconstitute that 'uterus' through the dogma of the 'immaculate conception,' making it worthy of its task by an ex post facto decree that Mary was 'sine labe originale concepta.'[6] Even as they hedged it round with clauses and provisions, Christians still acknowledged that the incarnation amounted to a curtailment of divine power, a cloistering of immensity, in Donne's phrase. But the acknowledgement had next to no impact on their social policy. A handful practised the extravagant sort of ascesis associated with Simeon Stylites, but few saw self-humblement as the instrument of social change. Instead, as the epistles of Paul make clear, the church accepted the social model that obtained at the time of its dogmatic regulation. Whereas Jesus had feasted with publicans and sinners (Matt 9.11), Paul established instead a moral apartheid of redemption, segregating holy sheep from wicked goats: 'every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; / Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God' (1 Thess 4.4-5). And while Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, undoubtedly caked with the grime of Palestinian streets, the pope, his putative vicar on earth, turned this *human* kenosis into an empty rite, scarcely to be recognized in its sanitary decorativeness.

So much, then, for the dogmatic context for the motif I want to examine in this essay. Not that we should seek its clarification in terms of Christianity alone. However central the idea of social reversal and moral commutation might have been to Jesus' teaching (the wordly great becoming insignificant and vice versa), it wasn't unique. Paul's doctrines of incarnation and kenosis had likewise been anticipated in Greek mythology, and even Jesus' first/last/last/first pronouncement had analogues in the rites and festivities of the Roman world. One such was the triumphal procession of a conqueror. His chariot was occupied by a slave who kept repeating *'Respice post te; hominem te esse memento.'*[7] This practice wasn't designed to *humble* the triumphator, but rather to preserve

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Prayer reads: 'When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man: thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.'

[6] 'Conceived without original sin.'

[7] 'Look behind you; remember you are [but] a man.'

him from the envious wrath of the gods: 'Preceded by his lictors, he stood, richly dressed and wreathed in bay, on a four-horse chariot, a slave murmuring to him words to avert the possible ill consequence of outstanding success such as 'remember you are mortal'.[8] Pliny the Elder gives additional information on what was, in conception at least, an apotropaic rite: 'although a Tuscan crown of gold was held over the victor's head from behind, nevertheless he wore an iron ring on his finger, just the same as the slave holding the crown in front of himself.'[9] Even though the presence of the slave was meant to avert the jealousy of the gods, the spectacle of a powerful and disempowered man alongside each other must, for the spectators at least, have hinted the fate that awaits us all. There is only a small semantic gap between the customary mantra of mortality, 'memento mori' (with its implied invitation to look ahead—'prospice *pro* te') and 'Respice post te; hominem te esse memento.'

But Roman society was also capable of more generous, disinterested kinds of levelling than we witness in the triumphator's attempts to cheat the 'evil eye.' The feast of Saturnalia was as ineffectual and as emblematic as the chariot slave, but nonetheless entertained the idea, if only for day, of commuting the positions of the powerful and the dispossessed. During the Saturnalia, *magister* and *servus* swapped roles, and one can only hope that masters who otherwise lacked the empathy to participate in the lives of their 'suffering servants' took something lasting from this experience. Suffering servitude was, of course, one of the underpinning ideas of the Christian incarnation. Paul and his successors claimed that the deity had had to *experience* the misery of his creatures in order to effect their redemption. And so the early church appropriated Isaiah's 'suffering servant' as a type of the incarnate saviour. This servant was simply a master in disguise, not unlike the servants-for-a-day of the Saturnalia, for the prophet's imagery of persisted bruising and attempted quenching suggested once more that society hadn't been transformed but only up-ended. From the Judaeo-Christian suffering servant on the one hand (with its pagan analogue, gods that go abegging), and from the holiday spirit of the Saturnalia, two distinct topoi came into being. The first was the *deus absconditus* or hidden god, and the

[8] M. C. Howatson, (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (London, 1989), p. 581.
[9] Pliny, *Natural History with an English Translation*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, 10 vols. (London, 1943), 9:11

second the rococo pastorale, exemplified in the hameau that Marie Antoinette built at the Petit Trianon. In the former, we witness a 'purposeful' sloughing of divine privilege (to investigate or try society at large), in the latter, an escape from the 'oppressiveness' of high society.

Let's begin with the *deus absconditus*. In Greek and Roman mythology, the gods take human form to pursue their lusts, but also to see how the 'other half' lives. When the motive is erotic, human flesh provides a lead suit *avant la lettre* against the dangers of divine radiation, as the fate of Semele attests. But by damping down its 'numen,' incarnation also *disguises* godhead, and makes it possible for the *deus absconditus* to go about his business without a fanfare. Thus degoddified in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter and Mercury descend to earth and visit Philemon and Baucis, an old couple rewarded for their hospitality. Their cottage changes into a temple, lifting the humble to heaven in the same way that the heavenly had descended to humbleness: 'marble columns took the place of its wooden supports, the thatch grew yellow, till the roof seemed to be made of gold, the doors appeared magnificently adorned with carvings, and marble paved the earthen floor.'[10] The Nachleben of such probative incarnations can be found in the popular legends attached to Haroun al Raschid and Joseph II of Austria who, 'donning a smock,' would walk 'behind the plough-tail,' and, 'wearing the dress of an ordinary citizen . . . would mingle with the crowd.'[11] In the background we sense not only the Philemon and Baucis myth but also that of Christopher, its Christian derivative: 'one night he was carrying a child across the river when the child became so heavy that Christopher could hardly get across. "No wonder!" said the child. '"You have been carrying the whole world. I am Jesus Christ, the king you seek."'[11] Meyerbeer's *L'Étoile du nord* contains a similar *coup de foudre* when Peter Mikhailov, an obscure carpenter in Wyborg, stands forth as Peter the Great, 'et vera incessu patuit deus.' At this point, like the cottage of Philemon and Baucis, his workshop in Wyborg transforms to his palace in St Petersburg, his 'Olympus' so to speak.

Since kenosis allows self-disempowered deities to gather first-hand knowledge of their creatures, moral shortcomings are just as likely to be

[10] Ovid, *The Metmorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955), p. 214.
[11] Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 85.

punished as virtue rewarded. In *Measure for Measure*, the Duke of Vienna uses his disguise to reveal Angelo as a moral fraud and also threatens Lucio with the gallows. Far from receiving kindness from his subjects, he finds himself maligned:

> *Duke.* Sir, the Duke is marvellous little beholding to your reports; but the best is, he lives not in them.
> *Lucio*. Friar, thou knowest not the Duke so well as I do. He's a better woodman than thou tak'st him for.
> *Duke*. Well! you'll answer this one day. Fare ye well. (4.3.158-62)

Judgement comes when he stands forth and arraigns his slanderer, a moment that serves only to reinforce the status quo. The Duke has never questioned his prerogatives, but simply put them in abeyance in order to renew and reinforce them.

A rather different purpose is served by King Lear's *involuntary* banishment, and by the anagnorisis made possible by his loss of privilege. Here 'godhead' has been surrendered, not put on hold, and gives rise to a *deus victus* rather than *absconditus*. As if to illustrate the medieval posy 'When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?,' Lear turns into a primordial being when he loses power. Unlike Paul, he is worried by the injustice of the world as he finds it, and moots a social remedy that would direct excess wealth toward the poor. Here Shakespeare hints at a *mechanism* for change, something absent from the reversal paradigm in the gospels. Lear's ideal society isn't inverted but levelled:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the Heavens more just. (3.4.28-36)

In *Measure for Measure*, the surrender of privilege entails only a mild element of pain when the Duke hears himself traduced, but in *King Lear* privilege speaks evil *of itself*, reminding us that power is no guarantee of virtue. It's all a game of chance or 'handy-dandy':

> *Lear*. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, and which is the thief? Thou has seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?
> *Glou*. Ay, Sir.
> *Lear*. And the creature run from the cur? There thou might'st behold
> The great image of Authority:
> A dog's obey'd in office.
> Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
> Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back;
> Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
> For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.
> Thorough tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
> Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. (4.6.149-65)

While this speech bears a superficial resemblance to the reversals promised by the *Magnificat*, the flattening is actually effected by Juvenalian disgust. The cozener doesn't triumph morally over the usurer; he simply trumps him.

Social privilege had its own attendant pains, however. 'Robes and furr'd gowns' might deflect searching criticism, but could offer no defence against Angst and insomnia, nor indeed against the pain of marital compulsions placed upon monarch and serf alike. In Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the nurse's experience as a feudal bride differs little from that of a dynastic queen:

> 'But you were married, nurse,' said Tanya,
> 'How was it?' 'By God's will, my Vanya
> Was but a boy, if truth were told,
> And I was just thirteen years old.
> The marriage-broker kept on pressing

> The matter for a fortnight; oh,
> What tears I shed you do not know,
> The day my father gave his blessing;
> They loosed my braids, and singing low,
> Led me to church. I had to go.[12]

Even so, the 'uncomplicated' lives of peasants, as rendered by rococo pastorales, often attracted the wistful gaze of the crown-weary. Shakespeare presents this view *de haut en bas* in *King Henry IV Part II*:

> Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
> Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
> And husht with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
> Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,
> Under the canopies of costly state,
> And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?
>
> (3.1.9-14)

If, as Henry concludes, 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown' (3.1.31), it's hardly surprising that some monarchs chose to set them aside for a day or two, taking due precaution against smoky cribs and night-flies before they did. This was certainly the impulse behind the sanitized peasant dwellings that Marie Antoinette erected at the Petit Trianon, though we can be sure that their launderers and cheese-makers conformed to the dress code of rococo pastorale, and that any patches or smutches on their garments were organized by the same artistic hand that had weathered the buildings in which they lived: 'Hubert Robert painted cracks in the woodwork, so that it might seem touched by the hand of time; and the chimneys were carefully smoked'.[13]

The Petit Trianon trivialized Rousseau in the manner of Mrs Merdle in *Little Dorrit*—'We know [society] is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropic seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself—most delightful life and perfect

[12] Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. Babette Deutsch, ed. and intro. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 77.
[13] Stefan Zweig, *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* (1933; rpt. London, 1988), p. 111.

climate I am told), we must consult it'[14]—and Marie Antoinette's knowledge of hameaux, like the society woman's of Polynesian huts, was simply a drawing-room pleasantry, a moral argument reduced to a travel poster. It was only in these controlled circumstances that the faux *di absconditi* of the first estate left their Olympus, spawning a recognizable narrative topos as they did so. Different from the divine condescension examined so far, it found embodiment, *inter alia*, in the ballet *Lady Henriette*, and in the opera—*Martha*—that Flotow subsequently made of it. In both, members of Queen Anne's court hire themselves out as servants, but 'soon tire of the drudgery of a servant's life and make their escape from the farm.'[15] Just as Marie Antoinette returned to Versailles at any time she chose, so do Lady Harriet and Nancy to Hampton Court. This kind of social commutation doesn't seek to investigate humanity, or to place it on trial, or to correct social inequalities—it simply escapes from boredom, the boredom of too little activity and, when that has been addressed, the boredom of too much. The social hierarchy doesn't change, nor, in essence, do those who make their escape. It is a ladder kept at hand for a quick getaway. That unchanging hierarchy also provided a ladder of escape for those few who were ambitious enough to claw a passage up from peasant cottages. In Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro*, the servant taunts the nobleman with the *un*distinction of his distinguished birth—'What have *you* done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born—nothing more'[16]—and counterposes his own energy and resourcefulness against the count's inertia: '

> Whereas I, lost among the obscure crowd, have had to deploy more knowledge, more calculation and skill merely to survive than has sufficed to rule all the provinces of Spain for a century! Yet you would measure yourself against me.

[14] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, intro. Lionel Trilling (London, 1953), p. 238.
[15] Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (1966; rev. and rpt. London, 1980), p. 227. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.
[16] Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *The Barber of Seville and The Marriage of Figaro*, trans. and intro. John Wood (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 199. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

As in the first/last sayings of the gospels, this doesn't amount to an argument for social equality. The count should ideally become a valet, and the valet step into his shoes in turn. Earlier on, Almaviva had grumbled that 'The servants in this house take longer to dress than their masters,' and Figaro retorted that that's 'Because they have no servants to assist them' (p. 159). If a nobleman's life's achievement were the mere fact of his nativity, the upwardly mobile servant could draw level by the sheer fact of his activity. Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* demonstrates how resourceful employees could, on occasion at least, commute their social positioning by force of will. Serpina secures the change through a stratagem of contrariness. Like Figaro after her, she matches the activity of her service against the passive comfort of her master: 'Per aver di voi cura, io sventurata debbo esser maltrattata?'[17] Her *consoeur*, Richardson's Pamela, also has to contend with the *droit du seigneur*, but secures *her* apotheosis through passive resistance (oiled with unction and sycophancy) rather than through action:

> Upon the whole, therefore, I conclude, that Mr. B is almost the only gentleman, who excels *every* lady that I have seen; so *greatly* excels, that even the emanations of his excellence irradiate a low cottage-born girl, and make her pass among ladies of birth and education for somebody.
>
> Forgive my pride, dear Sir; but it would be almost a crime in your Pamela not to exult in the mild benignity of those rays, by which her beloved Mr. B. endeavours to make her look up to his own sunny sphere: while she, by the advantage only of his reflected glory, in *his* absence, which makes a dark night to her, glides along with her paler and fainter beaminess, and makes a distinguishing figure among such lesser planets, as can only poorly twinkle and glimmer, for want of the aid she boasts of.[18]

[17] 'In looking after you, I, unfortunate woman, have to be mistreated?'—Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *La serva padrona (From Maid to Mistress): Libretto by G. A. Frederico (English Version by Hamilton Benz)* (New York, no date), p. 21.
[18] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, intro. M. Kinkead-Weekes, 2 vols. (London, 1962), 2:416.

Pamela is an eighteenth-century allotrope of Baucis, raised to Olympian heights by the masterful *fiat* of a sun god, for the baroque 'beaminess' of Mr. B recalls the solar imagery appropriated by Louis XIV.

For as long as the social hierarchy remained intact (while at the same time tolerating the mobility essential for social ascent) it could be used for fantasies of punishment as well as reward. The plot device of *punitive* social transition was almost as popular as that of the *deus absconditus*, as witness the 1686 comedy entitled *The Devil of a Wife, or A Comical Transformation*, 'attributed to Thomas Jevon but possibly written by T. Shadwell and first performed at the Dorset Gardens Theatre, London' (Guest, p. 300). This underwent operatic adaptations by Gluck, Philidor and Solie, and eventually became a ballet in 1845. The plot of *Le Diable à quatre*, its final avatar, centred on a 'blind fiddler . . ., whose violin the Countess breaks in a fit of ill temper.' He 'turns out to be a magician, and to punish the Countess he causes her and Mazourka to change places for a day. The countess is soon chastened by the rough manners of Mazourki, while Mazourka astonishes the Countess's servants by her gentle disposition' (Guest, p. 246). Something of the same Schadenfreude at the discomfiture of refinement figures in the treatment that Marie Antoinette received at the Temple and at the Conciergerie, and in *Wuthering Heights* when the cosseted Isabella Linton encounters necessity in all its bareness:

> 'I'm tired with my journey, and want to go to bed! Where is the maid-servant? Direct me to her, as she won't come to me!'
>
> 'We have none,' he answered; 'you must wait on yourself!'
>
> 'Where must I sleep, then?' I sobbed—I was beyond regarding self-respect, weighed down by fatigue and wretchedness.[19]

All of which has taken us some distance from our starting point—the stimulus that the unrealized social teachings of the gospels provided for alternatives to the status quo. It is to this issue that we must now return. As we have seen, Paul and the gospel editors thought it wise to defer the Kingdom of Heaven to a point post mortem, and while the former

[19] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 176.

proclaimed that distinctions between the faithful had been abolished ('There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are one in Christ Jesus'—Gal 3.28), he also took care to reinscribe them in other edicts and obiter dicta: 'Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing' (Eph 5.24). If the equality of the 'kingdom of heaven' couldn't be distinguished from the equality of the necropolis (at least as far as its practical implementation went), it must be said that other minds than Paul's had grasped this fact and had articulated it with greater eloquence—that of Horace for one:

> pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas regumque turres.[20]

And Lucian's too. In the latter's *Conversations in the Underworld*, Hermes does a carnal 'baggage check' on the entrants into Dis:

> *Hermes*: [*To the next man in the queue.*] And who may you be, with your crown and purple robes and disagreeable expression?
> *Next Man*: I am Lampichus, King of Georgia.
> *Hermes*: Well, Lampichus, what do you think you're doing with all that paraphernalia?
> *Lampichus*: You can hardly expect a king to travel in the nude.
> *Hermes*: If he's a dead king—certainly I do. Take it all off.[21]

When the socially powerful clash with the greater power of the grave, something's got to give. Oriental potentates must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust.

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[20] 'Pale Death with foot impartial knocks at the poor man's cottage and at princes' palaces'—Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, trans. C. E. Bennett (1914; rpt and rev. London, 1927), pp. 16-17.
[21] Lucian, *Satirical Sketches*, trans. and intro. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 66.

There were dress rehearsals for this stripping bare. The centralization of power in the hands of the emperor sometimes levelled the social ranks below him. Severus, for example, had much in common with Lucian's Hermes:

> In the administration of justice, the judgments of the emperor were characterised by attention, discernment, and impartiality; and, whenever he deviated from the strict line of equity, it was generally in favour of the poor and oppressed; not so much indeed from any sense of humanity, as from the natural propensity of a despot to humble the pride of greatness, and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence.[22]

A social equality based on the disablement of competitors is hardly generous, nor is it very thorough-going, for even patricians in quasi-egalitarian thrall to a dictator would have continued to sneer at the plebs and the slaves below them. And so too did the first and second estates of the *ancien regime*, except on those limited occasions when the precepts of Jesuist radicalism and the Roman Saturnalia were fleetingly realized, and, at the feast of Mardi gras, mooted the social equivalence of a bishop and a boy. Victor Hugo implicitly links this ritual with issues of social justice in *Notre Dame de Paris*:

> This procession [of the Fool's Pope], which our readers have seen take its departure from the Palais, had organized itself on the way, and been recruited with all the ragamuffins, the unemployed thieves and disposable vagabonds in Paris, so when it reached the Grève it presented a most respectable aspect.
>
> A history of vagabondism, beggary, and thievery, could it be faithfully and sagaciously written, would form neither one of the least entertaining nor least instructive chapters in the great history of mankind, and especially in that of all such old governments as have been established

[22] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire*, 8 vols. (London, 1903), 1:140-41.

> originally by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest), and for the benefit of the invading and armed minority and their descendants, at the expense of the unarmed, peaceful, and laborious majority . . .[23]

In this reading, the powerful entrench their power in a graded pyramid, criminalizing as 'vagabonds'—as 'wanderers' rather than perchers—all those unable to mount it.

The history of Europe was punctuated by other flickerings and flarings of the same radical spirit, fuelled in part by those precepts of Jesus that Paul had rendered inert. Take, for example, the Anabaptist uprising. Governments established 'by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest)' persecuted the 'heresy' of equal rights with as much brutality as they could command:

> For the Anabaptists no penalties were esteemed too terrible. These poor sectaries, whose revolutionary beliefs were for the most part the fruit of social misery, were drowned, roasted by slow fire, burned alive, or put to other forms of exquisite torture. The scaffold or stake which sufficed for the Lutherans was held to be an inadequate reward for desperadoes who dared to denounce property as well as priesthood.[24]

Given, therefore, the fates reserved for the architects of the Peasants' Revolt and the Anabaptist uprising (which had, after all, been the fate of Jesus too), social criticism or indeed any intimation of discontent with the status quo had to be aired with caution. But just as a cat can look at a king, so a proto-radical sensibility could survey injustice and, without expressly advocating revolution, hold it up for inspection. Two literary procedures came to hand in this regard. The first was to establish common denominators between castes and classes, expunging difference through the solvent of humanity. Shylock's speech in *The Merchant of Venice* is the locus classicus of this sort of appeal:

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[23] Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris* (London, no date), p. 80.
[24] H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, 2 vols (1935; rpt. London, 1960), 1:536.

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?—if you prick us do we not bleed? (3.1.52-58)

Shylock here implicitly indicts the disconnect between official Christianity and the more challenging Jesuism preserved within it, and which calls it to account. It was also possible to see patterns of *social* equivalence (rather than a mere human continuity) between the base and the summit of the pyramid. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare took a ruler from his palace and dumped him in a squalid corner of his realm so that his social commutation could bear moral and (theoretically, at least) practical fruit. How different, on the other hand, the tableau of before and after, of grandeur and sordidness, in Pope's 'Epistle to Bathurst':

> In the worst inn's worst room, with mat half-hung
> The floors of plaister, and the walls of dung,
> On once a flock-bed, but repair'd with straw,
> With tape-ty'd curtains, never meant to draw,
> The George and Garter dangling from that bed
> Where tawdry yellow strove with dirty red,
> Great Villers lies—alas! how chang'd from him,
> That life of pleasure, and that soul of whim!
> Gallant and gay, in Cliveden's proud alcove,
> The bow'r of wanton Shrewsbury and love;[25]

The apparently elegiac stance seems to take its cue from Hamlet's lament for Yorick:

> Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs,

[25] Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), p. 583.

> your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? (5.1.182-86)

But it isn't long before one senses that this isn't a lament at all, but rather of a piece with the Schadenfreude that greets Isabella at Wuthering Heights, and which greeted Marie Antoinette at the Conciergerie. Pope evokes the crimson and gold of opulence in the parodic strife of 'tawdry yellow' and 'dirty red' and plays the secrecy of alcoves against the exposure enforced by tape-tied curtains—curtains that also debase and mock the focusing drapery of baroque portraiture. Revulsion is compounded with exultant delight. The 'Epistle to Bathurst' was written at the same time that Hogarth was painting *The Harlot's Progress*; a graphically judgemental moralism is common to both.

Dickens, on the other hand, organizes the before-and-after tableaux of *Bleak House* in a different spirit. Here it's Lady Dedlock's social *ascent* that becomes the subject of mockery, and not her decline. One senses the presence of all the *Assumptions* the author had encountered on the continent in her 'miraculous' upward wafting:

> Indeed, he married her for love. A whisper still goes about, that she had not even family; howbeit, Sir Leicester had so much family that perhaps he had enough, and could dispense with any more. But she had beauty, pride, ambition, insolent resolve, and sense enough to portion out a load of fine ladies. Wealth and station, added to these, soon floated her upward; and for years, now, my Lady Dedlock has been at the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree.[26]

But how different the plangency and *Miteinfühling* when that 'assumption' is reversed, and Lady Dedlock begins her pilgrimage to Captain Nemo's

[26] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, intro. Osbert Sitwell (London, 1948), p. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

grave. Nothing could be further from Pope's 'Quomodo ceciderunt robusti' stance with respect to Villiers:

> On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind, where the clay and water are hard frozen, and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day, looks like an instrument of human torture;—traversing this deserted blighted spot, there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion. (p. 767)

Pope had used the 'George and Garter' as a foil to the rags of a Yorkshire inn; Dickens suggests that the George and Garter are rags in and of themselves. The crucial point is that while the *clothes* Lady Dedlock is wearing would never have come 'through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion,' the *person* who wears them most certainly would. This is the storm scene from *King Lear* set in a different key. And it's also *Paradise Lost* at a remove. Lady Dedlock is Eve divested even of her Adam:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through *Eden* took thir solitary way.[27]

Such graphically *enacted* reversals are comparatively rare, however. For the most part, encouraged by the church, people accepted social inequity as something ordained by providence, a donnée that it would be impious to question. But even if Peasants' Revolts were few and far between, the

[27] John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 469.

Jesuist radicalism of its war cry ('When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?') could still pose its question to the mind, and minds properly attuned to its implication could effect whatever social commutations they chose—within their own confines, at least. Marie Antoinette took refuge in her hameau with frivolous holiday motives; Lady Dedlock renounces her 'ascended' state in deadly earnest; but the narrator of Dickens's *Doctor Marigold* contents himself simply with parallels and equations between the privileged and dispossessed. This might seem an empty rhetorical exercise, but there can be little doubt that mental commutations such as these eventually paved the way for actual change. The Second Reform Bill was on the horizon at the very point that Dickens wrote *Doctor Marigold* in 1865. Here equality is effected not by the indifferent knockings of Horace's 'pallida Mors,' but rather through some shrewd conversions—theoretical only, but still in the here and now:

> I have measured myself against other public speakers,—Members of Parliament, Platforms, Pulpits, Counsel learned in the law,—and where I have found 'em good, I have took a bit of imagination from 'em, and where I have found 'em bad, I have let 'em alone. Now I'll tell you what. I mean to go down into my grave declaring that of all the callings ill used in Great Britain, the Cheap Jack calling is the worst used. Why ain't we a profession? Why ain't we endowed with privileges? Why are we forced to take out a hawkers's license, when no such thing is expected of political hawkers? Where's the difference between us? Except that we are Cheap Jacks, and they are Dear Jacks, *I* don't see any difference but what's in our favour.[28]

It's usual for moralists to brandish a CV before they start pronouncing—the speaker of Ecclesiastes, for example, asserts that he has 'seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit' (1.14)—and Doctor Marigold is no exception. After carefully measuring himself against politicians, he concludes that they are nothing more than

[28] Charles Dickens, *Christmas Stories*, intro. Margaret Lane (London, 1956), p. 438. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

vendors, and rather shady vendors at that. Here, once again, is King Lear's attempt at levelling (as opposed to Jesuist reversal), and here again a desire to expunge the superflux of power if not of wealth:

> 'For look here! Say it's election time. I am on the footboard of my cart in the market-place, on a Saturday night. I put up a general miscellaneous lot. I say: 'Now here, my free and independent woters, I'm a going to give you such a chance as you never had in all your born days, nor yet the days preceding. Now I'll show you what I am going to do with you. Here's a pair of razors that'll shave you closer than the Board of Guardians; here's a flat-iron worth its weight in gold; here's a frying-pan artificially flavoured with essence of beefsteaks to that degree that you've only got for the rest of your lives to fry bread and dripping in it and there you are replete with animal food ...' (p. 438)

This mocks the patter of a mountebank and also the *adunata* of romance, those impossible missions to a catch a falling star and get with child a mandrake root. The cheapjack's world is a world of lies, but attractive ones; the politician's, equally mendacious, seems drab and cynical:

> 'This is me, the Cheap Jack. But on the Monday morning, in the same market-place, comes the Dear Jack on the hustings—*his* cart—and what does *he* say? "Now my free and independent woters, I am going to give you such a chance" (he begins just like me) "as you never had in all your born days, and that's the chance of sending Myself to Parliament. Now I'll tell you what I am a going to do for you. Here's the interests of this magnificent town promoted above the rest of the civilised and uncivilised earth. Here's your railways carried, and your neighbours' railways jockeyed. Here's all your sons in the Post office. Here's Britannia smiling on you. Here's the eyes of Europe on you. Here's uniwersal prosperity for you, repletion of animal food, golden cornfields,

> gladsome homesteads, and rounds of applause from your own hearts, all in one lot, and that's myself.'" (p. 439)

Through the common denominator of 'animal food,' which links the two discourses and equates their improbabilities, Dickens reminds us that politicians catch votes and then discard their voters once the tallies have been made, just as unscrupulous vendors leave town before their false guarantees can be exposed. This recalls Lear's beadle and whore, except that here the beadle is *both* the whore *and* the lecher.

While Dickens suggests a moral and social parity between cheapjacks and the denizens of Westminster, Gilbert's Pirate King goes further still when explaining the paradox of his title. Seeing little to choose between monarchs and buccaneers, he all but paraphrases Hugo's tirade against governments 'established originally by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest)':

> When I sally forth to seek my prey
> I help myself in a royal way:
> I sink a few more ships, it's true,
> Than a well-bred monarch ought to do:
> But many a king on a first-class throne,
> If he wants to call his throne his own,
> Must manage somehow to get through
> More dirty work than ever *I* do,
> Though I am a Pirate King.[29]

While the philosophy of the Pirate King owes something to Hugo, it owes more still to Byron. Gilbert's joke (like Dickens's when Mrs Merdle pretends to admire Polynesian culture) centres on the clash of polite Victorian chit-chat ('well bred') with activities that it ordinarily wouldn't cover ('I sink a few more ships'). In Byron's *Corsair*, however, the language isn't at odds with the sentiment. Conrad voices identical ideas, but with the plangent inflection of a Romantic isolato, not the bounce of a comic song:

[29] W. S. Gilbert, *The Savoy Operas Being the Complete Text of the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas as Originally Produced in the Years 1875-1896* (London, 1962), p. 448.

> Fear'd, shunn'd, belied, ere youth had lost her force,
> He hated man too much to feel remorse,
> And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call,
> To pay the injuries of some on all.
> He knew himself a villain, but he deem'd
> The rest no better than the thing he seem'd;
> And scorn'd the best as hypocrites who hid
> Those deeds the bolder spirit plainly did.[30]

Like Doctor Marigold's politicians, the 'best' of society of *The Corsair* sin flagrantly, but sin under cover, opening themselves to a notional commutation with the pirate outcast. The cheapjack penetrates the moral disguise of 'Expensive Jacks' from below; Conrad from without. And that connects him in turn with Robin Hood, the figure on whom all concerns of this essay might be said to converge. Leigh Hunt's ballad, 'How Robin and His Outlaws Lived in the Woods,' sets out his formula for undoing excess by distribution, the 'fines of equity' a jab at Norman administrative prowess, which his efficient 'proletarian appropriations' seem to mock:

> Only upon the Normans proud,
> And on their unjust store,
> He'd lay his fines of equity
> For his merry men and the poor.[31]

There, once again, is government established by 'violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest),' and there once again a Mardi gras figure to effect the change. Traditionally viewed as an outlawed nobleman, Robin Hood retires to the forest and lives there in all the unreality of a rococo pastorale. To quote Leigh Hunt again

> ROBIN HOOD is an outlaw bold,
> Under the greenwood tree;
> Bird, nor stag, nor morning air,

[30] Lord George Byron, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, Reprinted from Original Editions, with Life, Explanatory Notes, &c.* (London, no date), p. 241.
[31] Leigh Hunt, *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. H. S. Milford (London, 1923), p. 109. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

Is more at large than he. (p. 107)

Even so, this is not the Petit Trianon; it's a version of the society mooted by the Peasants' Revolt, and by King Lear in extremis. And from the vantage of that Edenic alternative, it views the institutions of society at large, and collapses its hierarchical distinctions. Being outlawed by lawless rule of might, the band of merry men is paradoxically redeemed. It's Robin Hood and not the friars (those hypocritical *soi-disant* 'mendicants') who inherits the first place that radical Jesuism had traditionally reserved for the last:

And not a soul in Locksley town
Would speak him an ill word;
The friars raged; but no man's tongue,
Nor even feature stirred. (p. 107)

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In Dialogue with the Living and the Dead: Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

> Simultaneously a revelation and a cover-up, autobiography would appear to constitute itself as in some way a repression of autobiography.
>
> Barbara Johnson[1]

> I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans.
> I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.
>
> So Los, in fury & strength: in indignation & burning wrath
>
> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 10, line 20.

'Where was it, in the Strand?' asks Ted Hughes, uncertain. It is the first line of 'Fulbright Scholars', the first of the *Birthday Letters* poems, and we need to bear in mind that the sequence opens with a question, a reminder of just how untrustworthy the memory can be. The poet recalls seeing a newspaper photograph of a new 'intake' (l. 4) of Fulbright scholars:

> Just arriving –
> Or arrived. Or some of them.
> ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 5-6)

He cannot be sure. 'Were you among them?' (l. 7) he asks, addressing the dead Sylvia Plath. Again, he cannot be sure. A Cambridge undergraduate himself, he remembers wondering which of these young North American

[1] Barbara Johnson, 'My Monster/My Self', in her *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 144-54 (p. 146).

hopefuls he was likely to meet, but 'not'—with deliberate anti-climax—'your face' (ll. 10-11). He does not remember her face. Hardly love at first sight:

> Maybe I noticed you.
> Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.
> ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 12-13)

Feeling how unlikely a relationship would be, presumably—was she too beautiful? too otherworldly?—but what lingers is the premonitory *unlikeness*. The portrait that follows is entirely speculative, the superimposition of the image of Plath the poet will come to know upon a newspaper photograph he barely remembers. Maybe I 'Noted your long hair, loose waves' –

> Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.
> It would appear blond. And your grin.
> Your exaggerated American
> Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.
> ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 14-18)

Maybe. Even if the poet had noticed her, however, for a first sighting this is far too much knowledge (and this opening poem is all about knowledge, about what or whether we can know and about the loss of innocence). He cannot possibly have intuited in that first glimpse what he will later come to see as Plath's insecurity, her need to put on a face and to present to the world, which is captured here in the 'grin' that is wrested from the reader's expectations and the regular metre by a precipitate enjambment to become a grin *for*, a grin on display (we would expect 'Your exaggerated American grin | For the cameras, *etc.*'). 'Maybe I weighed you up', he says—if only as a female of the species—but 'Then I forgot':

> Yet I remember
> The picture.
> ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 19-20)

But not well. 'With their luggage?' he ponders: 'It seems unlikely' (l. 21)—as unlikely as a relationship with this alien blonde.

The poet is better on details of place and context, however. 'I was walking | Sore-footed', he says—not *sure*-footed, note, which is conjured and denied by its homophone—'under a hot sun, hot pavements':

> Was it then I bought a peach? That's as I remember.
> From a stall near Charing Cross Station.
> It was the first peach I had ever tasted.
> I could hardly believe how delicious.
> At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
> By my ignorance of the simplest things.
>
> ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 22-9)

We recall another famous peach, another opening poem, and another, altogether more timorous voice, also on the brink of a sensual experience:

> Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
> I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
>
> I do not think that they will ever sing for me.
>
> (T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', ll. 121-4)

Like Plath, Eliot was an American poet come to make a mark in Britain, but the casual irony does not end here. Hughes's peach has biblical as well as poetic precedents. If in 'Fulbright Scholars' the memory itself fails to come into focus and coalesce, the imagery is complex but decisive. The ignorant (innocent?) poet's first, uncertain glimpse of Plath coincides with his first eating a piece of fruit that proves inordinately 'delicious', a sensual experience carrying intimations of the Fall—a rite of initiation into the knowledge of good and evil. I say 'coincides', but coincidences prove fated and fateful in the universe of the *Birthday Letters*.

1

Before we look at just how fateful they turn out to be, it is worth asking ourselves what it is, exactly, we are dealing with here. What kind of a text *is* and *are* the *Birthday Letters*? What, for example, is their *genre*? Identifying the genre of a literary work cannot solve our interpretative problems for us,

but it can certainly help. The answer in this case seems to be given in the title: they are, first of all, letters—what we call familiar or private letters—written by the poet Ted Hughes to his dead wife, Sylvia Plath, over the years following her suicide in 1963, and finally (and sensationally) published in 1998, the year of Hughes's death. Hughes always claimed that the birthday letters were a private affair, written originally to 'communicate' with Sylvia Plath, and never intended for publication. 'My book is a gathering of the occasions', he wrote in a letter to the judges of the Forward Poetry Prize he was awarded on its publication:

> written with no plan over about 25 years — in which I tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife . . . thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself, and to feel her there listening. Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until last year, when quite suddenly I realized I had to publish them, no matter what the consequences.[2]

They are also *birthday* letters. The idea of the '*birthday* letter' combines with the suggestion of a constant and recurrent intimacy something much darker, something traumatic: a 'compulsion to repeat' (Freud),[3] to revisit ritualistically; the desire to exorcise. 'Psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature' to quote Lajos Székely,

> contains several descriptions of cases where anniversaries of painful and conflictual events in an individual's life possess crucial significances, as in the loss of an ambivalently beloved person. Individuals who seem to function well and to enjoy sound inner stability can suddenly suffer a mental breakdown on anniversaries: neurotic or psychotic symptoms are manifested.[4]

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[2] As quoted in Amelia Gentleman, 'Accolade for Hughes's Poems of Love and Loss', *The Guardian*, 8 October 1998, p. 4.

[3] Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', translated James Strachey, in *Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 269-338 (pp. 290-5).

[4] Lajos Székely, 'Anniversaries, Unfinished Mourning, Time and the Invention of the Calendar: A Psychoanalytic *aperçu*'. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 1 (1978), pp. 115-146 (p. 115).

Critics have noted that the 'birthday' of the book's title alludes to a number of poems by Sylvia Plath that use birthdays metaphorically for renewal and artistic creation: 'Morning Song', 'Stillborn', 'A Birthday Present', 'Three Women', 'Poem for a Birthday'.[5] As if this allusion to Plath's poetry and to the children she and Hughes bore together were not ironic enough in itself, however, the preoccupation of the *Birthday Letters* is not with birthdays at all, it is with death, and with the deathday: they are, in fact, *Deathday Letters*. What makes them possible—the recurrent occasion and the informing motive—is the suicide of Sylvia Plath.

But even the familiar letters we write to friends and family negotiate between the private and the public realms, and can imply a larger audience than just the person addressed. This is especially true of a writer's letters, of course, more true again when the person addressed is actually dead, and most true when the letters themselves are poems that are actually published by the author him- or herself for other people to read. When the decision to publish had been made, all of the poems were revised and a number of others written for the express purpose of filling out a published volume, turning it from a collection of *poems* into a *collection* of poems, a *livre composé*. If they were ever private letters—and I am questioning the possibility of a purely private writing—they were soon transformed into public documents.

The more we look into it, in fact, the more we realise that the familiar or private letter between two parties in a specific relationship in specific circumstances, written with a directness of communication that is no less performative than it is informative, lies behind many forms of public writing—including, besides the novel and certain kinds of lyric poetry, newspapers and the books of the New Testament. Letters are a flexible medium, in other words, out of which have evolved many more public functions and institutional practices.

If these ostensibly familiar letters cannot be limited to the 'inner contact' they seek between Hughes and his dead wife, then, for whom *are*

[5] See, for example, Ian Sansom, 'I was there, I saw it', review of *Birthday Letters* in the *London Review of Books*, 19 February 1998 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n04/print/sans01_.html>

they written? As acutely as any other collection of poems by a major writer, *Birthday Letters* raises the issue, beyond genre, of audience—at the same time as it raises corresponding questions of authorship and agency. The very fact that neither the poet nor his commentators have to go into the story behind the letters in too much detail—the story of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, that is—has something to tell us about what the *Birthday Letters* represent and for whom they were written. Following Plath's suicide, the story of her and Hughes's relationship very quickly acquired the kind of communal and proverbial status of a myth, up there with the lovers Antony and Cleopatra and Abelard and Eloise, except that the 'Ted and Sylvia' story is still too recent and is too controversial to have acquired a settled, mythic status. *Birthday Letters* amounts to what Randall Stevenson has called 'a hugely public exposure of the most famous, and troubled, relationship in late twentieth-century poetry'.[6] Every educated person knew about the relationship and had an opinion, it seemed, or had an opinion even without knowing about it.

The controversy surrounding the couple, especially since the copycat suicide in 1969 of Hughes's second wife, Assia Wevill—'the huge outcry that', Hughes says, 'flushed me from my thicket in 1970-71-72 when Sylvia's poems & novel hit the first militant wave of Feminism'[7]—becomes part of the context required to make sense of the *Birthday Letters*. There can be no question that the individual poems comprising *Birthday Letters* were all written or revised with the knowledge of this controversy in mind. More to the point, they were written with the knowledge of the readers' knowledge of this controversy in mind. Hence my title, 'in dialogue with the living and the dead'. Not only is *Birthday Letters* in dialogue with the dead—most obviously and extensively with Plath and her poetry, but also with a whole host of other dead poets (Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas to name but a few)—it is also in dialogue with the living: with his and Plath's shared and separate readerships, that is, and with Plath's reputation. More specifically, the letters are an elaborate rejoinder, an answering or writing back and an

[6] Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England?*, The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 12, 1960-2000 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 205.

[7] Ted Hughes, in a letter to Keith Sagar, 18 July 1998, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 719.

apologia pro sua vita that yearns to persuade, not just the poet himself (though the need to convince himself should never be underestimated), but also his doubters and accusers. 'The book has a clear and practical purpose', writes Ian Sansom: 'correcting distortions, setting the record straight, putting right the gossips and the speculators, the detractors and the critics'.

'But', continues Sansom, 'it is by no means a final statement of "fact"'.[8] Born out of and into a conflict of perspectives, the *Birthday Letters* implicitly recognise that they are incapable of silencing controversy. The enormous popularity of *Birthday Letters* amongst an educated reading public that had largely given up on poetry, selling upwards of 150,000 copies in its first years, is testament to the rhetorical violence, as well as to the extent and sensation of that conflict. As with the best of confessional literature (Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath) we are left with a busy conflation or con*fusion* of the public and the private, one that is impossible to disentangle.

2

Even if we could ignore the controversy, the *Birthday Letters* are, as letters, strange—or, more accurately, *estranged*. Though predicated on separation, letters are designed to close the distance between two intimates (usually the major performative aspiration). Here, in Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, there remains an unbridgeable rupture: the rupture of death, in the first instance, but also the rupture brought about by an intractable selfhood. 'Letter for letter is the law of correspondence', or so the proverb goes. Here, however, there can be no correspondence, nothing corresponding. Note how sparingly Hughes uses the word 'our', for example—even their daughter becomes 'your daughter' in 'Daffodils' (l. 3)—and when he does use the third person plural ('we', 'us', 'our') how often the sense of affinity and intimacy it carries is undercut: 'Our Marriage had failed' ('The Epiphany', l. 63). Alienation and isolation seem to be the very condition of these often willfully, even perversely unsentimental letters. Witness the alienation, not

[8] Ian Sansom, 'I was there, I saw it' <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n04/print/sans01_.html>.

just in the Gothic imagery, but also in the breakdown of pronouns in this bitter passage on their life in Boston:

> Alone
> Either of us might have met with a life.
> Siamese-twinned, each of us festering
> A unique soul-sepsis for the other.
> Each of us was the stake
> Impaling the other. We struggled
> Quietly through the streets, affirming each other,
> Dream-maimed and dream-blind.
> Your typewriter,
> Your alarm clock, your new sentence
> Tortured you, a cruelty computer
> Of agony niceties, daily afresh –
> Every letter a needle, as in Kafka.
> While I, like a poltergeist fog,
> Hung on you, fed on you—heavy, drugged
> With your nightmares and terrors. Inside your Bell Jar
> I was a mannikin in your eyeball.
> ('9 Willow Street', ll. 37-52)

The critic A. Alvarez called them 'scenes from a marriage, Hughes's take on the life they shared',[9] but if the poet shared a life with his object and subject (the poems are written to Plath, as well about her), there is precious little sharing of anything else going on in these poems. 'I was a fly outside on the window-pane | Of my own domestic drama', says the estranged poet in 'The Rabbit Catcher' (ll. 36-7)—then, as now.

To illustrate this, let me take an early poem in the sequence, 'Visit', one that again raises the possibility of intimacy only to disappoint or deny it, emphatically, with a divisive full stop acting as a caesura (or 'cut') in its final line: 'Your story. My story'. With Lucas, a male friend of his, a drunken Hughes has been 'Lobbing soil-clods up at a dark window' (l. 15), Plath's window, before he and Plath had formally met. Not only is there no romantic

[9] A. Alvarez, 'Your Story, My Story', review of *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes, *New Yorker*, 2 February 1998, p. 58.

infatuation motivating the act itself, but the mock-Petrarchan lover who is the object of their raucous suit (Plath) is not actually there. The action is a parody of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ('But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?' [II, 2]), raising the question that is raised so often throughout the sequence of who, exactly, wrote the script of their lives, the question of fate and personal responsibility:

> Drunk, he was certain it was yours.
> Half as drunk, I did not know he was wrong.
> Nor did I know I was being auditioned
> For the male lead in your drama,
> Miming through the first easy movements
> As with eyes closed, feeling for the role.
> As if a puppet were being tied on its strings,
> Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.
> I jigged through those gestures—watched and judged
> Only by starry darkness and a shadow.
> Unknown to you and not knowing you.
> Aiming to find you, and missing, and missing.
> Flinging earth at a glass that could not protect you
> Because you were not there.
>
> ('Visit', ll. 16-29)

Still on writing and difference, the living poet re-experiences the event years later, from her point of view, in the dead Plath's diaries:

> The freezing soil
> Of the garden, as I clawed it.
> All around me that midnight's
> Giant clock of frost. And somewhere
> Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,
> A pulse of fever. Somewhere
> Inside the numbness of the earth
> Our future trying to happen.
> I look up—as if to meet your voice
> With all its urgent future
> That has burst in on me. Then look back
> At the book of the printed words.
> You are ten years dead. It is only a story.

Your story. My story.

('Visit', ll. 75-88)

The story of Ted and Sylvia is not one story, in other words, but two. Reading her version, the poet feels compelled to tell his.

In the same way that the poems of *Birthday Letters* are a dark parody of familiar letters, so the relationship between the two lovers they project is often a dark parody of romantic love: a deliberate anti-climax or a violent, anti-romantic climax. 'At the end of the twentieth century', writes Nigel Glassy, 'Hughes could not deify his experiences of romantic love, and instead the call in *Birthday Letters* is to convey its dark underbelly, to give the entire, unmisted account'.[10] In the *Birthday Letters*, there is no initial revelation—'whoever loved that loved not at first sight' (Marlowe)—just questions, doubts, misunderstanding, misinterpretation (as we saw in 'Fulbright Scholars'): in short, conflicting perspectives. Familiar letters conventionally communicate to their recipients more or less remarkable events that the recipients have not experienced, sharing their experience. In the memories that comprise *Birthday Letters*, Hughes and Plath have shared the event itself, but not the experience; here, years later, one of the two registers his isolated experience of moments, incidents, events the two have shared, separating event and experience while effecting a separation between the letter writer and the person addressed and discussed. The storied Plath serenaded from the frozen earth below in 'Visit' is simply not there. Hughes's letters sunder, rather than share. They are, in this sense, not familiar but unfamiliar or 'defamiliarizing' letters: *unheimlich*, uncanny.

Take the example of 'Your Paris', whose very title uses the second person pronoun to enforce a separation between the two lovers:

Your Paris, I thought was American
I wanted to humour you
When you stepped in a shatter of exclamations,
Out of the Hotel des Deux Continents
Through frame after frame,

[10] Nigel Glassey, 'Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and *Birthday Letters*: Visions of Power and the Mythology of Containment', PhD, University of Sydney (2005), p. 106.

Street after street, of Impressionist paintings
('Your Paris', ll. 1-6)

Hotel des Deux Continents: even the hotel insists on difference and separation; the two continents are Hughes and Plath, Britain/Europe and America: continents apart. In '18 Rugby Street', Plath's body becomes a continent—'So this is America, I marvelled'—echoing a famously sensual lyric by the poet John Donne: 'O my America, my new found land' (Elegy XIX: 'To His Mistress, on Going to Bed'). America is (momentarily) marvellous, erotically charged. But strange.

Plath and Plath's Paris, then, are American. Hughes's Paris, on the other hand,

My Paris
Was only just not German. The capital
Of the Occupation and old nightmare
I read each bullet scar in the Quai stonework
With an eerie familiar feeling
('Your Paris', ll. 9-13)

Plath's Paris is envisaged by Hughes as the Paris of America expatriates: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, and Gertrude Stein. Hughes's Paris, on the other hand, was 'Occupied Paris': a Paris still occupied by the ghosts of the German troops of the Second World War.

I had rehearsed
Carefully, over and over, just those moments -
Most of my life, it seemed. While you
Called me Aristide Bruant and wanted
To draw *les toits*, and your ecstasies ricocheted
Off the walls patched and scabbed with posters –
I heard the contrabasso counterpoint
In my dog-nosed pondering analysis
Of café chairs where the SS mannequins
Had performed their *tableaux vivants*
So recently the coffee was still bitter
As acorns, and the waiters' eyes
Clogged with dregs of betrayal, reprisal, hatred.

I was not much ravished by the view of the roofs.
My Paris was a post-war utility survivor,
The stink of fear still hanging in the wardrobes,
Collaborateurs barely out of their twenties,
Every other face closed by the Camps
Of the Maquis. I was a ghostwatcher.
('Your Paris', ll. 15-33)

Both Hughes and Plath are 'ghostwatchers', as it happens, occupying 1950s Paris with figures and images from different pasts, and each occupying it differently, seeing it from different, conflicted perspectives. Indeed, Hughes everywhere sees conflict: where Plath's 'ecstasies ricocheted | Off the walls', Hughes hears bullets ricocheting off the walls—the walls, the pavements, and the posters of the Paris that Plath romanticises. (We can hear the sound of the bullets in Plath's excitement: 'you stepped in a shatter of exclamations'.) Each has a 'perspective' in and on this capital of painters:

My perspectives were veiled by what rose
Like methane from the reopened
Mass grave of Verdun.
('Your Paris', ll. 34-6)

Here Hughes extends his meditation on war to include perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most destructive, of all human battles (the battle between the Germans and the Allies in 1916 at Verdun). For Hughes, the artistic Paris of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Paris of the Impressionists and the Modernists—is gone. His are the bleaker 'perspectives' of a Paris occupied or colonised by Germans, hers the sentimental perspectives of a Paris colonised by artists, especially American artists.

Beyond this difference of perspectives, however, the poet's paranoid allusions to the Occupation raise the more general, psycho-spiritual issue of occupation or 'possession'—of one person entering into and taking over another—that is a recurrent theme of the *Birthday Letters*. (The 'dybbuk' that crops up in 'The Rabbit Catcher' (l. 6) is the lost soul of a dead person in Jewish superstition, a malicious spirit that takes possession of its victims.) And the German who occupies Sylvia Plath, according to Ted Hughes's mythic rendering of Plath and of their relationship, is her father, Otto Plath:

the great spoiler; the precursor and harbinger of death, to whose grave Hughes sees Plath returning on her suicide in 1963.

3

I started out by talking of the *Birthday Letters* as letters; what I am signalling in the phrase 'mythic rendering' is the fact that they are *verse* letters—that, before anything else, they are poems. Hughes might have talked of 'direct, private, inner contact with my first wife', but he also recognized that there were artistic demands to be met, no less than personal or psychological ones. 'If things cannot be got off' the autobiographical level 'and onto the creative level', wrote Hughes to Keith Sagar of the *Birthday Letters* not long before he died, 'then they simply stay as if they were a recurrent stuck dream that simply goes on delivering its inescapable blows':

> I must take some uplift from the consistency of the interconnections—though I wrote them over such a long time, rarely re-reading them, merely adding another now & again, never regarding them as a single structure—in fact the book has a structure, intricate, & accurate so far as I can judge. Solidly of a piece, somehow. So I can't care what people say. It has worked for me—better than I'd thought possible. Though I see now that any traumatic event—if writing is your method—has to be dealt with deliberately. An image has to be looked for—consciously—and then mined to the limit: but not in autobiographical terms.[11]

As poems, Hughes's 'letters' use literature to create literature, 'deliberately'. (Poem after poem rewrites a Plath original, often repeating or echoing its title,[12] but Plath is only one among a number of poetic precursors; the closing passage from 'Visit' I quoted earlier, for example, involves an elaborate play on Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', with its frozen stillness and

[11] Ted Hughes, letter to Keith Sagar, 18 July 1998, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Reid, p. 720.

[12] For extended account of Hughes's revisionary incorporation and contestation of Plath's poetry, see Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.3-4 (2000), pp. 455-69.

its coupling and contrasting of the father and child.) As poems, moreover, Hughes's 'letters' draw upon mythology—upon a variety of mythologies—while aspiring in a characteristically mythopoeic way to create their own personal myth. Ted Hughes is one of the great mythmakers of modern English poetry, deriving his inspiration from W. B. Yeats and, before him, from William Blake, whose mythic embodiment of the spirit of poetry, Los, famously strove to 'Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans'. In the confessional poetry of *Birthday Letters*, no less than in the darkly anti-biblical, anti-humanist *Crow*, Hughes seeks a primal narrative sequence to explain otherwise bewildering and perverse human and natural phenomena, and to express what he takes to be a common cultural intuition or anxiety—what he calls 'the deeper shared understandings that keep us intact as a group'.[13]

In a poem like 'The Minotaur', the personal and the mythic—and the personal mythmaking—all come together. Hughes utilizes the myth of the half-human, half-bull familiar from Greek mythology, in which the Minotaur is the monstrous offspring of the Cretan queen, Pasiphæ, and a bull that was given by the sea god, Poseidon, as a gift to Pasiphæ's husband, king Minos. Minos had deceived Poseidon by not sacrificing the animal as he had promised and Pasiphæ had 'disgraced herself by her unnatural passion for a bull'.[14] Most commonly figured with the body of a man and the head of a bull (though sometimes the reverse), the Minotaur is a deity of darkness, death, and winter whom king Minos had enclosed within a labyrinth built by Dædalus, where he was fed on the flesh of maidens and youths. As half bull, and therefore hugely powerful, and as a devourer of humans, the Minotaur was the god of cannibalistic sacrifices, and (by extension) symbolic of devouring and destruction generally. Later the Minotaur would be killed by Theseus, who was able to escape the labyrinth with the help of a thread given to him by Ariadne (daughter of Minos) that allowed him to retrace his steps.

The occasion commemorated in this uncharacteristically stanzaic poem of Hughes (the majority of the *Birthday Letters* are in an irregular verse,

[13] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 310.

[14] See the entries on the Minotaur and on Pasiphæ in J. Lempriere, *A Classical Dictionary*, seventh edition (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809).

hovering somewhere between blank and free, and divided into verse paragraphs rather than regular stanzas) is one on which Plath has been overcome (possessed) by a superhuman passion:

> Demented by my being
> Twenty minutes late for baby-minding.
>
> ('The Minotaur', ll. 7-8)

The immediate object upon which she vents her wrath—Hughes's 'mother's heirloom sideboard'—is obviously symbolic of Hughes himself, of his family rather than hers, of the past (inheritance, tradition) rather than the present, and it comes 'under the hammer' (l. 5) in a quite savage, literal way: rather than being auctioned off, as the expression suggests, it is smashed 'into kindling'. It is a climactic, even apocalyptic moment. But even as Plath is possessed by this superhuman passion, giving her superhuman strength—even as she becomes the monstrous Minotaur of the title—the poem gathers the incident into the larger, composite myth of the *Birthday Letters*, as Plath, with Hughes's encouragement (not to say goading), succumbs to her fate:

> 'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,
> Smash it into kindling.
> That's the stuff you're keeping out of your poems!'
> And later, considered and calmer,
>
> 'Get that shoulder under your stanzas
> And we'll be away.' Deep in the cave of your ear
> The goblin snapped his fingers.
> So what had I given him?
>
> ('The Minotaur', ll. 9-16)

The bullish shoulders of the Minotaur focus its enormous strength. It is precisely this Dionysiac passion that Plath has been 'keeping out of [her] poems', but her tapping into this—as indeed she does in her confessional art, again and again—is seen as having fatal consequences. At the centre of her labyrinthine ear lies a goblin, at the centre of her labyrinthine mind a Minotaur. In an image that inverts that of the salutary thread given by Ariadne to Theseus in the myth to enable him to escape the labyrinth of the Minotaur, Hughes sees Plath's evocation of her superhuman, hitherto repressed passion as both empowering and overpowering, disastrous:

energizing her poetry but 'unravelling' their marriage, alienating her from her children, abandoning her mother, and driving her back to her father, the 'real' Minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth of her disturbed mind:

> The bloody end of the skein
> That unravelled your marriage,
> Left your children echoing
> Like tunnels in a labyrinth.
>
> Left your mother a dead-end,
> Brought you to the horned, bellowing
> Grave of your risen father –
> And your own corpse in it.
>
> ('The Minotaur', ll. 17-24)

It all began (according to Hughes's psychoanalysis of his dead wife, after Plath herself[15]) with the unresolved death of Otto Plath from untreated diabetes when the young Sylvia was aged eight; the utter disproportion of Plath's reaction to Hughes's lateness in the poem is identified as a kind of existential anger triggered by her father's untimely death. At once disastrous and inevitable, Plath's compact with her own rage has all the fatal consequences of a Greek tragedy. Hughes figures himself throughout this tragedy (and this is true of a number of other poems in *Birthday Letters*) as a not quite innocent audience, the instigator of a calamity that he is as powerless to control as Plath herself is—as powerless to control as his own readers are, he also suggests, including amongst those all the accusers who would make scandal or ideological capital out of her life and death.

The conflict of perspectives in *Birthday Letters* is not simply a conflict between Hughes's 'version' and Plath's 'version', nor is the conflict just one between Hughes's version and the version of those who felt he had callously

[15] 'In *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes lifts the plot of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" and offers it as the "true story" of her death', writes Sarah Churchwell, 'Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', Contemporary Literature, 42:1 (Spring 2001), pp. 102-48 (p.124). Compare Alan Williamson on Hughes's 'obsession with Plath's father-obsession', 'A Marriage between Writers: *Birthday Letters* as Memoir and as Poetry', *The American Poetry Review*, 27:5 (September/October 1998), pp. 11-13 (p. 12).

and culpably contributed to Sylvia Plath's mental breakdown and suicide. The conflict is also between Hughes's version and Hughes's version—which is only to say that Hughes is large, and contains multitudes, if not directly contradicting himself (though there is that) then offering many and various versions of Sylvia Plath, and of the events of their lives. This is in part to do with the uncertainties of memory, of course, but if we are looking for conflicting perspectives in *Birthday Letters*, we should never ignore or underestimate Hughes's own. In one poem after another he will resign Plath to her preordained fate; her death was, we are told, beyond her or him or any of us, puppets as we are of fate. Or is it of poetry, or of some childhood trauma, or of some more arcane, not to say superstitious impulse from within or from outside? Or are we puppets of all of the above?

> Your worship needed a god.
> Where it lacked one, it found one.
> Ordinary jocks became gods –
> Deified by your infatuation
> That seemed to have been destined at birth for a god.
> It was a god-seeker. A god-finder.
> Your Daddy had been aiming you at God
> When his death touched the trigger.
> In a flash
> You saw your whole life. You ricocheted
> The length of your Alpha career
> With the fury
> Of a high velocity bullet
> ('The Shot', ll. 1-12)

Hughes cannot be sure. Plath is by turns a child, a priestess, a dybbuk, Cinderella, an American naif, an unexplored continent. It may be that Plath was protean, changeable—that, certainly, is part of the myth—but the poet himself contributes to that changefulness, seeing her from conflicting emotional and interpretative perspectives. There is no doubt that, throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes returns obsessively to certain explanations (or rationalizations) of the failure of his and Plath's marriage and of her suicide, but he is not consistent, exploiting the occasional nature of the different lyrics' composition to rehearse different attitudes, different emotional responses, different myths: 'Your story. My story'. 'That intimate voice', writes Katha Pollitt, 'is overwhelmed by others: ranting, self-justifying,

rambling, flaccid, bombastic'.[16] There are indeed plenty of conflicting voices in *Birthday Letters*, which (and this is a point too often overlooked) *reflects on*, no less than it reflects, the changeable nature of human emotion and allegiance, and the vulnerability of our understanding. Perhaps, after all, the best way of approaching the story of Sylvia Plath told by Ted Hughes in *Birthday Letters* is simply to acknowledge its fictive nature, to read it as mythopoeic and (as Hughes suggests) look for a patterning of poetic statements that reaches beyond trying to make sense of Plath's, or of any other human life, to what the story figures as to the primal mysteries of mind and fate.

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[16] Katha Pollitt, 'Peering into the Bell Jar', review of *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes, *New York Review of Books*, 1 March 1998, p. 4.

Troublesome Teleri: Contemporary Feminist Utopianism in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Lady of Avalon*

JAN SHAW

Lady of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley is part of a trilogy[1] that takes the idea of Avalon from medieval Arthurian literature and reworks it to create an alternative social, cultural and religious community. The trilogy tracks the development of the mythical Avalon from its establishment in *The Forests of Avalon*, through its development into a significant social and political force in *Lady of Avalon*, to its final rise and fall during the reign of King Arthur in *The Mists of Avalon*. This trilogy is, *prima facie*, a feminist project, taking the marginalised mysterious feminine otherworld and reclaiming it, developing it as a feminine narratological space that has been elided by mainstream masculine literatures.

While *Lady of Avalon* is the middle book in the fictional chronology of the trilogy, it was the last to be produced. The first volume was *The Mists of Avalon*, a hugely commercially successful retelling of the Arthurian story. As an Arthurian text this work has received some critical attention.[2] Bradley's

[1] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Lady of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1997); Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Forests of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1993); Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1983). All quotations will be from these editions.

[2] For a general positive reception see Lee Ann Tobin, 'Why Change the Arthur Story? Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*', *Extrapolation*, 34:2 (1993), 147-57, and Diana L. Paxson, 'Marion Zimmer Bradley and *The Mists of Avalon*', *Arthuriana*, 9:1 (1999), 110-126. For discussion of Bradley's conception of the Goddess see Carrol L. Fry, '"What God Doth the Wizard Pray To": Neo-Pagan Witchcraft and Fantasy Fiction', *Extrapolation*, 31:4 (1990) 333-346, and Victoria Sharpe, 'The Goddess Restored', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 9:1 (1998),

two prequels to *The Mists of Avalon*, while less successful in terms of sales, are arguably more successful as feminist projects. Surprisingly, however, *The Forests of Avalon* and *Lady of Avalon* have received no critical attention.

In *The Forests of Avalon*, Avalon is established as an escape from the oppressions of patriarchy; it is a community of self-sufficient women who are not beholden to men for their livelihood or well-being, and thus they explicitly refuse the status of marketable objects in the patriarchal economy of exchange. *Lady of Avalon* is a novel in three parts. Set in the years 96-118 A.D., Part I tells of the moving of Avalon into the mists to protect it against both the Roman legions and the violence of the extremist Christian priests. The self-proclaimed independence and autonomy of *The Forests of Avalon* is not enough to free women from the physical violence legitimated by a patriarchal order, so magic is invoked to separate Avalon from the world. In Part II of *Lady of Avalon* (285-293 A.D.), Avalon has been established in the world as a centre of learning and privileged knowledge for some 160 years. From this position Dierna, the High Priestess, attempts to engage with, and wield influence in, the world of men. To participate in this economy, Dierna makes a strategic decision. In order to position herself as an actor in the political economy, she must necessarily position other women as objects of exchange within this economy. At this moment the utopic ideal of Avalon turns into a dystopic regime, where personal identity is subsumed within the 'universal good', a good determined by those with access to mysterious and privileged knowledge and power. Part III (440-452 A.D.) tells of the coming of age of Viviane, who is to become the most powerful and awe-inspiring High Priestess of Avalon in the chronologically later text, *The Mists of Avalon*.

36-45. For a positive reception of lesbian politics see Marilyn R Farwell, 'Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*' in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook,* ed. and intro. Thelma S Fenster (New York, NY: Garland, 1996) pp. 319-30. For a negative strain see particularly Karin E. C. Fuog, 'Imprisoned in the Phallic Oak: Marion Zimmer Bradley and Merlin's Seductress', *Quondam et Futurus: A Journal of Arthurian Interpretations*, 1:1 (1991) p. 73-88, and James Noble, 'Feminism, Homosexuality, and Homophobia in *The Mists of Avalon*', in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend,* ed. & introd. Martin B. Shichtman, James P. Carley (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994) pp. 288-96.

This essay explores the development of the character Teleri in Part II of the text. Teleri becomes a pawn in Dierna's political game, demonstrating that one person's utopia can easily become another's dystopia. On the face of it this tale is dystopic, with Teleri's situation seemingly going from bad to worse as the narrative continues. It does, however, have several 'glimpses' of processes which qualify and invert the dystopian condition. The tale of Teleri could, therefore, be interpreted as a utopian dystopia along the lines described by Dunja M. Mohr, who argues that 'utopian dystopias' are dystopias with a utopian subtext: 'the utopian subtext is interwoven as a continuous narrative strand within the dystopian text'.[3] While the tale of Teleri might indeed be a utopian dystopia, it introduces a narrative thread sufficiently subversive to undermine the paradigms of established order that permeate the larger text, destabilising many of the apparent certainties found in the main narrative. The tale of Teleri can therefore be approached as an example of what Lucy Sargisson has identified as feminist utopianism. Finally, this paper concludes that utopianism in *Lady of Avalon* is not to be found in Avalon itself, but rather in the continual resistance and critical reflection that was the impetus for the foundation of that alternative society.

Contemporary feminist Utopianism

In her significant and influential work *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*,[4] Sargisson theorises utopianism as an approach to texts. Rather than considering the notion of utopianism as associated with a model or 'blueprint' of an ideal society, as an artifact or fixed object, Sargisson is more concerned with utopianism as a process of reading. For Sargisson, utopianism in texts is evidenced by the spaces they create that allow certain kinds of reading to take place.

Sargisson takes the conventional idea of the blueprint model as her point of departure in considering feminist utopianism. Transgressing the categorical

[3] Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, NC, USA: McFarland, 2005).
[4] Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

boundaries of Krishan Kumar's five types of ideal society[5] and drawing on Thomas More's *Utopia* for support, Sargisson argues that one of the functions of traditional utopias has been social debate and critique. Such critiques are necessarily subversive as they not only operate internally to the text, but also turn a critical eye to the 'political present'.[6] Drawing particularly on More's *Utopia*, Sargisson argues that this subversion extends to a critique of system and order, of the 'perfect society'. Contrary to conventional belief, therefore, Sargisson presents utopianism as fundamentally subversive of the blueprint model. In her analysis of a number of feminist texts from the late twentieth century, Sargisson finds that one of the main functions of feminist utopianism is to undercut the notion of perfection, of the one truth, of the ideal society. The disruption of the blueprint model, overlaid with the notion of social and political critique, is the focus of Sargisson's utopian approach.

The notion of the perfect society presents a number of problems for feminism. It assumes the possibility of perfection, the one ideal. To strive for perfection is also to strive for the one truth, the one answer. Sargisson problematises this on a number of levels. On a most basic level, 'To strive for perfection is to strive for death' (37). Perfection means there is nowhere else to go. Perfection necessarily means the end of process, which is stasis. The most perfect end, the most perfect closure, is death.

Sargisson further critiques this view of utopia as having a 'universalising function' (51). The 'perfect society' depicted will be, necessarily, equally perfect for everyone. This is based upon the ideal generic 'human'. Sargisson notes, however, that traditional, mainstream utopian literature and theory grants this universal 'human' an 'abundance of qualities commonly associated with masculinity. The ideal utopian subject, for instance, conquers passion by the exercise of reason, and his mind conquers his body.' (51). Indeed, feminist

[5] In *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) Kumar posits that utopia is 'distinct and different' (p. 17) from the other numerous possibilities of ideal society, of which he delineates four major alternatives: the 'golden age', arcadia or pastoral (p. 3); the Land of Cockayne (after the medieval poem) which is a land of 'extravagance, exuberance and excess' (p. 6); the millenium or 'once and future Paradise' based largely upon a Christian model (p. 6); and the ideal city or 'perfect commonwealth', founded in the tradition of classical democracy (p. 12). Sargisson critiques this view as content driven.

[6] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p.28.

critique has long argued that the figure of the universal 'human' is in fact masculine. From a feminist perspective, the ideological construct human/non-human is underpinned by that of man/woman and masculine/feminine which further manifests itself as reason/passion and mind/body. The traditional view of utopia is, therefore, fundamentally established upon the notion of the binary dichotomy; it sets up a binarism of truth/non-truth.

The fundamental flaw of the binary dichotomy is that while it appears to delineate two separate entities—one and another—it in fact takes the form one/not one. The binary dichotomy describes a unity divided into two parts that are mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. Together they make up the whole universe of possibility for that particular notion. Helene Cixous has famously demonstrated that the two parts are in a hierarchical relation, with one having a positive value, and the other a negative value. In other words, one is presence and the other is absence of positive value.[7] For Luce Irigaray, the other can be understood as that which is cast off by the one, that which is rejected by the one: the other is made up of 'scraps, uncollected debris'.[8] The irony is, of course, that the one is in fact reliant upon the other for its definition, as the relation between the one and the other is based purely upon differentiation. The other supports the one by defining what the one is not. By being what he is not, the other operates to reinforce—to reflect back—to the one an image sanitised of all impurities and imperfections that are safely, carefully contained within the other. Such dependency is of course strategically and systemically denied.

Sargisson suggests that contemporary feminist utopianism proposes another kind of otherness. Rather than the binary dichotomy which is A/not A, feminist theory looks to the A/B of difference, where A and B are not defined in terms of one another, and are therefore not in a binary relation. This means that the formulation could be A/B/C or any number of possibilities, quite simply because their relation is not mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. This is closely linked to the 'double gesture' Derrida associates with the process of deconstruction:

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[7] Helene Cixous, 'From "Sorties"', *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton UK: Harvester Press, 1981).
[8] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 30.

> Deconstruction cannot limit itself, or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture ... practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions it criticizes. [9]

A reversal of the binary dichotomy is only the first step. To effect any lasting change, the paradigm of mutually exclusive and exhaustive binaries must be undercut and displaced. How is this to be done? Irigaray makes a number of suggestions:

> Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions* ... Insist also and deliberately upon those *blanks* in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion ... Reinscribe them hither and thither as *divergencies*, otherwise and elsewhere than they are expected, in *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid ... *Overthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current ... Make it impossible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why[10]

> In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.[11]

This paper argues that the Tale of Teleri goes some way to effecting this destabilisation. The tale begins with Teleri trying to take control of binary constructions by simply reversing the binary construct and assuming the

[9] Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 108.
[10] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York; Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 142.
[11] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 78.

position of subject, but she cannot throw off the relentless gendering implicit in binary operations. In the end Teleri finds that the only escape is to cast off the binary paradigm and embrace the disruption and risk associated with stepping outside the prescribed order. Teleri's actions become deeply subversive of the dominant order, and wreak havoc upon it. On the level of characterisation, Teleri comes to learn that freedom is release from ideological constraint. On the level of the wider narrative, the tale represents the potential of the feminine when let loose on structures of logocentric order, of the feminine as subversion of such an order.

Entrapment and the setting up of binaries

Teleri recognises early in her life that the world operates according an underlying paradigm of binarisms, and that the pairs thus described are not of equal value. She does not want to be in the position of object, of other, into which these binarisms would cast her. Instead, she constructs her own binary of freedom/entrapment, which is grounded in a double movement of both 'going beyond' and freedom from men. Teleri imagines Avalon as a magical place, beyond the constraining walls of her father's town, a utopia of feminine agency and freedom. In such a place, Teleri seems to assume, she would automatically take a leadership role, thus assuming a subject position. Inevitably, however, Avalon is no utopia. While women are free from men in Avalon, it is another hierarchical society that functions within a paradigm of binary order, an order in which Teleri finds herself on the wrong side of the binary divide.

Teleri is the daughter of Eiddin Mynoc, a powerful and wealthy regional prince of the Britons. She has been educated alongside her brothers, speaking with her father 'in the cultivated Latin which the Prince had required all his children to learn'.[12] Well-educated and perceptive, Teleri recognises all around her the binaries that would operate to contain her life. However safe and protected it might be, Teleri does not identify with such a life, likening it to the luxurious house in which she lives: 'protected and nurtured, but turned inward' (151). Even the rain in the atrium is tamed, it simply falls, adding to

[12] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Lady of Avalon* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1998) p. 150.

the beauty of the 'potted' flowers, cultivated, encircled, entrapped. No matter how beautiful it might be, such a life is a 'cage' (210, 288), a trap from which there is no escape, a wife is 'a slave', marriage is 'bondage' (199). Within this world of women the only movement is an endless cycle of repetition, of sameness: 'The women in my father's hall could talk of nothing but men and babies' (168). Teleri wants nothing to do with either. For her, such a life of enclosure and repetition is no life.

Teleri dreams instead of movement, of journeys, of going beyond:

> But there was a ladder that led to the rooftop. ... *Hitching* up her skirts, Teleri *climbed* it, *opened* the trapdoor, and *turned* to face the wind. Rain *stung* her cheeks; in a few moments her hair was wet and water was *running* down her neck to *soak* her gown. She did not care. Her father's walls gleamed pale through the rain, but above them she could see the grey blur of the hills.
>
> 'Soon I will *see what lies beyond* you,' she whispered. 'And then I will be free!' (151, my emphasis).

Teleri has found a trapdoor out of her stifling life and gone beyond it into the cold and rain. She is capable of her own movement: 'hitching', 'climbed', 'opened', 'turned'; and unlike in the atrium, the rain on the rooftop is unconstrained and invigorating: 'stung', 'running', 'soak'. For Teleri freedom is having no borders, seeing 'what lies beyond'.

Teleri thus constructs a definition of freedom that is quite literally, geographically, going beyond, and that necessarily precludes marriage. She identifies with Avalon, a place she has only heard about in stories, and imagines that it will deliver her the freedom she desires:

> the priestesses did not marry. If they wished they took lovers in the holy rites and bore children, but they answered to no man. The priestesses of Avalon had powerful magic. (151)

Thus Teleri establishes, within her own understanding of the world, an underlying dichotomy of freedom/entrapment based upon an alignment of freedom with that which lies beyond, and with personal and especially sexual agency, while entrapment is aligned with a range of notions that revolve

around marriage: obedience to husband, bearing children, and the domestic realm as enclosure. For Teleri Avalon represents this freedom, she constructs it in her mind as a utopia of the blueprint type, with a strict social order based upon a reversal of existing social codes, elevating women to subjecthood through the casting out of men.

So, while Teleri lives in a world that would position her as the other in the self/other relation, and so relentlessly manoeuvre her into marriage and domesticity, there is an alternative in Avalon. Teleri is able to contemplate Avalon because her father recognises her particularity and wishes to accommodate her uniqueness. Teleri knows her father's behaviour is 'indulgent' (150), as 'most girls her age had already been married off without anyone's considering their wishes at all' (151). He allows Teleri to choose, so Teleri goes to Avalon.

Teleri is disappointed. Avalon does not deliver the freedom she had come to expect.

> To sit spinning with the other women was not the life of freedom she had imagined when she begged her father to let her come to Avalon. *Will I yearn always for a happiness that is beyond my grasp?* She wondered then. *Or will I learn in time to live contentedly within the mists that wall us round?* (171)

The domesticity of life on Avalon is an unpleasant surprise. While Teleri admits that the conversation 'has some meaning' (168), she still wonders about the beyond where happiness resides. The mists also have a slightly sinister quality. They are actively encircling and entrapping. Unlike the walls of Teleri's father's house that can be climbed, stood upon, and seen beyond, the mists are intangible and thus cannot be grappled with or surmounted. The mists are quite literally impassable without a magic spell. For Teleri Avalon is a strange and unexpected mixture. While it offers freedom from men, still there are domestic needs to be attended to and all this comes with the somewhat troubling enclosure of the mists, which are an impenetrable barrier in both directions.

Teleri's experience undercuts her notion of Avalon as a utopia of feminine freedom and agency, and also challenges her understanding of

freedom and entrapment as clear-cut binarised terms. Avalon nevertheless reinforces the binary as an idealised paradigm of order. Avalon presents its own range of hierarchical binaries, including consecrated/ unconsecrated priestess and privileged/unprivileged knowledge. Somewhat paradoxically, consecrated priestesses, who are sworn to Avalon for life, are the only ones who have the privileged knowledge that enables them to move through the mists at will, thus, only those who are bound are free. As an unconsecrated priestess Teleri finds herself in a domestic space more securely enclosed than that from which she has apparently escaped. The problem for Teleri on Avalon is that she finds herself enmeshed in a new range of binary constructs, but she is on the wrong side of the divide. Her subjecthood has been elided and she has no agency. In Avalon, as a trainee priestess, she is only a subject in waiting with the promise of eventual transformation into a subject operating as the main containment mechanism.

Instead of becoming a priestess, however, at what seems like the eleventh hour Dierna claims that to serve the goddess Teleri must marry Carausius. Teleri objects to the marriage in the strongest terms, but her objections are ignored as personal. Her wishes/fears/desires are treated as though they are nothing. She must bow to the universal good. Thus the particularity or uniqueness of the self, that which was celebrated by her father and brought her to Avalon, is pushed aside and deemed to be of no importance. Dierna only attends to the universal, which is, she argues, the defence of Britannia.

Instead of allowing Teleri her uniqueness, Dierna inscribes an identity upon her. Dierna identifies Teleri to Carausius as 'the daughter of Eiddin Mynoc. Her birth is high enough so that it will be considered a worthy alliance, and she is beautiful' (196). Seeking to arrange a marriage, Dierna identifies Teleri as having desirable marketable qualities within this economy: she has 'high birth' and is 'beautiful'. Dierna continues by granting to Teleri herself this identity, strategically adding the characteristic of 'most gifted': 'you are the fairest and most gifted of our maidens yet unsworn, and you are of high birth' (198). Such characteristics are generalities. They might identify Teleri in this instance, but she is interchangeable with any other person who satisfies these criteria. They do not tell us *who* Teleri is, they tell us *what* she is. As Adriana Cavarero explains:

> While claiming to be valid for every*one* that is human—who is

> rational and thinking, as the experts would say—the subject lets itself be seduced by a universality that makes it into an abstract substance. The fragility of each *one* is thus inevitably sacrificed to the philosophical glories of the One.[13]

There are two points to note here. First, *who* we are is personal and individual. Being thus insignificant in the wider frame, *who* we are is easily dismissed, as Dierna does above with Teleri. However, there is the second point. The universal, as abstract and philosophical, nevertheless addresses the One who is constructed within its schema. So, if one aligns oneself with the One, if one can tap into this vein and make oneself recognisable as a One, then one can accede to the status of a universal subject. This means that, while *who* we are might go unrecognised, *what* we are, if it is an identity that has status and meaning in the universal, might perhaps be used as a mechanism to accrue benefits. The *who* and the *what*, by this calculation, are not mutually exclusive, depending of course upon *who* you happen to be. The universal good is therefore not really universal at all.

Necessarily, the costs and benefits within such a system are unevenly distributed. As an object of exchange, Teleri cannot be an actor in the economy of exchange, she can only be acted upon. She can accrue no benefit to herself. Nevertheless, in this economy Teleri has significant exchange value, as carefully itemised by Dierna. She also has use value. As Carausius' wife Teleri is a service provider on a number of levels. Publicly, she provides political advantage to Carausius, connecting him simultaneously with the royal house of the Durotriges and with Avalon. However, more importantly for Carausius and Dierna, Teleri uses her powers to convey Dierna's sightings to Carausius, and thus expedites his military successes against the Saxon raiders. On the back of this marriage Carausius goes from strength to strength, relishing in the glory: 'when the men of the fleet raised him on their shields to acclaim him Emperor, he lifted his arms, accepting their love, and their land' (240). Dierna too has much to gain from the alliance between Carausius and Avalon. As she rides off in the carriage with Teleri to the wedding, Dierna muses upon the tales that will be told of her achievements in the histories of Avalon, and realises that they 'lay in this journey' (201-2). In other words,

[13] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 38.

Dierna's historical legacy is dependent upon the alliance she is forging with Carausius, and Teleri is simply the means for her to achieve this end. For Teleri there is nothing of herself, nothing for herself.

So it can be seen that the dichotomies Dierna constructs and enforces upon Teleri—the particular/universal that she maps onto who/what we are, and the subject/object and self/other that underpin them—are mutually exclusive only as Dierna strategically applies them to Teleri. For Dierna herself, however, it is another matter. Through the process of identifying Teleri, of naming her, Dierna both claims Teleri as her own and also asserts herself as a subject of knowledge.

Dierna is operating within an economy that has been aligned by Derrida with the 'Drive of the Proper'; for Derrida, the proper is linked with propriety, property, appropriation, the proper place and the proper name.[14] The proper offers mastery to the subject: 'it is the infinite mastery that the agency of Being (and of the) proper seems to assure it'.[15] For Derrida naming is an act of appropriation, as Sargisson explains:

> Naming, for Derrida, is claiming. Naming, asking and deciding 'What is it?', is central to philosophical discourses and relies upon the possibility of attaining the truth. It assumes the (possible) presence of truth, hence logocentrism.[16]

Naming (and claiming) assumes an actor, a namer and claimer. Derrida links naming with the actions of God, who 'owns' the power of naming. In this context, the giving of a name is an act of positioning or organising, of labelling, of defining. The giving of a name is, in fact, an act of appropriation, a claiming of possession by the namer. Sargisson links this kind of actor with the author of the blueprint in popular conceptions of utopianism, as the namer of the perfect ideal. The gift of the blueprint is an act of appropriation, a claim of possession, an inscription of the ideal. The act of naming, by this account, is not something that just happens, it is

[14] *Derrida Reader*, p. 123. Translator Barbara Johnson notes: 'In French, "propre" can mean both "proper" and "own", *Derrida Reader*, p. 150 n. 4.
[15] *Derrida Reader*, p. 158.
[16] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 89.

something that must be enacted by someone. The act of naming is therefore not innocent.

Dierna is such an actor. Through the act of naming, Dierna has the capacity to create, or rather remake, Teleri into that which suits Dierna's scheme. Further, this act reduces Teleri to an object of possession of Dierna. Teleri is now able to be traded in the economy of the proper by Dierna for Dierna's own ends. Similarly, Dierna has the capacity to recreate herself as she sees fit. This means that Dierna is a subject of knowledge, and as such she can align herself with the universal; she can rework *who* she is with *what* she is (or rather, with what she should be, or what she would like to be). Moreover, Dierna's motivations are not innocent, but driven by her desire to author herself into the annals of Avalonian history. For Dierna, then, the particular and the universal, the *who* and the *what*, are inextricably interwoven. Thus the lie of the universal/particular and the what/who as mutually exclusive binaries is revealed. What really matters is whether or not one is a subject of knowledge, in other words, whether one has access to definitional discourses, and is able to rework them as required.

Thus it can be seen that Teleri's construct of utopian freedom as 'going beyond' and the absence of men is fundamentally flawed. Teleri recognises binary constructs as the underlying paradigmatic schema with gender as the main organising principle. Teleri resists the position in which this schema would place her as a woman and tries to negotiate out of this position by choosing the separatist feminine world of Avalon. Teleri finds, however, that Avalon is not a utopian world that will free her from subjection. Rather, she finds that Avalon is founded upon the same paradigms of order as the outside world. While Avalon's binarisms are not overtly underpinned by gender, they nevertheless necessarily repeat the relation of subjection between the one and the other. Changing the occupant of one position or the other does not reconfigure the structures of power. Further, through the acceptance of the apparent ubiquity of the binary structure, Teleri unwittingly participates in her own subjection. Moreover, on Avalon the hope of subjecthood is held out (to all) as a reward (to the few) to encourage acceptance of the paradigm of order. In this way an ideology is developed within which the acceptance of subjection is understood as a necessary condition in the process of eventual self-realisation. Existing structures of power are therefore both reinforced by and embedded within ideological operations.

Avalon is no utopia. Indeed there is no particular place in the text that can be elevated to utopian status. Rather, Sargisson's utopianism can be found in another kind of space. It is a space that functions at both the level of character and the level of narrative. It is a space brought into being through the thought processes and finally the actions of Teleri, and it is also a space that destabilises the narrative certainty of the wider text. To find such a space it is necessary to look elsewhere and otherwise.

Estrangement and the breaking down of binaries

One way in which a utopian space can manifest itself is in the form of a voice or a character who moves from one world to another within the text. Sargisson identifies such a visitor 'who is temporarily estranged from her/his own environment' as a traditional utopian convention.[17] Such a visitor can bring a new critical distance to the perception of their own world:

> Estrangement, the mechanism of the utopian text whereby it focuses on the given situation but in a displaced manner to create a fresh view, is identified as central to the subversive quality of the genre.[18]

Further, the experience of moving 'in and out of different cultures' can effect a change in 'identity and behaviour' in the visitor, even to the extent that the visitor shifts from being one person to another in different contexts.[19] Such accommodations require adjustments which necessarily destabilise the original position of the visitor to some degree. This process can create a visitor who can sustain both accommodation and critical distance simultaneously:

> The effect of such travelling on visitors to utopia is usually that of

[17] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 179.
[18] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 33 cited in Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 180.
[19] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 179. See also Maria Lugones, 'Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception' in *Hypatia*, 2:2, (1987), 3-19.

> an enhanced awareness of their own present.[20]

The term 'visitor' suggests one who visits from somewhere, and who therefore retains a central core connection with that somewhere, usually their home world. In classical utopian narratives, the utopia is revealed by the visitor who returns home, imbued with a new critical distance, but home nevertheless. The term 'traveller', on the other hand, is moving away from reference to a home base. In contrast with the term 'visitor', 'traveller' suggests one who no longer identifies with the 'home' world or with any other. In this discussion, the traveller refers to one who (no longer) has a core identity, who has changed fundamentally, who is fundamentally estranged. It is from a position of fundamental estrangement that the character of Teleri in Bradley's *Lady of Avalon* and the narrative around her come to question a number of dichotomies that underpin the main narrative of the text. Teleri's musings challenge the self/other construct, which in discursive terms is subject/object, but also privileged/unprivileged knowledge, particular/universal, what/who, mind/body and particularly freedom/entrapment.

The binarism of privileged/unprivileged knowledge is assiduously cultivated on Avalon. Teleri, still unconsecrated, has no access to privileged knowledge, and so she does what is required of her, marrying Carausius because she believes that it has been foretold (199). While Teleri is obedient, however, her childhood taste of subjecthood makes her not easily reconciled. To preserve her sense of self, Teleri detaches herself from the identity inscribed upon her and the environment in which she has been placed. Teleri's detachment during the marriage ceremony and celebrations is evident. She is barely present, only ever seen from a distance: 'Carausius looked across the room, where Teleri was standing with her father' (204), and both Carausius and Dierna 'gaze at Teleri' (207). Later, in the bedroom scene, she is simultaneously present and absent: 'she had only to detach her mind from her body and she felt nothing' (211). Teleri also cuts herself off from Avalon: 'It will be better to make the break a clean one' (202), and she later refuses to visit Avalon when invited. This estrangement is a deliberate and strategic survival mechanism of Teleri's very self. It enables her to do her duty without flinching, but she lives almost as an automaton, detached from everyone and everything around her. Estranged from both the material world of her daily

[20] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 179.

existence and from Avalon, Teleri's position is one of ideological divestment.

Ironically, Teleri's chance to 'go beyond' and thus fulfill her dream of freedom comes encumbered with her marriage to Carausius. As the wife of the admiral of the British fleet Teleri is not hampered by the tedium of domestic tasks. Instead she travels the length and breadth of the country, repeatedly seeing 'what lies beyond'. She travels from Dubris on the eastern coast (223) to Venta Silurum in Wales (252), from Portus Adurni on the southern coast (187) to Corstopitum near Hadrian's Wall (242). She has considerable agency in her movements, choosing to travel to Corstopitum when Carausius wanted her to stay in Eburacum (243), changing the route on the way to Venta Silurum to include Aqua Sulis (252). These journeys hold little interest for Teleri. Since she left Avalon, her experience of 'going beyond' is more closely related to exile than to freedom, and rather than encirclement or entrapment, stone walls look 'fragile against the expanse of the moors' (243). Teleri's notions of freedom have been abandoned: 'she no longer ... dreamed of freedom' (244).

This physical travelling, however, enables a more figurative travelling. In her estrangement, Teleri becomes a dispassionate voice critiquing nationhood, identity, politics and power. Teleri's musings problematise the binarised dichotomy of self and other which manifests itself here as nationhood and identity. When Dierna and Allectus confront Carausius about his loyalty to Britannia, and they debate what Britannia is, Teleri stands aloof. And yet, her straightforward observations belie the hotly disputed claims of race and nation making a mockery of the subtle complexity of political arguments. For example, when she sees Hadrian's Wall she notes that the Picts 'were as Celtic as the Brigantes on this side of the Wall', and yet despite this racial similarity, they are more feared than the foreign Saxons (242). Further, Teleri dispassionately ruminates upon core definitions, questioning that which is unquestionable during times of war:

> *Did she love Britannia? What did that mean?* She was fond of the Durotrige lands where she had been born, but *she had seen nothing on these northern moors to make her love them*. Perhaps, if she had been allowed to study the Mysteries as long as Dierna, she would have learned how to *love an abstraction* as well.

> But it was Dierna's *ability to care for abstractions* that had sent Teleri into *exile*. Teleri had no more wished to be Empress of Britannia than she did to *rule* Rome itself. To her, they were equally *unreal*. (My italics, 244)

Teleri ponders definitions of nationhood but can find only contradictions. Having established the racial sameness of the enemy, Teleri is now confronted with the geographical difference of the northern territories of Britannia. The northern moors are alien to her—cold and bleak, without comfort—how can she love them? Despite being born a Briton princess, and now being Empress of Britannia, Teleri does not identify with Britannia or with being a Briton. Rather than a matter of blood and land, Teleri concludes that nationhood is an abstraction. This undercuts the earlier notion established by Dierna that Britannia is a binding of blood and soil.

Further, Teleri connects the 'ability to care for abstractions' with privileged knowledge ('the Mysteries'), but also with power over others (to 'exile', to 'rule'). Thus a direct contrast between Teleri and Dierna is established. Dierna uses her access to privileged knowledge to wield worldly power. Teleri, on the other hand—as the beautiful daughter of a powerful prince, as the wife of the admiral of the Britannic fleet, and finally as Empress of Britannia—has always had access to this kind of power if she wanted it, albeit through different means, but these things mean nothing to her. In this world, Teleri lives within a system of meaning which is alien to her. The glories it celebrates do not interest her. They are 'unreal'.

Denying Teleri access to privileged knowledge was one way to keep her in Dierna's thrall; however, Teleri's estrangement from Dierna enables her to critique the high priestess's wisdom. Dierna, as high priestess of Avalon, is enormously powerful both symbolically and personally. This is evident in the moment during the blessing of the fortress of Adurni when Dierna spontaneously requires Carausius to enter into a blood oath:

> 'Your blood will bind you to this soil. Hold out your arm'.
> In her voice was utter certainty and he, who with one word could send the entire Britannic fleet to sea, obeyed.' (192)

Dierna is not easily denied. Nevertheless, Teleri is able to respond to Dierna's

'lofty meditations' by raising her eyebrows, and to refuse Dierna's presumptive request (256). Teleri's refusal is later given narrative approval, as Dierna's interpretation of events is once again shown to be incorrect, thus undercutting further the certainty of privileged knowledge. As Dierna's apparently privileged knowledge is thus shown to be partial, so she loses her grip over Teleri. Teleri's estrangement has enabled her not only to critique Dierna's apparently privileged knowledge, but to accede to subjecthood. No longer an object possessed by Dierna, no longer transacted by others, Teleri asserts herself as an actor in the economy, transacting on her own behalf. Later, when Teleri agrees to abandon the marriage with Carausius, which had been arranged by Dierna for her own ends, and marry Allectus, she is clearly free of Dierna. She does not even consider Dierna or what she might think. She is momentarily concerned about Carausius, but Dierna is absent from her thoughts and from her conversation with Allectus. When Dierna learns what Teleri has done, she considers cursing her, but doesn't have the energy. Dierna no longer has any power over Teleri, and Teleri no longer participates in her own subjection.

Teleri's estrangement thus allows her to critique established norms, and it is this critique that releases her from the constraints of the universals within which she has been trapped. Somewhat ironically, it is Teleri's uniqueness, her individual particularity ignored by Dierna, which changes the whole political scene in Britannia.

Teleri's argument against her marriage to Carausius is personal. It is based upon her distaste for men, particularly after her violent assault and attempted rape by a Saxon raider. This experience is fundamental in shaping her view of the world. It is part of who Teleri is, and Dierna knows it. While Dierna was able to save Teleri at the last moment, she acknowledges the life-changing effects of such an event: '*that demon has raped her soul*' (166). However, in order to effect the marriage, Dierna dismisses this knowledge even when Teleri reminds her of it (199). Teleri submits, but as Carausius displays incrementally more Germanic characteristics, there comes a moment when she can no longer acquiesce, and she leaves him. Teleri's only protest to Carausius is a private one, a unique response based upon her unique circumstances and experiences. Her rejection of him is not based upon an abstraction, but upon the material revolt of her physical body: 'She had tried to discipline her feelings, but since the feast at Cantiacorum she had not been

able to bear his touch' (252). Sargisson notes that one of Cixous' strategies to usurp 'masculine' writing is that she 'invites the body into the text', in a way which 'privileges the corporeal whilst at the same time transgressing the mind/body divide' (S. 115). Bradley does this with Teleri. Teleri has bodily knowledge, a knowledge that Dierna casts aside as personal and therefore irrelevant, but it is a knowledge which is ultimately held up against Dierna's privileged knowledge and overrides it. It is this bodily knowledge, not bound by logic or reason but nevertheless inescapably real for Teleri, that leads to her abandonment of Carausius and her acceptance of Allectus.

When Teleri agrees to marry Allectus, it is not for reasons of politics or nation, but because she is seduced by his recognition of *who* she is, rather than *what* she is. Allectus literally throws himself at her feet, declaring a passion of many years that has been inscribed in the text from the day they met: ''You have haunted my dreams … I would give you my heart on a platter if it would please you'' (270). Moreover, Allectus offers her what no-one else has, he offers her a choice, affirming her subjecthood: 'Allectus would not stop her if she rose and walked away' (271). What tips the balance, however, is the recognition of her irreplaceable uniqueness: 'Carausius had needed her as a link to the British, and to Avalon. This man needed her love' (271).

Teleri's acceptance of Allectus can also be read as an instance of Cixous' alternative economy of the gift. Cixous sets up a 'realm of the gift' as an alternative to the gift as it is traded in the masculine economy of the proper. For Cixous, in the economy of the proper the gift is equated with debt:

> Giving: there you have a basic problem, which is that masculinity is always associated—in the unconscious, which is after all what makes the whole economy function—with debt.[21]

As was discussed above, the giving of a name is an act of appropriation within the masculine economy. Within this economy any form of the gift operates similarly, as 'a gift that takes—autonomy and identity'.[22] Sargisson raises the question 'in logocentric discourse, can there be a "true" gift?'[23] As a

[21] Helene Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation', *Signs*, 7:1 (1981), 48.
[22] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 121.
[23] Lucy Sargisson, 'Contemporary feminist Utopianism: Practising Utopia on

possible alternative to this masculine economy, as a different way to approach interpersonal exchange within feminist utopianism, Sargisson presents Cixous' libidinal economy and the realm of the gift. Cixous' realm of the gift is predicated upon a different desire. Rather than on accumulation, on 'investment ... in anticipation of a due return',[24] Cixous' feminine economy is characterised not by exchange, but by 'giving and receiving' which take no measure, by giving 'freely'.[25] This is not to say that one always gives and the other always receives, but that no account is kept. Teleri understands that she has 'power' in her relationship with Allectus (271). He is prepared to give her anything, everything, even Britannia, but she has no interest in these things. Her power is that she can give him a gift, a free gift, a gift which has great value to him, and his only gift to her is that he has given her the opportunity to give without any return.

Teleri's fundamental estrangement, her capacity as a traveller, divests her of ideologies of nation, of politics, of power, and even of identity and belonging. She is no longer in the thrall of the binary order, she is no longer complicit in her own subordination. Being thus released, indeed being the agent of her own release, she is able to take critical positions which were previously impossible and/or unthinkable. Moreover, she is able to enter into relations on her own behalf and on her own terms. Teleri thus succeeds in finding her freedom at last, in 'going beyond' the existing paradigms of meaning and order. In so doing Teleri's movements are profoundly subversive of that order.

Teleri and the subversion of order

Teleri recognises binary constructs as the underlying ideological structure and tries to escape her feminine destiny as an other, attempting to become a subject, a self, a One. She does not succeed because she is trapped on the wrong side of the divide; however, the lie of the binary is evident in the capacity of Ones to reconfigure themselves, to author themselves forever

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Utopia' in *Literature and the political imagination*, eds. John Horton, Andrea Baumeister (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 245.

[24] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 121.

[25] 'Castration', p. 54.

renewed as Ones. It is not until Teleri 'goes beyond' the binary paradigm, by celebrating her particularity and disallowing the privilege of the one, that she is free.

From the moment Teleri is introduced into the narrative, she is 'femininity as potential subversion of order'.[26] Her construction of her own binaries, and her positioning of herself on the subject side of such a split, is already approaching the first step of Derrida's deconstruction, that of the reversal of order. This is suggestive of a capacity to cross forbidden boundaries. When Teleri's potential is fully released the order is overthrown both ideologically and narratively. In her estrangement Teleri becomes an ideological traveller, stepping beyond the binaries and critiquing them from without. Finally, she eschews the economy of the proper, releases herself from the clutches of the universal and embraces the realm of the gift.

Operating within the realm of the gift is a process fraught with risk: 'This takes the form of wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable: no reckoning'.[27] Risk is both practically necessary, as it is inherent in any process which is without closure, and it is also political. The gift of protection offered to women by patriarchy has never been free, but in the giving up of protection there is risk. However, without risk there is no possibility for change:

> Who goes not into the abyss can only repeat and restate paths already opened up that erase the traces of gods who have fled.[28]

A significant strategy for feminist utopianism, then, is not only the transgression of boundaries, but a going beyond into the space of risk and uncertainty, of the unpredictable and the unknowable. In this way utopian thinking creates new conceptual spaces—a good place that is no place, an *outopia*—in which different ways of 'thinking, conceptualising and theorising' can be imagined.[29] These new conceptual spaces are both within and without the text: they have their 'roots' in the text, and work from within the text (110),

[26] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 120.
[27] 'Castration', p. 53.
[28] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), p. 213.
[29] Sargisson, *Contemporary feminist Utopianism*, p. 59.

but they are not clearly delineated or described there. Instead, the text provides opportunities, openings, and ambiguities which challenge expected patterns and closures. The text thus creates a space which, while necessarily established by it, is somehow elsewhere, estranged from the text. Sargisson notes that this utopian space, and the critical function it makes possible, operates not in some desired/perfected/blueprinted future, but in the present of the text and therefore also critiques the contemporaneous historical, social and political context. From this ou/utopian space, then, alternative 'readings of the present', or even 'radically different 'nows'' are possible (52). The open-endedness of this approach to utopianism is 'constantly affirming play, process and dynamism' (108).

Lady of Avalon creates such a space in two dimensions. First, in the development of the character of Teleri. From naive but perceptive princess to self-sacrificing servant of Avalon, Teleri becomes an independent actor whose agreement to marry Allectus is a radical deviation from her prescribed path. This liberatory act literally racks the dominant paradigm with 'radical convulsions', causing the military order established by Carausius and Dierna to collapse into ruins. Second, the tale of Teleri operates to subvert the ideological certainties of the wider narrative. The tale is dystopianism interwoven with utopianism, with critique and subversion. Further, as a sub-plot, it weaves critique and subversion in an out of the main narrative. Thus twice embedded it would be easy to dismiss this tale as a caution against the foolishness of women and their capacity to unthinkingly bring down an empire; but it is much more than that. It destabilises the apparent certainties which permeate all three narratives of the text: nationhood, identity, wisdom and power. Most particularly, it reconfigures freedom as ideological release.

Rather than closing on the hope of a positive future conventionally offered by traditional utopian narratives, Sargisson aligns the ending of a feminist utopian text with open-endedness and uncertainty. Part II of Lady of Avalon closes with both hope and fear. After the deaths of Carausius and Allectus, and the fall of the Britannic rebellion against Rome, Teleri is finally reconciled with both Dierna and Avalon. In the postscript, Teleri becomes High Priestess of Avalon and even ascends to the high seat of prophecy that has been unoccupied for hundreds of years. Despite this apparent resumption of the status quo, Teleri's prophecies reveal a continuation of the ideological unravelling in the outside world, and these prophecies end 'too chaotic for

comprehension' (294). Within this environment of uncertainty and change—of risk—Teleri sleeps soundly; it is Dierna's peace that is broken.

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Pleasure in the Gap: Kate Lilley's Cross-Pollinated Poetic and Academic Discourses

JOHN SHEEHY

So *it was* I began
to write my sins
in water[1]

Under the guise of literal temporality and formal brevity, Kate Lilley's untitled tercet (hereafter '66') bespeaks three recurring interests of the language poetry effort: the poem foregrounds the practices of writing and reading, dissolves the synthesis of form and content, and challenges the notion of generic categorisation. Perhaps a tripartite approach is incongruous to the essence of her work, which like all language poetry, resists such reductionist impositions of intent. Having voiced this scepticism, however, which will become the refrain of this discussion, it is in the interest of the writer and reader—flavoured by pedagogical context—to collectivise and inventorise. As Daniel Chandler posits in favour of transparent models of discussion, creating categories promotes organization instead of chaos.[2] This poem's reductive categorisation will therefore constitute my formal logic: discursive sanity is assured.

While Lilley's textual products are ultimately Australian, her predispositions and persuasions towards contemporary American culture

[1] Kate Lilley, *Versary* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing 2002) p. 66. Hereafter referred to as '66'.
[2] Daniel Chandler, *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (23 May 2003 [cited 1 June 2007]); available from http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html.

and literary history are unwavering.[3] From her pop-culture imagery[4] to her pop-ularised theory,[5] Lilley's poetic and academic substance is intercontinental, a melange of the Australian-American. In her own words, the American language poets (and the respective Australian contingency in figures such as John Tranter) resurrected her poetic impulse.

> It was certainly my interest in the language poets which brought me back to writing poetry which I had more or less stopped doing during the years in which I was doing my PhD (on elegy, in London) and after that becoming an academic. It seemed to take a long time for me to work out how to link the 2 up and language poetry was crucial in that (though I had always been a fan of ashbery & new york school - & its Australian resurgence in Tranter, Forbes, Gig Ryan). [6]

Consequently it is interesting to trace the degree to which Lilley's poetic and academic discourses simultaneously employ and resist the tropes of the American language writing tradition, and ultimately to gauge whether she might be labelled 'definitively postmodern' - regardless of whether this expression is oxymoronic.

Mobilised in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the geographical and epistemological origins of the language writing movement are, like the works themselves, decentered. On the West Coast Robert Greiner and Barrett Watten's *This* magazine was first circulated in 1971. Consisting of twelve editions, the latter nine edited solely by Watten, the magazine celebrated this new poetic phenomenon as the creative materialisation of a new literariness, one focussed on theory and poetry for the sake of themselves. Literary circles such as the modern New York School spawned the similarly oriented L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the contribution of which to the language enterprise was so pronounced that its

[3] It is by happy chance, and worthy of momentary digression, to note that the poem chosen to structure this discussion appears on page 66 of *Versary*, to be read as an undoubtedly unconscious homage to 'highway 66', the great trans-American roadway.
[4] Lilley, 'Nicky's World' in *Versary*, p.5.
[5] Lilley, 'As Is' in *Versary*, p.76.
[6] Electronic interview between author and Kate Lilley held on 3 June 2007.

mathematically balanced title has become synonymous with the name of the movement itself.

To inventorise the thematic and technical interests of language writing is self-defeating. The works within *This* and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as well as those scribed since, resist generic reductionism. Although numerous attempts to 'tropeify' have been made, some more convincing than others, all discussions inevitably hesitate to impose finite rules and meanings. This is not to suggest that scholarship in the field is devoid of practical application, but rather that the reader is contractually obliged to engage in continually contextualised, unendingly qualified, theoretical banter. Michael Delville's final chapter in his work *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* illustrates how ungrounded poetry can be centred in grounded academic discourse. Similarly, Linda Reinfeld's *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* is refreshingly clear and conversationalist in tone. While Delville's text remains closer to formal and technical manifestations of language writing, Reinfeld's text is, like its subtitle, more psycho-linguistically aware. The complementary combination of the two will constitute the theoretical spine of this discussion. Lilley's *Versary* and her essay 'Tranter's Plots' will be read comparatively in light of these and other sources.

'Writing' and 'reading' as practice or image: Lilley's interest in process as result

'66' self-references its process of production—the verb 'to write'—which foregrounds Lilley's interest in process as result. Rather than conventional poetry's focus on plainspoken lyrical voice, narrative, or affect, language poetry extols the pre-theoretical practices of writing and reading as the only real imperative of language. John Tranter metaphorises writing and poetry as constitutionally inseparable:

> The difference between a poet writing a poem and a poet having a lyrical impulse is the difference between…a farmer ploughing a paddock and [the actor] Bryan Brown playing a farmer ploughing a paddock.[7]

[7] John Tranter, 'Four Divisions and a Prose-Poem on the Road to Poetics,' *Meanjin* 47, no. 4 (1988).

Regardless of technological and syntactic evolution, the procedure of writing, as a process of individual cognitive materialisation, is at the heart of poetic discourse. Delville insists that language writing deliberately undermines the phonocentric assumption that poets can spontaneously express themselves and use language as if it were a transparent medium for their innermost thoughts and feelings.[8] On the contrary, language poetry uses language as a 'thing-in-itself, providing its own terms of reference, being simultaneously the signifier and the signified'.[9] Or as Lilley writes critically about the work of John Tranter, words are preserved as 'potent floating signifiers, continually emptied and replenished: to be written, to be read.'[10] Read as the manifestation of these three sentiments, Lilley's interest in the materiality of writing is anything but transparent. She posits writing as a mutable image: one that is both her poetic impulse 'so it was I began / to write…' and her narrative proper '…to write my sins / in water'.

Conventional poetry's interest in a transparent writing process is a consequence of its oral performative tradition as a literary form addressed to a *listening audience*. On the contrary, language poetry's definitively *written* and *read* communicative interest presupposes the poetry's self-consciousness to its practical production and reception. '66' therefore delineates the speaker-listener relationship by referring (by omission) to the practice of readership as the necessary 'other' in the dialogic process of text production.

In his work on the relationship between psychology and writing, Douglas Vipond distinguishes the concepts of the addressed-audience, or the 'hearers', and the metaphoric-audience that presupposes a passive recipient and authoritative writer. Narrative studies theorists make a similar distinction between the figures of the 'actual reader' and the metaphorised 'narratee'.[11] These conceptions of readership have spawned a series of now

[8]Michael Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville University Press of Florida, 1998), p.194.
[9] John Kinsella, *Introduction to the Australian Poetry Anthology* ([cited 31 May 2007]); available from http://www.johnkinsella.org/essays/introduction.html.
[10] Kate Lilley, 'Tranter's Plots,' *Australian Literary Studies* 14, no. 1 (1989). Cited 31 May 2007 http://www.austlit.com/a/lilley-k/1989-tranter-als.html .
[11] Jonathon Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.87.

infinitely rejectable claims about the practice and status of writers and readers.

Anthony Paré postulates and desolates three presumptions about audience. First, multiple readers do not constitute one monolithic 'audience', as the collective term might suggest. The dictum of one of Paré's social workers -- 'I work with one pen and twenty hats' -- alludes to the necessarily indeterminate subjectivity of multiple readers. Second, the writer-reader relationship is not temporary or limited to the text. On the contrary, the reader's relationship with the author or text often exists prior to, and continues after, the textual encounter.[12] Finally, the writer-reader relationship is not monologic, in which writers speak and readers listen. Despite the prevailing celebrity of Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', the epistemological heritage of this now *un*profound postmodern presupposition is ultimately Platonic: 'once a thing is put into writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, falling into the hands of not only those who don't understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it'.[13] Interestingly, Plato conceives of writing as 'the composition, whatever it may be', pre-emptively dispelling arbitrary generic differences.

In a moment of inter-generational and inter-disciplinary mimesis, contemporary American poet Arielle Greenberg, who is currently developing the aesthetic theory 'gurlesque', resurfaces Plato's dictum. The words of the gurlesque 'luxuriate: they roll around in the sensual while avoiding the sharpness of overt messages, preferring the curve of sly mockery to theory or revelation'. There are two major differences between the sentiments espoused by Plato and Greenberg with respect to their common beliefs in the autonomous mobility of words. Greenberg's words possess an integrity that can resist 'drifting into the hands of those who don't understand them': they are imbued with 'preference'. Furthermore,

[12]Douglas Vipond, *Writing and Psychology: Understanding Writing and Its Teaching from the Perspective of Composition Studies* (Westport: Praeger 1993),p. 25.

[13] Plato, '*Phaedrus*' (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts-Bobbs, 1956), p.68.

her effort to develop a 'theory' of the gurlseque presupposes differentiation: her words are enmeshed in the taxonomy of gender.[14]

Returning to Lilley's approach to audience, the following brief encounter signals her playful recognition of all three of Paré's criticisms.

> I'm Going to *stay* Inside
> And read *a* Book
> *Until* I feel like Myself[15]

The poem cynically portrays monological reading as a process of self-actualisation, a predictable and mechanistic procedure by which one might unlock the door of selfhood. The singular first-person pronoun is ambiguous, blurring the distinction between writer and narrator and is further confounded by a definitively writer-centred image of 'the reader'. The poem alludes to the spatiality of reading as normatively 'indoor', which juxtaposes the presumption that reading is an act of mental escapism. This reference to interiority insists that reading can only occur under correct contextual conditions. Imposing such contextual parameters is illogical given reading is environmentally *in*dependent, requiring only reader and text. And finally, Lilley's desperately submissive reader is parodied by their hyperbolic self-pity: they can only feel like themselves by reading the words of others.

Lilley's tercet problematises normative conceptions of audience. The disappearance of rhyme and other 'meaningless' rhetorical strategies signals her foregrounded interest in semantic rather than physical qualities. Visual clues such as ambiguous capitalisation and italics replace conventionally aural tropes. The oral heritage of the 'hearer' is consequently debunked. Robert Greiner's exclamation 'I HATE SPEECH!' resonates with language poetry's lack of musicality while parodying the speech-based poetics of Charles Olson, whose taste for capitalisation as a grammatical signifier was compulsive. *Versary* satisfies Greiner's urge towards the unperformative. Lilley's poems are graphocentric (privileging of the written word) by

[14]Pam Brown, '*Jumbling the Traditions: Review of Kate Lilley's Versary*,' *Literary Journal of the English Association* (2004). Cited 31 May 2007, http://www.austlit.com/a/lilley-k/versary-r-brown.html.
[15] Lilley. Untitled tercet in *Versary*, p.60.

appealing to the propinquity of reader and text during private textual encounters - visceral and aestheticised:

> Precision-timed explosions create
> acres of visual illusion
> Light up your album of beautiful sights[16]

In a similar instance of dissolved writer-reader polarity, this time focussed on the writer, Michael Davidson writes in *The Prose of Fact*:

> He wanted a writing that wanted to expose itself. He wrote as if not wanting nor imputing wanting. Still this was the only way to account for it. He wanted to write and it wrote.[17]

As in Lilley's tercets, the reader encounters a linguistic depthlessness in Davidson's excerpt: the Derridean moment of the mirror of a mirror—a self-devouring *mise-en-abyme*.[18] The pronominal ambiguity of the final sentence, what Delville labels the gap between the narrating and narrated 'I', is bleakly reductionist and removes all agency from writing: 'it wrote'. The removal of agency does more than problematise the writer-reader relationship. Indeed, if there is no longer a discernable self the reader is left with Frederic Jameson's 'waning affect': the disappearance of affect based on the absence of a feeling subject. Lilley's poetry is, however, arguably highly affective. But it is so in accordance with Jameson's logic. The affective response to her poetry is inseparable from the foregrounded linguistic interest. We do not respond emotionally to Lilley's poems' plots, but to the literary strategies through which the plots are handled. Lilley achieves this most thoroughly by her playful subversion of the synthesis of form and content.

Unsystematic and unsynthesised: Lilley's subversion of poetic form and content

Both the narrative proper and formal structure of '66' allude to the dissolving relationship between form and content—the harmonious

[16] Lilley. Untitled sapphic in *Versary,* p.95.
[17]Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.222.
[18] Ibid. p.196.

relationship by which poetry is traditionally distinguished from prose. Percy Bysshe Shelley insists that poetry is the expression of the imagination made possible by its synthesis of form and content.[19] '66' opens with a declaration by the Grand Victorian narrator, 'so it was I began'. The tone and syntax are incongruous to the pictorial space the text inhabits: a page containing only six further words. Lilley questions the value and function of form as a mediator of readers' expectations which she systematically sets up and knocks down:

> Preference and orientation
> are the same thing aren't they?
>
> It's a puzzle for elocution
> and lyric infrastructure[20]

The temporal 'lyric infrastructure' of '66' is metaphorised by water. Lilley's reference to this transparent and mobile medium constitutes her literal reference to the inadequacy of form. 'To write one's sins in water' is an ironic gesture: the oxymoronic practice of materialising thought *im*materially, or admitting a fault only for that admittance to be conveniently washed away.[21] Here Lilley displays her poetic tendency to have her cake and eat it too: the water image referencing a formal structure while denying the functionality of that structure. Water also echoes Lilley's interest in literalising the relationship between content and form. This is not a sign of her adherence to a synthesis between the two, but of her homage to the uncanny, the awkward disjuncture between the familiar and unfamiliar. Writing in water is operationally unfamiliar, yet the two become related by a parodic synthesis of content and form: the fleeting content is reflected in the similarly fleeting form.

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[19] Percy Byshe Shelley, *English Essays: From Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay* (P.F. Collier & Son 1909-1914 [cited 2 June 2007]); available from www.bartleby.com/27/23.html.

[20] Lilley, Kate, Untitled sapphic in *Versary*, ll.5-8 p. 91.

[21] 'To write my sins in water' is reminiscent of the anonymous inscription on the tombstone of John Keats in the Protestant Cemetery, Rome: 'Here Lies One Whose Name was writ in Water'. Both authors reference the temporality of identity through the uncanny act of writing something of themselves in water: for Keats, his name; for Lilley, her sins.

'Nicky's World' is an example of Lilley's acute scepticism about the relation between form and content in contemporary poetic discourse. Although the poem is prima facie formally conventional, linearly narrated and affectively provocative, these three attributes comprise Lilley's subversive arsenal. The poem parodies the two-dimensionality of soap operas by importing the rhetorical strategies of that pop-culture genre into the verse:

> As the plot rocks back and forth on a pinhead
> Counts to fifteen very slowly
> By that time you should be alone again
> Contemplating your evening.
>
> You could go for a ride and take a fall,
> Break your back and welcome an addiction—
> Or ask Miguel to serve drinks by the pool,
> That hunky contractor might stop by.
>
> Finally there's a knock at the door,
> A lady policeman shows her badge.
> She's asking if these unusual cufflinks
> Belong to the father of your children.

Opening with a self-reference to its own fictionality, the poem 'rocks back and forth on a pinhead', metronomic and predictable. Here Lilley references narrative time as a stylised generic convention. The discursive time it takes us to read the relatively short poem, to engage with its affective content, is completely incongruous to the narrative time in which the events occur. Like a soap opera, it skips between a time and place continuum that is decentered and non-linear. Bob Perelman is similarly interested in time relations stating that 'attempts to posit an idealised narrative time [for poetry] would only blur perception of the actual time of writing and reading.'[22]

The three stanzas of equal length satisfy the Aristotelian principle that a reader is pleasured by the rhythm of a text's ordering. Again, Lilley subverts this reader expectation by filling her 'body' stanza with images of

[22]Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.198.

disparate plot-catalyst worth. 'Going for a ride, welcoming an addiction and asking Miguel to serves drinks by the pool' are treated indifferently—simply listed as a string of unrelated plot fillers. The final stanza opens with a visual clue that conclusion approaches: "finally", in true melodrama, the poem leaves its reader (or viewer) on edge, necessitating a sequel. 'Nicky's World' is subsequently positioned as the first poem in the anthology rendering it a prolepsis to Lilley's interest in serialisation.

Mirroring the interpellation of the affective and the linguistic in the conclusion of 'Nicky's World', Lilley critically writes of Tranter's poetry:

> The subject of self-censure, lyric pathos and epiphany, are often granted a big moment at the last minute: …high modernist despair, linked to control closure and cadence as the aesthetic consolation prize.[23]

Lilley makes an even more literal reference to the synthesis of form and content in 'As Is'. But most emphatically, and demanding diversion, this poem evinces her interest in lyricising theory. 'Letters and figures', writes Reinfield, 'have always been the stuff of poetry: the twisting of literality and the decomposition of figure characterise both the poetry and the critical writing of our time.'[24] Reinfield's observation refers to the mutability of poetic and academic discourses, and more obtusely, to the redefinition of theory as content: theory turned inwards on itself takes the voice of poetry.[25] Lilley's academic interest in literary theory and history pervades both her scholarly and poetic work, from her preface to *Margaret Cavendish: The Blazing World and other writings* to her essay on John Tranter's Plots, she popularises theory as a mass-consumable and producible entity.

The relationship between theory (as content) and form is literalised in 'As Is'. The poem reads, like the wider anthology, as the meeting point between pop-culture imagery and a dictionary of rhetorical terminology. By combining the discordant registers of a 'raincoat's floral lining' and the 'garment district' with 'chiasmus, strophe and antistrophe', Lilley compels the reader to engage in terminological and epistemological reassessment.

[23]Lilley, 'Tranter's Plots', p.4.
[24] Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p.26.
[25]Ibid. p.21.

Theory is 'undressed', taken out of the garment district, and afforded the platonic freedom to drift about all over the place. Strophe and antistrophe are read doubly as both a literal reference to the poem's unconventional metrical form and a metaphorised reference to the unconventional form of the garment district. As Lilley writes of Tranter:

> The strategy of taking an alien word and relocating it in poetry … or making strange a very familiar word like 'verandah', of putting apparently simple words like 'plot' and 'track' through their paces, or bringing an etymology into focus…create[s] a rippling surface of verbal intemperance and motility, even at the risk of exploding into incoherence.[26]

The semantic relations between the four stanzas of 'As Is' reflect the sentiment of polarity evinced by the term 'chiasmus'. The opening stanzas are highly accessible. 'Local girls trying on seconds and samples / no exchange or refund' are vivid, uncomplicated images. Conversely, 'chiasmus of symptom and side effect / Flooding chemical debris' is referentially ambiguous, 'dressed up' by discordant registers. The semantic uncertainty necessitates a second visit. Re-read, the opening stanzas are coloured by Lilley's ensuing theoretical playfulness. Semiotic relations are rendered opaque: the raincoat's floral lining becomes polysemous, a chiasmus of spring and winter, inside and outside, beauty and functionality.

Defying genre: dissolving the boundaries of categorisation

> Arguments that any currently privileged set of stylistic conventions of academic discourse are inherently better—even that any currently privileged set of intellectual practices are better for scholarship or for thinking or for arguing or for rooting out self-deception—such arguments seem problematic now.[27]

Peter Elbow's scepticism towards genre espouses the commonplace belief that textual categorisation is arbitrary. But it is not, as Lilley would agree, without its uses. By stating that 'such arguments seem problematic now'

[26]Lilley, 'Tranter's Plots', p.7.
[27] Peter Elbow cited in Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, p.149.

Elbow alludes to his reservation: 'genres get distressed'[28], but they are not entirely defeated. Rather than dismissing genre in one carnival gesture, Elbow reflects the view of Ralph Cohen whose aim is to rescue genre from its usual role as a static taxonomy. For Cohen, genre is dynamic. Boundaries between form and content are unfixed, 'always blurred, jumbled, mixed, or combinatory.[29] Lilley's attitude to genre is similarly dismissive of taxonomic incantations and capricious boundaries. Rather than perceiving genre as inherently aesthetic, ritualistic or ideological, Lilley subscribes to rhetorical genre, emphasising the social construction of a text as a product of writer, reader, publisher and context.

Lilley's critical musings on the title of John Tranter's first collection of works, 'Parallax', is a convenient metaphor for the multitude of 'gaps' that occur during the process of generic categorisation. A derivative of the sixteenth century astronomical term 'parallax error', the term describes the effect whereby a change in position of the viewer is registered, perceptually, as an apparent change in the position of the object viewed. More generally defined as perceptual illusion, the phenomenon can be read as the distance of displacement between conflicting readings. Consequently, the theory mobilises the subjective agency of the reader as the mediator of what must become an open-ended process of textual classification. The expression is therefore relevant to all three parts of this discussion. It concurrently refers to the gap between writer and reader, the illusions of form and content relatedness, and the shortcomings of our pedagogical tendency to generically inventorise:

> It [language poetry] cannot be tracked down as a form apart from time; it inhabits its tenses actively, politically, and without respect for definition, property rights or borderline disputes. The project per se has neither permanence nor identity.[30]

Lilley's scepticism about a synthetic relation between form and content is self-evident. As a corollary, if form can be conceived figuratively as the empty container into which the shaping medium of content is poured[31], then the broken relationship between the two can be read more broadly as the

[28] Lilley. 'Sequel' in *Versary,* ll.9-10 p.14
[29] Vipond, *Writing and Psychology,* p.36.
[30]Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue,* p.148.
[31]Vipond, *Writing and Psychology*, p.37.

insufficiency of genre, or perhaps, as Reinfeld would agree, the theoretical impossibility of any definitive categorisation of text. Here '66' supports Derrida in 'The Law of Genre' where he asserts that texts never truly belong to a genre—'not because they are unclassifiable but because a genre sign is never a referent'.[32] The subversion of the Grand Victorian Novel in '66' ('so it was I began') is therefore not only formal, but generic. In one parodic breath, Lilley conflates generic convention and redistributes readerly expectation.

Problematising the 'genre' of language poetry is the concept of marginality. Traditionally conceived as that which is different from, opposed to, or excluded from the mainstream, the marginal resists self-certainty: 'the expository logic and speech derived syntax that dominate contemporary writing practice'.[33] If language poetry is, like Reinfeld insists, marginal by nature, then it presupposes a peripheral status to generically mainstream language. But the idea that a text is marginal is not enough for it to elude categorisation. Indeed, marginality presupposes at least one type of categorisation—the collection of texts that inhabit the margin. These texts are consequently imbued with a unique discursive space, one that is popularised seminally by the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This intercontinental and inter-generational reference is not as haphazardly imported as first may appear. It is useful in that it recognises the literary tradition of resistance to classical conceptions of genre, a resistance that was by no means first evinced by the American language effort. Like Lilley, Coleridge's notebooks are simultaneously self-referential to their formal structure while dissolving arbitrary divisions in such structure:

> And in Life's noisiest hour,
> There whispers still the ceaseless Love of Thee,
> The heart's self-solace, and soliloquy.
> (*The Notebooks*—February 1807 (1))

Genre is most commonly conceptualised on a horizontal scale. I shall refer to this easily traceable distribution of genres as 'generic breadth'. 'Nicky's World' and 'As Is' foreground the fluid mobility of generic depth by blurring modality distinctions. But Lilley does not limit herself to horizontal

[32] Jacques Derrida, *The Law of Genre*, ed. W J T Mitchell, *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.68.
[33]Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue,* p.151.

conceptualisations of 'genre'. That would in fact signal an implicit respect for the confining restraints of genre. She is not only interested in dissolving the binaries of the encyclopaedic and the imaginative, or the academic and the poetic, but she also is highly devoted to surfacing what I shall term 'generic depth', or the socio-linguistic manifestations of the 'high' and 'low' brow.

Lilley's fetishisastion of language, a kind of grammatical and syntactic commodification, is evidenced in her lowbrow, irreverent textual play: 'Transference fucks with your head.'[34] Her images are combinatory, a pastiche of 1960's country music, literary identities and forms of the seventeenth century, and conversationalist dialogue. These 'genres' are not only traceable chronologically and formally, but on the public perception of their literary 'worth'. Lilley's poetic interest in the origins of the high/low brow polarity is mirrored conveniently in one of the postgraduate courses she has convened over the last decade on the evolution of text production and publication. The course's recurring interest is the popularisation of text based on technological change. The introduction of the printing press during the enlightenment, for example, brought texts to a much broader audience. Pamphlets and broadsides revolutionised literary accessibility, as did entirely new genres, such as the novel. Suddenly, both high and low culture authors were competing for the same audience. Lilley poetically mimics this socio-historic phenomenon by engaging a similarly diverse readership. The generic depths of her forms are thus oriented towards the generic depth of her audience, signalling a pleasure in the 'parallax error'.

David McCooey believes contemporary Australian poetry 'demonstrates how poetry can renew itself in part by writing against the habits and visions of poetry itself while still seeking effects central to the poetic'.[35] This uncanny literary self-consciousness is at the heart of Lilley's work: 'someone new is crying in the most familiar way'.[36] Poetic and anti-poetic, stable and restless, platonic and sexed-up, 'Nicky's World' and 'As

[34] Lilley, Untitled sapphic in *Versary*, p.89.
[35] David McCooey, *Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism* (2007 [cited 1 June 2007]); available from http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=9031.
[36] Lilley. 'Countrypolitan' in *Versary*, l.9 p.16.

Is' are unashamedly self-conscious celebrations of two-dimensionality. O'Hara writes of his own work, with all the pragmatism of an economist,

> as for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. And if you're going to write a poem, you don't want it to bore; you want it to be 'sexy' enough so that everyone will want to read it ... it makes economic sense—as a marketing strategy.'[37]

There is nothing metaphysical about Lilley's literary self-conscious act in writing against poetic habits while employing them—she is simply revelling in language's ability to do both at the same time.

Marjorie Perloff's meditations on what she calls 'poe(t)heory' lyricises Lilley's project as both poet and academic. The expression is apt not only because of its combinatory attitude to genre, but because of its grammatical playfulness, aestheticism and phonocentricity. It is, as a phrase, both theoretical and poetic. It captures the essence of the language poem as *not* one that seeks to undermine the generic convention from without but rather shows how it deconstructs itself through the act of writing.[38] Here we have returned to the image of writing, which has now become not only central to the language poetry effort in terms of a new 'content', but as a mechanism of generic subversion. An analogy can be drawn here with abstract expressionism's definitive disinterest in reference, focussing alternatively on the patterns that can be taken by its medium.[39]

And so it *is*, we begin to *read* her words as water, a 'chiasmus of symptom and side effect', a criss-cross of the academic and poetic. Despite language writing's resistance of categorical reductionism, Lilley's attitude to writing, reading, form, content, and genre *can* ultimately be conceived as a string of polarities. For when she renounces a linear writer-reader relationship, she does so by playfully employing a conventional and

[37]Mutlu Blasing Konuk, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O' Hara, Bishop, Ashbery & Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.31.
[38]Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.208.
[39] Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1990), p.172.

discernable voice. When she refuses the synthesis of form and content, she does so by creating soap-operatically conventional structures and plots. Her diffusion of the boundaries of genre is only possible because of her in-built pedagogical respect for categorisation. Her poems are accordingly anamorphic - differentiated by resemblance - 'you might look like her / she might look like me'.[40] Lilley's work maps the space between extremes, the material and immaterial, the ability to write one's sins in water. In her own words, she explores the 'direct and indirect, conscious and unconscious'.[41] In true Coleridgean spirit, she satisfies her 'human tendency to run into extremes',[42] to map out ideas on an antithetical scale so as to fully immerse her reader in the pleasure of the parallax error. And the gap is a large one: [she] 'slides on a plastic glove, enters to the elbow and says it's big'.[43]

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[40] Lilley, 'Anamorphosis' in *Versary*, p. 80.
[41] Electronic interview between author and Kate Lilley held on 3 June 2007.
[42] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (J.M. Dent &Sons Ltd, 1960), p.58.
[43] Lilley, 'Synecdoche' in *Versary*, ll.9-10, p.84.

Mirroring, Depth and Inversion: Holding Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* Against Contemporary Australia

NAOMI OREB

'There were many different darknesses;
even Victoria knew that.'[1]

'How do I tell you this? How do I unconceal?'[2]

Introduction

Gail Jones's most recent novel, *Sorry*,[3] has been readily embraced as the author's most probing consideration of the historical and contemporary treatment of Indigenous Australians by this country's federal Government. One critic noted that 'the word "sorry" has become so contentious in recent times that Gail Jones's decision to adopt it as the title of her fourth novel must be interpreted as a political statement',[4] whilst another pronounced the novel 'Gail Jones's "sorry" to her aboriginal compatriots'.[5] At the same time, however, the existing body of criticism regarding Jones's previous novel, *Black Mirror*, has almost entirely side-stepped a close examination of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within the text. Commentators have tended to regard such concerns as incidental to

[1] Gail Jones, *Black Mirror* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2002), p. 195.
[2] Ibid, p. 224. All future references to this work will appear in the body of the essay.
[3] Gail Jones, *Sorry* (Sydney: Vintage, 2007).
[4] James Ley, 'Sorry', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 2007, available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/book-reviews/sorry/2007/05/04/1177788377886.html> accessed 1 October 2009.
[5] Miranda France, 'Madness, Murder, Betrayal and Rain', *The Telegraph*, 20 June 2007, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3665967/Madness-murder-betrayal-and-rain.html> accessed 1 October 2009.

other issues such as the limitations of biography,[6] the aesthetics of modernity[7] and postmodernity,[8] and the reception of female artists in the early twentieth century.[9] This may be the result of a recently renewed historical interest in the largely unrecognised achievements of female Australian artists,[10] or, quite simply, a consequence of *Black Mirror*'s overarching stylistic interest in associative images and transformative spaces. Yet as Indigenous Australians come to occupy an ever more prominent place in Jones's fiction, and also continue to endure lower health standards, shorter life expectancies and higher unemployment rates than non-Indigenous Australians, the imperative to examine the significance of Indigenous stories and experiences in novels such as *Black Mirror* is arguably more pressing than ever before.

I argue that *Black Mirror* foregrounds the need to rectify past and present injustices and the importance of Indigenous Reconciliation through the filter of the surrealist art movement. I examine how Jones develops these themes, focusing first on the reality of war-torn Europe, second on the historical perspectives offered by non-Australian characters, and third on the political dimensions of the human body. It is through these visual and profoundly emotional foci that Jones sustains an enduring, haunting sense of incompleteness throughout the text, and fosters a broad, national imperative to 'unconceal' existing black holes in Australia's history. In doing so, *Black Mirror* calls for a politically active Australian populace and highlights the negative consequences of collective political detachment and complacency on Indigenous issues.

Before evaluating the Indigenous question in greater depth, it is worthwhile considering the ways in which the structure and style of *Black Mirror* facilitate Jones's exploration of story-telling and repressed voices. Presented as a non-linear narrative, *Black Mirror* charts Anna Griffin's

[6] Tania Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', *JASAL* 4 (2005), pp. 49-61.
[7] Lyn Jacobs, 'Gail Jones's "light writing": Memory and the Photo-graph', *JASAL* 5 (2006), pp. 192-208.
[8] Fiona Roughley, 'Spatialising Experience: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* and the Contending of Postmodern Space', *Australian Literary Studies* 23 (2007), pp. 58-73.
[9] Paul Genoni, '"Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', *JASAL* 3 (2004), pp. 159-172.
[10] Ibid, p. 159.

attempt to write the biography of the elderly though '[f]lamboyant and obstinate'[11] surrealist artist, Victoria Morrell. Whilst their relationship is initially premised on an effort to record the details of Victoria's life, both Victoria *and* Anna divulge various personal memories and encounters throughout these sessions. The stories offered by both women navigate 'unlikely intersections, particularly around childhood memories of a Western Australian gold-mining town'[12] as they grapple with their respective experiences of mourning, maternity and art. Jones utilises these conversations and Anna's biographical writing to confront the inherently limited nature of any 'official' history purporting to outline the complete life of an individual. Biography is deeply mistrusted as a form of record, referred to as a 'meanly simplifying genre' (16) with a marked and inadequate 'disrespect for the irreducibly copious life' (35). Indeed, Anna is compelled to abandon a reductive, rigidly chronological presentation of Victoria's life (see the chapter entitled 'The Swan' (153-209)) in favour of a structure propelled by images (see the following chapter, 'The Black Mirror Stories' (211-247)) in order to capture the fluid, sprawling complexity of Victoria's life. Importantly, Jones's willingness to acknowledge the incompleteness of biography thus enables her to 'interrogate the idea of *history* as "pure, intellectual discourse"'[13] (my emphasis) and ask 'the question *par excellence* that motors this genre: who are you?'[14] in relation to Australia—*Black Mirror*'s other biographical subject. In effect, the persistence of innately national concerns throughout the text broadens the fundamental question driving biography so that Jones also examines greater, collective concerns, such as 'Who are *we*?', 'Where have *we* come from?' and 'Where are *we* going?'.

The need to answer these questions is inherently connected to the unsettled, dynamic play surrounding Jones's title, *Black Mirror*, and its numerous possible gestures towards notions of opposition, inversion, mirroring and depth. One possible meaning derives from the literal object, a 'Claude glass' (otherwise known as a 'black mirror') which is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Art as:

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[11] Bree Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', *The Courier Mail*, 26 October 2002, p. 5.
[12] Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 49.
[13] Jacobs, citing Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) in 'Gail Jones's "light writing": Memory and the Photo-graph', p. 200.
[14] Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 51.

> a small tinted mirror, with a slightly convex surface, used for reflecting landscapes in miniature so as to show their broad tonal values, without distracting detail or colour.[15]

Once popular amongst artists and travellers, these 'black mirrors' effectively eliminated unnecessary particulars in order to produce a reductive and inaccurate (though highly picturesque and painterly) depiction of the landscape at hand. Just as Anna deems Victoria 'unresolved and imprecise, like a photograph not properly taken' (58), Jones argues against the equally 'unresolved and imprecise' image of Australia so willingly embraced by many Australians; that is, a simplistic and self-congratulatory image that fails to acknowledge urgent and underlying crises facing Indigenous people. As a whole, *Black Mirror* might be regarded as Jones's endeavour to proffer a more realistic photograph of Australia by incorporating stories of Indigenous mistreatment and hardship at the hands of governments and non-Indigenous communities (despite the fact that their potential 'unsightliness' has been traditionally concealed by a 'black mirror' worldview). Attempts to approach the text in this way are agreeably complemented by Jones's use of style and imagery, for as Sibree suggests, 'like a painting or photograph, it [*Black Mirror*] too, is fashioned from a luminous weave of light and dark, of presences and absences'.[16]

The idea of a 'black mirror' can also encompass other non-mutually exclusive possibilities linked to story-telling and national narratives, referring to the way in which various associative, analogous stories are mediated between Victoria and Anna (i.e., Anna's stories 'mirror' Victoria's stories, just as Victoria's stories often 'mirror' Anna's stories). Because Anna's 'whole world is like this: analogies, sadness, the hush evoked by a shape' (33), she is constantly attuned to 'the principle of correspondence' (27), forging multiple connections between their respective memories to revelatory effects. The illuminating effects of this 'mirroring' principle is perhaps most fluidly crafted when Victoria describes the light at her first surrealist art exhibition as '[j]ust like a vision' (71), prompting Anna to recall a time at a salt lake where she also 'squinted against the glare … What a Vision! said Uncle Ernie' (73). Jones links these memories

[15] Ian Chilvers (ed), *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 130.
[16] Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

beyond the mere repetition of the word, 'vision' however, because Victoria is profoundly affected by her encounter with surrealist art, just as Anna's confrontation with nature is 'subordinated by awe, by loveliness, by who-knows-what' (74). Their emotional, affective 'mirroring' evokes a commonality charting the personal and indescribable. In light of their increasingly emotional discussions about absent mothers and lost lovers, the *black* mirror reflects their sense of grief and loneliness. Victoria recalls a period of intense torment and depression and the way in which 'I did not recognise myself at all; I stared into the mirror and saw darkness staring back' (246). In light of the 'visions' joining analogous, mutually illuminating stories, Anna's suggestion that '*They're everywhere, these Visions; you just have to wait; you just have to look*' (77), encapsulates the reader's task of identifying the many layers of 'visionary' mirroring and double narratives at work throughout the text. The first such example I consider is the way in which Jones's depiction of Paris under Occupation elucidates particularly confronting elements of Australia's (largely repressed) colonial history.

Mirroring: Reading Europe against the Australian experience

Whilst Victoria circulates amongst the surrealist *avant-garde*, mingling with the likes of 'Breton, Ernst, Desnos [and] Man Ray' (19), such sociability is drastically impeded by the Second World War and Victoria's struggle to cope with the disappearance of her lover, Jewels. The war allows Jones to explore the 'haunted, layered history of Paris'[17] as a settlement subject to the intrusion of foreign forces, just as countless Indigenous communities throughout Australia were previously subject to colonial intervention. Similar to the way in which '[p]eople in France speak of the Occupation as though it existed in parenthesis, a pause in the continuum … [even though] [p]arentheses *only appear* to possess containment' (239; my emphasis), Jones interrogates Australia's unsustainable attempt to contain its own 'Indigenous Holocaust' within a discrete period of time. Jones distinguishes contemporaneous responses to these two forms of invasion by way of the perceived differences in language, culture and civility between Parisians and Indigenous Australians. On the one hand, the recognisable French language and prosperous Parisian cultural traditions prompted many

[17] Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

European nations to acknowledge the effects of Occupation as regrettable injustices against a highly civilised society. On the other hand, Britain's failure to even attempt to appreciate Indigenous customs *as a culture* or the Indigenous people *as cultured* essentially legitimised and necessitated paternalistic interference into Indigenous communities. Jones makes this distinction painfully clear, presenting the performative surrealist art scene in highly aesthetic, sensory terms grounded in vibrant colours and a dynamic play with surfaces. For example, at an elaborate party, even the air itself is innately connected with creativity and artistry, as 'light filtered through drawn scarlet curtains … [giving] the impression of an organic pinkness … [Victoria] imagined her lungs blooming with pigment' (19). In contrast, Indigenous cultural traditions are never referenced in similarly affective, generous terms, largely because most of the characters, Anna included, fail to identify (or even encounter) any forms of artistic Indigenous expression.

Despite these disparities, Jones undermines the perception that 'cultured' people are somehow empowered to control (and by extension, actively exploit) individuals and/or societies less 'cultured' than themselves. Jones depicts the experiences of women within the French art scene as a means of accessing the often untold, unrecorded and unacknowledged experiences of both male and female Indigenous Australians. Whilst a significant part of *Black Mirror* is set in Europe, Jones resists an uncritically romanticised presentation of Paris by interrogating the dominant (and overwhelmingly masculine) history of the Parisian *avant-garde*. Victoria was received as an outsider owing to both her gender and her status as an Australian, given the large part that modern primitivism played in the Parisian *avant garde*, and the simultaneous attraction and attractiveness of sophisticated expatriates from societies deemed primitive. Victoria is valued for her novelty as '"*L'Australienne!*"' (18), and her capacity to evoke momentarily entertaining and 'arresting Antipodean inversions' (18) to the delight of her contemporaries. André Breton, for example, who features in the novel, was indeed demonstrably curious and actively writing about Australian Aboriginal art during the 1920s. Yet at the same time, Victoria's gender contributed to her positioning as an 'Other' both interesting and vulnerable during a time in which Breton famously proclaimed, '[t]he problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in the world'.[18] Even though Victoria's distinctly female voice became a 'rich

[18] Hugh Honour & John Fleming, *A World History of Art,* 6th ed (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002) p. 823.

source from which to explore an alternative experience of modernity,'[19] she originally 'receive[d] scant recognition in the obdurately male circle in which she move[d]',[20] largely because for the surrealists, 'women were viewed solely as a projection of male desire and needs'.[21] But this community more than simply marginalised women, for 'violence against women within the male surrealist movement [occurred and] is quite well documented.'[22]

Jones's depiction of Victoria in Paris proves an illuminating 'mirror' against the presence and power of 'cultured', inevitably masculine figures in Australian society throughout the early to mid-1900s. In a small mining town, Herbert Morrell (Victoria's father) is presented as an anachronistic, self-deluding man of 'culture' whose financial and cultural resources tend to suppress the untold, 'unimportant' and fundamentally 'uncultured' experiences of Indigenous Australian women. Herbert's inflated sense of self-importance derives largely from his self-perception as a collector with an exceptional (and distinctly European) taste in art and architecture. He rejects Indigenous artifacts in favour of 'objects on a criterion of radical unAustralianness' (156) for he is wholeheartedly and unashamedly '[c]ontemptuous of the local' (156). Herbert's proud monoculturalism prompts him to purchase so many imported goods that Victoria can quickly and easily produce a list reflecting the full extent of their collection: 'We had Louis Seize cabinets full of curios: statuettes of Carrara marble, Bohemian bowls … embroideries from various nunneries in Europe, and a series of ostentatious and rather ugly oil paintings' (47). Herbert himself willingly shares his attempts to 'systematically rank' (158) and order 'every race and nation on earth' (158)**,** pushing Indigenous Australians to the very bottom of the list on the grounds that they are without 'markets, commodities and *evidence of artistry*' (158, my emphasis). In light of Herbert's determined efforts to further his highbrow tastes (and his equally 'refined' public persona) it is unsurprising that he views Lily-White as an Indigenous **'**mission-girl … well-trained for housework and general slavery' (178). He is '[c]ontemptuous of her race' (179) just as Miss Casey, a fellow

[19] Genoni, '"Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', p. 170.
[20] Genoni, '"Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', p. 163.
[21] Honour & Fleming, *A World History of Art*, p. 823.
[22] A comment by Gail Jones as cited in Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

resident in the Morrell home, 'thought Lily-White an animal' (182-183). Building on a former colonial paradigm where it was acceptable to 'set up dynamite traps at waterholes just to kill off Aborigines' (258), the perceived animalism of Indigenous people informs masculine attempts to colonise women's bodies. Lily-White was used by Herbert (her employer) for sexual gratification because she was 'almost not there, a symbol he banged against' (179). Even though we are never explicitly told that Lily-White does not consent to sex, Herbert's willingness to reduce her personality and entire cultural background to 'a body in whom he imagined every uncivilised simplicity' (179) strongly suggests that her improbable consent would have been quite immaterial anyway.

Black Mirror attempts to give voice to the experiences of women like Lily-White by recognising the exploitative power imbalances that characterised so many relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a reality that does not appear to have been spoken about at the time, nor, arguably, to meaningful effect in contemporary Australian society. Rather than directly ventriloquise the stories of Indigenous women like Lily-White, Jones uses Victoria's experience of the surrealist art movement and, to a larger extent, her subsequent experience of rape as an empathic, correlative means of accessing Lily-White's untold history. Victoria tells Anna that being sexually assaulted by three German soldiers left her with 'a kind of hollowness; I emptied out' (243), and describes the way in which the event called attention to her own crude utility, for 'my body was occupied … [and] I knew my own concavity' (243). Just as Victoria 'wept for her own loneliness and her depatriation' (146) after being raped, having become little more than 'a body others pressed their intentions on' (146), the ill-treatment afforded to ostensibly primitive and 'uncultured' women like Lily-White emerges as a truly frightening and demeaning state of affairs. By the very act of telling these stories, *Black Mirror* suggests that the frequency of such occurrences in Australia's past need to be acknowledged rather than ignored. Rape is a particularly powerful and fitting metaphor for this task, as sexual penetration encapsulates the process of colonisation itself; that is, the implementation of forceful, non-consensual projects within Indigenous communities (such as *The Stolen Generation* and systematic killings) as a means of actively suppressing (and often destroying) Indigenous stories altogether.

Inversion: Reading new perspectives to gain empathy and understanding

Building on Jones's emphasis on historical Indigenous exploitation, *Black Mirror* urges an understanding of the ways in which these elements of Australia's past continue to impact upon the present (and, by implication, the future). In particular, Jones foregrounds the long-term effects of history on future generations through Anna's lover, Winston, a Jamaican expatriate and English Literature student currently living in London. Moving beyond the experiences of Lily-White and a young Victoria during the early twentieth century, Winston proffers a modern perspective on the ways in which momentous encounters and forms of grief are reproduced and re-navigated along family, ethnic and national lines. Despite the scope of Winston's personal talents and achievements, he remains haunted by the memory of Jamaica's colonial past. In response to Anna's question, 'Do you remember much of your childhood?' he answers, 'again formally' (103):

> Black people—everywhere—always remember. Only the imperialist has the privilege of amnesia … [Anna] knew then there were things he would never tell her (103).

Winston and Anna share a tendency to become self-conscious of their respective skin colours whilst in each other's company. This point of difference proves a recurring source of unease between them, as Winston frequently denies Anna the 'privilege' of forgetting the turbulent interplay between white and black people within her own nation, Australia. Whilst their affair facilitates a shared experience of becoming 'tropical and dark' (98), these 'jokey extrapolation[s]' (98) reveal Winston's lasting resentment of the way in which white people have not only abused their privileged positions at the expense of black people, but also have failed to remedy these negative consequences. On the other hand, Anna is continually surprised at Winston's professed connection with Jamaica's historical and cultural traditions, as realised through his musings on his mother and his childhood on a sugar plantation. When recounting these stories, he embodies his mother's manner of speaking (or singing, as the case may be): '*Nuh cry, nuh cry, nuh cry me poo chile,/ you is mine an me is yours*' (105).

When Anna asks Winston 'Why is it … that you mimic your mother's voice?' (106) he is surprised by her question and responds, 'It's my voice too … [d]on't you understand?' (106).

But Anna *doesn't* understand, for she is completely removed from the reality of Indigenous Australia. Even as a child she perceived Indigenous people as an exotic 'other' rather than an integral part of her community. She rode her bike to 'Aboriginal camps and the desert' (55) in part because 'in this far-out region Anna felt transgressive' (55). In addition to her own detachment from Indigenous Australians, a now-adult Anna appears somewhat cynical about the ability of white Australians to ever know or appreciate Indigenous customs. This is suggested after Winston visits Victoria and mentions that:

> [Victoria's] been telling me … about the black people, the Aborigines.
>
> (Jesus, thought Anna. What could she possibly know?)
>
> About spirits, persists Winston. Why have you never told me? (131)

There are many reasons why Anna has failed to raise the subject of Indigenous Australians to a non-Australian citizen; largely because she knows next to nothing about their way of life and thus, like Australia at large, has preferred to disguise her ignorance by avoiding the topic altogether. In this respect, Winston rather aptly equates and implicates Anna with/in the colonial project itself, telling her, 'when he is angry … to hurt her: *I will not be your dark fucking continent*' (98). This gap between them is again apparent when Anna somewhat awkwardly asks Winston to '[t]each [her] not to be afraid of the dark' (102). Troublingly, it isn't Anna who is perplexed by the Indigenous question to the point where she loses sleep—rather, it is Winston, who says to her in the middle of the night; in a voice evoking his own national history: 'Me can' sleep, he said softly, in his boyhood speech. Me keep thinkin bout them po thirsty Aborigines' (260). Winston's choice of vernacular is significant as it highlights the fact that even though he comes from the other side of the world, he evidences a greater concern and connection with Australia's Indigenous population than Anna does, even though she is an Australian.

Winston's attitude towards the Australian Indigenous population is shared by Victoria, who approaches Indigenous people with a great degree

of empathy and enthusiasm (largely due to her close family-connections with Lily-White and Ruby-White. Victoria lovingly mentions Ruby-White as '[m]y sister, my Ruby' (182), and her genuine personal connection with Indigenous Australia is further evidenced by her affective, compassionate response to the brutal murder of two black swans:

> Two adult swans were pierced through the chest with makeshift spears, and they had been plucked of their wing-feathers so that they looked exposed and violated. Their long necks were limp and their black bellies already bloated with death. (202)

The parallels between the massacre of the swans and the colonial massacres of Indigenous people emerges through Jones's emphasis on the body parts of swans that are also common to humans, namely, their exposed 'chests', 'necks' and 'bellies'. This comparison is further enhanced through the construction of a principal binary whereby 'black' victims are subject to the fatal cruelty of 'white' oppressors. The plucked feathers re-enforce the awful reality of 'cruelty for cruelty's sake' inflicted upon the birds to grant the schoolboys a close inspection of their barbaric work. This event prompts Victoria to cry, 'not only for the swans but more mysteriously for Lily-White, as well. So Victoria sobbed for all the wounds that she did not understand' (203), bewildered as to how and why such brutality is imposed upon vulnerable others.

Victoria's response to this situation cannot be dismissed as the simple grief of an overwhelmed child, as evidenced when an older Victoria sees a woman throw a baby into the Seine. This similarly localised incident prompts Victoria to grieve once more for a variety of interconnected horrors, weeping 'for the baby … for Occupied Paris, and its many barbarities … for her lover, Jules' (11-12). Refusing to be ignored, the slaughter of the swans remains a momentous event for Victoria, for, in the absence of an explicit explanation behind her 'propensity for display' (129), it appears to inform her decision to adorn herself in feathers for much of her adult life. A connection between this momentous experience and Victoria's penchant for feathers can be drawn, not only because the event is said to enable her to mourn for multiple other Indigenous 'wounds', but because Victoria's feathers, just like those of the swans, were also 'so dark they had an oily sheen' (129). Importantly, as Victoria informs Anna at their first meeting, her black feathers actually come from swans: 'In your honour I am

wearing swans' (17). The identical colour and texture of both sets of feathers are unlikely to be mere coincidences. Rather, in the context of the unforgiving ways in which her father, brother and country have approached Indigenous people, Victoria's feathers come to stand much like Coleridge's albatross around her neck, representing her inability to rectify injustice whilst allowing her to say 'sorry'. When she is placed under hypnosis by figures from the surrealist art scene she betrays a series of unconscious associations between swans, Indigeneity and herself:

> *What creature are you?*
> Swan and not swan. Winged and wingless. Beady-eyed.
> *Do you have a name?*
> Lily-white. Midas. Ruby. Swan-Seine. (91)

The feathers become so thoroughly intertwined with Victoria's sense of self and self-fashioning that when recounting an elaborate party she attended in her youth she exclaims, 'And my feathers, of course. I wore my feathers' (110). Similarly, despite her deteriorating condition in the face of death, we are told that Victoria is 'sitting up in bed, wearing her feathers' (268). In fact, the feathers remain a part of Victoria in death itself, as she becomes 'ash as she wished, mingled with her swan's feather head-dress' (277).

Despite Victoria's personal efforts to engage with repressed stories and lost voices, the ending of the novel (rather inevitably) emphasises the need for substantive change in relation to Indigenous affairs. Led to the place where Lily-white 'buried the placenta she gave birth to with her daughter, Ruby' (301), this final, concluding image evokes a natural, unfailing connection between Indigenous beliefs and the Australian landscape. Here, even though 'Whitefellas would pass by and not notice anything at all' (301), we are explicitly told (though by whom it is not quite clear) that:

> This place is holy. It contests all the mine-work and despoliation that is everywhere around. It is the unregarded and persisting monument of countless other stories. It is its own kind of marvellous. A secret marvellous. (301)

The existence of unsaid, 'countless' Indigenous stories foregrounds the fact that these 'contested histories will not be laid to rest'[23] whilst there are still many stories which must be expressed. Importantly, a failure to acknowledge the 'marvellous' stories literally and spiritually embedded in the Australian landscape means that Australians cannot gain a more comprehensive understanding of their own nation. Importantly, Jones locates 'holiness' (despite the horrific deaths, justices and oppressions marring the postmodern context) in the strength and sanctity of stories as a form of life-source. Much like the placenta, this passage acknowledges how narratives of association, belonging and identification are worthy of devotion because they continue to sustain Indigenous communities. Moreover, just as Victoria fails to volunteer all of her 'black mirror stories', proclaiming 'I have several black mirror stories and I will give you [Anna] three' (213), the open-ended conclusion of *Black Mirror* similarly and 'deliberately acknowledges the limits of its knowledge and reach'.[24] Despite the contribution of *Black Mirror*, Jones acknowledges that she cannot come close to representing the extent of all forms of grief experienced by Indigenous communities and inspired by arms of the Australian government (for example, *The Stolen Generation*, heavy restrictions on Native Title Claims or Indigenous deaths in custody). Subsequently, the open-endedness of the narrative works against a sense of complacency by re-iterating an urgent task for readers: re-creating an alternative sense of the 'community [that] might yet have been possible' (233)**.**

Depth: Reading the substance of human hands as a mandate for change

Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, *Black Mirror* appears to broaden traditional conceptions of the 'many different darknesses' (195) confronting contemporary Australia by moving beyond historical injustices committed against Indigenous people to include the non-responsiveness of Australian citizens to crises within Indigenous communities. Written before The Apology that was to be delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008, Jones gestures towards the federal Government's failure to 'say sorry' for 'The Dead Heart of Australia' (259) and, accordingly, locates the impetus for change within the collective power of the Australian

[23] Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 58.
[24] Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 58.

populace. Drawing upon elusive, heavily imagistic conceptions of the human body (in particular, human hands), *Black Mirror* encourages readers to offer collective support for the movement towards Indigenous Reconciliation. In light of the 250 000 iconic cardboard hands offered by Australians in a proliferation of *Sea of Hands* installations on *National Sorry Day* in the year 2000,[25] *Black Mirror* can be read as a lament for the absence of a formal apology or substantive policy change at the conclusion of these high-profile national initiatives; a concern that the enormous *Sea of Hands* proved a regrettable and ever-declining case of 'form over substance'.

Again, the key story-teller who develops this theme is Victoria, who discusses hearts, heads and hands in fleetingly symbolic, associative terms whilst entering a state of gradual decline. Her recollections encapsulate her surrealist *oeuvre* rather nicely (given that the image of a detached hand also evokes the idea of the 'automatic hand' and automatic writing from Breton's 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*) whilst also affording Anna an insight into some of Victoria's most significant, traumatic experiences. One such example is the way in which she describes the haunting presence of her former lover, Jewels, for 'over the span of absence his phantom arm still lay warmly across her breast, cupping at her heart' (112). Similarly, after witnessing a woman throw her baby into the Seine, Victoria traumatically 'imagined herself translucent. Upraised veins marbled her glassy skin … her two hands, blue stars' (13). Here, the unnatural, transient quality of Victoria's hands captures the extent of her uncontainable suffering whilst pre-figuring Jones's complex, ambivalent and evolving use of human hands to chart the decline of the Indigenous Reconciliation movement.

Throughout the text, hands move from a hopeful symbol of possibility before becoming portentous and cursory and finally existing as empty, fading residue. An early depiction of hands provides a powerful sense of hope whilst representing the exciting possibilities of being able to make, create, design and act. Early in her art career whilst at a Salvador Dali lecture, Victoria notices that

> a single plastic hand had detached in a flurry… it was white, child-size and appeared immaculate. … I saw the asterix of

[25] *Sea of Hands* [Online], *Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation*, available at: <http://www.antar.org.au/sea_of_hands> accessed 1 October 2009.

> every hand. And I saw my own hands, glimmering, white and open before me … as though fabulously new. (86)

Victoria's inspired feelings of self-empowerment in response to this hand captures a particularly democratic (yet politically realist) approach to instigating action and awareness amongst the broader populace. As changes in Australian social justice policy in particular are indeed contingent on popular support, this passage offers a short-lived enthusiasm as to what the sentiment represented by the images of the *Sea of Hands* might have achieved. Following this incident, hands soon pre-figure a sense of failure, collapse and death, as Victoria thinks she sees 'a hand drift over the river and trace a line in the sky, a kind of script of her death, a prognostication' (142). The brief appearance and momentary impact of this hand suggests a sense of declining influence and energy, culminating in death itself.

Jones suggests we are perilously close to realising this outcome when we are left with the empty remains of hands as opposed to substantive hands themselves. The cartoon in Herbert Morrell's stereoscope features a deceptively simple, comical story in which a wealthy man is caught stealing kisses from the servant girl. In the story, 'the man's wife (one supposes) … is pointing angrily … and imprinted on his back are two floury handmarks' (219). Whilst these prints serve as an indicator of culpability and responsibility, importantly, it is not the hands themselves that are present, but rather, the inauthentic trace of human hands. As Jones's development of Indigenous themes become increasingly explicit, her proposal is fully realised when she uses the fragile absence of hands to suggest that their presence (and the strong, activist sentiment they embodied) is necessary if our sense of national identity is to be complete:

> After the war I met a woman who had one arm blasted away, and who kept reaching, so she said, to brush hair from her face with the destroyed lost arm. It felt like that: impossible. It was like a phantom limb asserting lost presence. I felt spooked and disfigured by incompletion. (230)

Like a 'phantom limb', Jones develops the notion that an ongoing failure to act together and encourage government change for Indigenous Australians will continue to 'haunt' Australia (domestically and internationally) until positive action is taken. The sign hanging outside the Midas mines re-

enforces this sense of urgency, placing the mandate for change 'in the hands', so to speak, of ordinary Australians:

> It was a picture of two large white hands, hanging downwards. They appeared severed and ghostly. The caption simply read: T H E S E A R E P R E C I O U S. *The asterix of any hand.* (298)

It is no coincidence that by the second last page of the novel the focus has moved from Victoria to Anna, a representative of the next generation, and tells us that 'Anna is alone again … looking for a hand to clutch' (300). Jones leaves readers with an image re-enforcing her original portrayal of the inherent possibilities of an open hand searching for a meaningful union with multiple others. It is through the powerful formation of an Australian collective that Indigenous history can be fittingly acknowledged and appreciated, allowing our 'official' national history to avoid the incomplete simplicity of a reductive 'black mirror'.

Although *Sorry* can arguably be read as an exploration of the limitations of apology and understanding—that is, the possibility that an apology can be 'too little, too late'— *Black Mirror* attempts to alleviate the haunting presence of unacknowledged Indigenous history by bringing it to the fore and acknowledging how non-Indigenous Australians have contributed to that history. The ways in which Jones utilises the various dimensions of a 'black mirror', namely, mirroring, depth and inversion, proves a particularly illuminating means of exploring Indigenous narratives through association and analogy. *Black Mirror* is, in fact, a startlingly accurate reflection of one key dimension of contemporary Australia.

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