This is the second issue of *Westerly* in its new structure, with *Westerly* and *Salt* published annually: *Salt* in the first half of the year, *Westerly* in November. Together the journals offer the best new poetry, fiction and critical work from Australia and Asia, Europe and America.

*Westerly*’s editors wish continuing success to this affiliation with *Salt* and the new, annual *Westerly*.

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PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 2000

Maggie Joel

for her stories "A Mile from Grapple X" and "In Search of Lost Angels"
that appeared in the No. 45, 2000 edition
THE PROSPECT OF GRACE

The suicide "goes away", and the survivors are forever in the wrong. They are like the damned, who can never make amends, who have no prospect of grace.
Janet Malcolm, The Silent Woman

23 SEPTEMBER 1999
Today a bronze statue is bolted to the sea floor off Fremantle, near the site of the former Robb Jetty abattoir. Here is a horse facing out to sea, away from the shore. It is distressed, head threshing, nostrils aflare with the prescience of blood. Here is its rider, beyond fear, beyond feeling—impassive in bronze in a way he could not have been in life at this, his last sentient moment. Facing the other direction, he takes in what would have been the wake of the horse’s wallowing through the aquamarine shallows to this deeper blue. See how he stares at what is now the dog beach. What was he seeing then?

Without, apparently, a trace of irony, the sculptor expresses his hope that this work of art will allow people to see beyond the suicide of Charles Yelverton O’Connor, Western Australia’s engineer-in-chief during the period of the colony’s most ambitious public works.

This work of art, which alchemises anguish into bronze...

11 MARCH 1902: A FUNERAL OF MEN
The mile-long cortege of 100 vehicles left the O’Connor residence in Beach Street, Fremantle, at 4.00 p.m. According to the Western Mail,
there were so many wreaths that they covered the hearse and filled a second carriage. Following were the chief mourners—O’Connor’s sons, Roderick, Frank and Murtagh—the pallbearers, the ministerial carriage, the Harbour Works carriage, and 150 employees from the Fremantle Harbour works and the Coolgardie Water Scheme. “It is estimated that about a thousand gentlemen followed the funeral procession, while several thousand members of the public were assembled along the route.”

18 MARCH 1902: SUSAN LETITIA
It is unseemly, so soon, to have ventured out alone. It is dangerous to be here, on this isolated shore, the jetty deserted, the smelting works far enough away to lie silent, a smudge of black on the blue and white seascape. One hears stories about women being attacked in the scrub behind the dunes. It is beyond comprehension that she should have taken off her buttoned leather shoes, her fine lawn stockings. The black taffeta skirt, with its layers of petticoats, balloons out in the wind, then collapses round her knees like a sail becalmed.

The breeze is damp with the spray of unseen waves, and it begins to settle on her. As she takes a step forward, the taffeta drags through sand, pulling at the empire-line seam below her heart. Strands of wheaten hair escape the cap of tight little curls and fly. The cameo at her throat sweats.

See the way she looks down. She has never before experienced the sensation of wet sand squelching through bare toes. There are few times in a lady’s life when bare feet, hers or anyone else’s, are acceptable. Susan Letitia O’Connor has always been a lady.

His blood is here, in this ocean. This is where he chose not-her. Even as she thinks this, she can hear soft voices reassuring, dripping sympathy as they sip her tea.

*It was too much...The strain...They ought not to be allowed...*

Yes, yes. She is impatient with rational pity, wishes to be free of it and to be alone. Here, where no one will hear, she will say it. *He chose not-me. I did not do enough. I was not enough.* She will sink to her knees in taffeta and scream.
NOVEMBER 1997: RITES
People are jostling shoulder to shoulder. There are furtive glances scanning the cathedral, to see who is here, who is not, what can be gleaned from the seating arrangements, what the appropriate attire is deemed to be for this theatrical version of the rite of last respects. Television cameras pry for the same answers, their lenses met with hostility, or a tear, or both. The whole country breathes with this congregation.

There are tributes, of course: expressions of homage, sorrow and praise for this man in the carved coffin strewn with purple irises and one golden tiger lily. And there are reproaches hushed under breath for the woman in the front pew, barely conscious with grief, garishly made up and trussed in lycra.

A shout comes from the gallery, and a face leans over, flushed and craving, skewed from neck to ear with the knot of a noose. He’s dead, Paula. He hung himself. This is how he died.

I suppose there may be worse obscenities than this.

BIDDY REMEMBERS
On the morning of 10 March 1902, Bridget O’Connor awoke feeling unwell with a head cold, and told her father she would not join him on their usual dawn ride across the sand dunes and along the pristine beaches of Fremantle. He drank a glass of warm milk and shut the door to his office. His groom saw him just before he rode off alone. “He was looking back towards his own house...”

Biddy went on to marry the wealthy pastoralist Ernest Lee Steere in 1909 and had six children. She tended her family and their spacious home, took a prominent role in the social life of Perth, worked actively for the Girl Guides and the Young Women’s Christian Association, opened art exhibitions, wrote letters, pottered around her beloved garden, won prizes for her Wyandotte fowls, occasionally travelled overseas with her husband, took responsibility for her ailing mother’s wellbeing, sent food parcels to her artist sister Kate in Paris during the Second World War, and in 1959 became Lady Lee Steere.

In the 27,851 days of her life following that morning in March 1902, was there one in which she did not think, If only...?
Michael Hutchence was found naked, kneeling on the floor of his hotel room, arms resting on his legs, and a belt—its buckle broken—hanging from the back of the door above him. There were traces of semen on his thighs.

The coroner ruled that it was suicide, citing Hutchence’s “severely depressed state”, and his chaotic ingestion of substances—beer, wine, vodka, champagne, cocaine, Prozac—in the hours before his death. According to the official verdict, there was no evidence to suggest auto-eroticism. There was no other person involved. No inquest was necessary.

After the first brutal shock is over, Paula Yates contests, loudly, these findings. Her pendulum of grief has swung wildly from accusations of murder against her former husband to tortured self-recriminations, and now it draws to a fragile rest on denial.

It could not have been suicide, she says. He would have dressed. He would have written a note. He would never have deliberately abandoned their daughter.

The corollary she will not say: He would never have abandoned me.

The Western Australian Government passed a Bill to secure an annuity of £250 “to sustain Susan Letitia O’Connor for her life”.

It was said among family and friends that she was a born actress, known for her “turns”. They may have sustained her more than the annuity bestowed on her life by a grateful, guilty legislature.

Virginia Woolf inadvertently rehearsed her suicide, but she learned from her mistakes. Her first attempt was undone by the lightness of the fabric of her coat...

The muddy bed of the Ouse sends eddies around her feet and sucks at her shoes. She tries to force herself down into the soft sediments—but the coat, the damned coat. Its closely woven gaberdine fibres hold fast, proof against the weight of the river. It floats out around her, suspending her here on the surface, resisting her attempts—becoming ever more feeble—to sink into oblivion. She could remove the coat, but the raw resolve has, for now, gone.
In a crisis of courage, she has lost to the stubborn will of a summer gaberdine wrap.

She returns home, tells Leonard that she—so clumsy—fell into the dyke, retrieves the letter she had left propped up on the desk of her sitting room.

This first letter, addressed to Leonard, “Dearest”, is itself a death, its words of effacement an erasure. He is patient and good; she is mad. He is responsible for her greatest happiness; she is spoiling his life. He could work, were it not for her; she can no longer read or write. Her gift to Leonard is exoneration: “If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.” A kindness.

Ten days later, she leaves her dusting—a chore the maid later says Leonard assigned to keep his wife’s agitation at bay—and strides out again over the water meadows, down to the river, this time wearing a thick fur coat. She takes no chances, weighting the pockets with smooth river stones to ease the drowner’s leave-taking, necessarily violent because it must defeat the primeval urge to breathe.

It is not until three weeks later that her body emerges near the bank exactly opposite the place where she had gathered her stones and laid aside her walking-stick.

She has left another letter, repeating the words of the first, anticipating his guilt and absolving it: “Nothing anyone says can persuade me.”

For Leonard, the prospect of grace.

THE MYTH
Several generations of Western Australian schoolchildren grew up believing that C. Y. O’Connor killed himself after losing confidence in the viability of his Goldfields Water Scheme, one of the most ambitious engineering undertakings ever conceived. The day after, so the story goes, water reached Kalgoorlie through O’Connor’s 600-kilometre-long pipeline.

Of course, these details are false. It was not until three weeks after O’Connor’s death that the pumps at Mundaring were switched on, and another ten months before the reservoir at Kalgoorlie began to fill with cool, clear water diverted from the catchment of the Darling escarpment. And although O’Connor
was suffering from overwork, insomnia, and relentless vilification by the *Sunday Times* over alleged maladministration of the project, he never doubted the soundness of his design, or that the pipeline would succeed in bringing water to the desert.

To those schoolchildren of the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, O’Connor’s death “by his own hand” was a romantic tragedy, as well as an object lesson in the rewards lost to those who give up. A collective sigh, and each child shared the same exquisite thrill of agony for the man of the pipeline legend: If only he had waited one more day. If only...

**NOVEMBER 1933: TRUE MATES**

He was seated in a chair on the back verandah, and may have been there all day and all night and half the next day before drawing his war service revolver to his head and firing.

Hugo ThrosseU—soldier, horseman, winner of the Victoria Cross, neophyte socialist, failed entrepreneur, loving husband and father, guilt-ridden adulterer, insomniac—left a note pencilled on the back of his will, appealing to the state for financial support for his family in recognition of the toll taken on his health and sanity by his experiences in the Great War. He added a note for his wife, who was away travelling in London and Russia: “No man could have a truer mate.”

Katharine Susannah Prichard’s grief was compounded by guilt. She had left, in the house, the draft manuscript of a novel dramatising the slow disintegration of a marriage, and the final resort of the husband to suicide. Unable to bear the possible consequences of her art, she dismembered it, changing the ending and swallowing the bitterness of its creative failure like a punishment well deserved.

She remained living in that house, raising her son, channelling her love and fear and hope for the world into a prolific literary career. The Red Witch of Greenmount brewing words.

“It was unlucky”, she wrote in one of her novels, “to have bougainvillea growing about the place.” It grew profusely around her own back verandah, its fallen petals skittering across the floorboards and gathering in scarlet corners.
DEATH WAS INSTANTANEOUS

The report of the post-mortem examination is too viscerally descriptive to ever have come before the eyes of Susan Letitia.

Well nourished male, it reads. Considerable amount of blood in mouth and nostrils...A stellate wound (six fissured) on vertex of skull in scalp $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in longest diameter...wound led by a jagged opening into the skull; piece of bone being missing...Slight rigor mortis. Black powder stains were washed from roof of mouth...Haemorrhaging in membranes at points of entrance and exit...Channel through brain on right side...Death was instantaneous...A bullet from the revolver produced would cause these injuries described.

The revolver belonged to his son Roderick, whose deposition stated that he had no idea how it came to be taken from the drawer in his desk. His father, he said, was not in the habit of taking a revolver with him on his morning ride. "He said nothing to me about being worried."

Constable Hormer recovered the body and examined the scene, reporting that O'Connor's horse had entered the water at a canter. The tracks came out again near the jetty, which was splashed with wet sand "as if the horse had got a fright." There were no footprints.

The jury's verdict in the "Inquiry touching the cause of death" of C. Y. O'Connor, Fremantle Coroner's Court, 10 March 1902, was: "Death by his own hand...while in a state of mental derangement caused through worry and overwork."

LIKE A PUNISHMENT WELL DESERVED

Katharine grows on the back verandah, all day, all night, so long that she becomes one with the bougainvillea's stealthy possession of the rails and planking. It shoots slyly around her heels, curling across the laces of her shoes. She feels the light scratch of thorns, the pressure against her skin as the canes thicken and set around the shape of her limbs. One green tendril tests the pulse of her throat, then snakes up and across the bridge of her nose and around and around her skull, throwing out pale leaflets, buds, embryonic thorns. It explodes into a wreath of flowers and weaves into her hair and threads and braids, and suddenly her temples are pierced and the skin broken, and she is invaded by these bruise-purple
blooms, dry veins leaking their madness, and she is hallucinating in colours of flesh and blood the unseen but clearly imagined pictures she had by pure will banished and will banish now and will forget.

With a spasm, Katharine wakes, and remembers.

THE LETTER IN HIS OFFICE
An unsigned note, written in pencil, was found on his desk. "The position has become impossible...I feel that my brain is suffering & I am in great fear of what effect all this worry may have upon me—I have lost control of my thoughts. The Coolgardie Scheme is all right..."

He added a postscript: "Put the wing walls to Helena Weir at once." His biographer applauds the fact that the Chief's final words were for the water scheme.

No final words from Charles to Susan.

SUICIDE HAUNTED HER
Katharine Susannah Prichard's life was inscribed by three men she loved, to whom she was Kattie, Kate, Mother. Her son, Ric Throssell, once wrote that suicide haunted her. Hugo's death was not the first. In 1910, her journalist father, Tom Prichard, hung himself after years of unemployment and mental breakdown. His daughter, who had emulated him in her ambitions as a writer and had protected him when his own talents failed, writing his editorials and submitting them in his name, was scarred for life and could never bring herself to face the manner of his death. Hugo's suicide during the depths of the Great Depression blistered these scars, and although Katharine lived another thirty-six years, she did not remarry.

She was never to know that in 1999, Ric, as though conditioned, completed the triumvirate.

1999: "THEY SUNG HIM"
The Fremantle Aboriginal heritage walk gives visitors a Nyoongar version of the history of the port and the way Aboriginal people responded to the invasion by Europeans. The story of C. Y. O'Connor as told by the Nyoongar guide is not one of brilliance
and innovation, of a life cut short by tragedy. There is tragedy, but it belongs to the Aboriginal people whose ancient Dreaming track was drowned by O’Connor’s dredging works to create a safe harbour at Fremantle. O’Connor could never be forgiven, and the tribes placed a curse on the man who trapped the spirits of their people in a grave of bilgewater and the salt of foreign oceans.

“They sung him”, the guide says. “They got into his dreams.”

2000: “A PIECE OF BONE BEING MISSING”
Imagine a boy climbing the twisting tendons of the horse’s neck, one hand grasping the top of its head; the other steadying his weight on the solid shoulder of the rider. In the thrill of anticipation, preparing for the momentum of flight, hugging his knees as he hurls himself forward, he may forget to keep his mouth closed; he may shriek as he hits the water. It will gush up into his nose and throat, salt exploding the sinus membranes, burning the whites of his eyes.

The surfaces of the bronze horse and rider have been sculpted smooth to avoid injury: no jagged edges, no risk of damage. But still, there are these tears.

What remains of Charles Yelverton O’Connor here in this place that is said to honour his life? In the smooth, unseeing curve of the rider’s face, there is the stoicism of the nineteenth-century gentleman, dry-eyed as he faces the shore and places his son’s revolver against the roof of his mouth. Unseen is the despair of a valued reputation impugned by accusations: “blundering corruption”, “reckless audacity”, a “crocodile impostor flourishing on palm grease.” Unheard is the high, reedy wailing infiltrating wide-awake dreams. There is little of him here except—perhaps—embedded in the sand, transmuted by the mineral accretions of nearly a century, a piece of bone.

There is nothing here to show that his wife once stood barefoot on this shore, and fell to her knees. Her tears dissolved onto the black taffeta stained sand, and were borne elsewhere by the tidal breathing of spirit children.

But Susan Letitia stood up, and walked away, and survived, and so perhaps what remains here is the grace of her survival—less dramatic, more heroic, than despair, than grief, than honour.
SOURCES


“Tragic end at Fremantle, the result of worry.” Western Mail 15 March 1902.
As an intellectual context the cold war has its limitations. It so shaped those who lived through it that it seems that all intellectual questions must first be interrogated for whether they are supporting the left or the right. The "case" of James McAuley all too often exemplifies this stultifying compulsion with the cold war being warmed up like last night's dinner in the wake of Cassandra Pybus' investigative biography *The Devil and James McAuley* (UQP, 1999). The saga was given further impetus this year with the release of Michael Ackland's joint biography *Damaged Men: The Precarious Lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) and, to a lesser extent, by the death of A.D. Hope. Peter Coleman, a friend of McAuley and the author of an early study of his literary work, reviewed in remarkably similar terms the rather different works of Pybus, in the *Australian Book Review*, and Ackland, in the *Weekend Australian*. Coleman was scathing about the author's attempts to psychologise the figure of James McAuley, although claims each book made about the "private" life of McAuley, and in particular that he was a closet homosexual, seemed if anything rather coy. Pybus wrote an article in *Meanjin* called "Dogs in the Graveyard" which addressed some of these criticisms and reflected more broadly on the ethics of biography.

A welcome and productive departure from this bleak melodrama is the consideration given to McAuley in Robert Dixon's intriguing study of twentieth-century primitivism, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance* (UQP,
Dixon’s is one of several studies that seek to unravel a tangled world. There sometimes seems a perverse nostalgia for the power the cold war had to organise the moral universe, but one of the difficult benefits of the breakdown of that bipolar system is the imperative to know one’s world more carefully. In Dixon’s study, without downplaying McAuley’s undoubted talent and vision, we begin to see his sensibility as caught in the contradictions of Australia’s world in the time following World War Two. He was a man of deep, but troubled convictions, and Dixon traces this by examining his career in New Guinea. Dixon uses McAuley’s experiences in New Guinea to elucidate Australia’s relationship with its near neighbour and the role that it played in both defining and destabilising our national postwar modernity. For McAuley, New Guinea was our “grinning mirror”, a land where forces were altering traditional life and newly formed citizens played out a disturbing (for him) parody of modern life. But McAuley was not just a passive observer – he was caught in the game. In Dixon’s analysis, McAuley becomes newly interesting, not as a cold warrior who fought the good (or bad) fight, or as a poet embittered (or not) by sexual repression, but as an acute and reflective figure positioned along Australia’s sensitised boundaries of exclusion and reflection. More of this later.

Apart from the passing of A.D. Hope, 2000 saw the death of arguably the most profound, humane and influential Australian poet of the latter half of the twentieth century, Judith Wright. Wright was a formidable figure, sometimes leading debates, sometimes leapfrogging them altogether. One lasting legacy of her intellect has been the articulation of an environmental sensibility that whilst drawing on the heavy strain of romanticism that critics like Shirley Walker have discerned in her work, also has an insistence and sharpness that speaks strongly to readers many decades later. To the extent that Australian literary critics have latterly discovered “ecocriticism”, Wright has figured prominently. The shadow of Wright falls across two recent works which link Australian cultural works to the environment. The first is Tim Bonyhady’s *The Colonial Earth* (MUP, 2000), a study which shows that the issues we now consider “environmental” very much preoccupied Australians in colonial times. Bonyhady, like his ANU
colleague Tom Griffiths, is a practitioner of environmental history, which unlike ecocriticism has a venerable tradition in this country. Bonyhady wrote an essay paying tribute to Judith Wright that was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* in which he claimed that her truly great work was not her poetry but her environmental history. Bonyhady shares with Wright a lucidity of style, a striking eye for detail and a meticulous and compendious engagement with primary historical sources. *The Colonial Earth* is an important re-evaluation of the attitudes of nineteenth-century Australians to the natural world with which they were in collision. Bonyhady’s book unearths environmental concerns – despoliation, habitat loss, pollution, extinction, erosion – dating to the very earliest periods of the European settlement of this continent. Just as Reynolds charts a counter-history of anxiety about Aboriginal dispossession in his recent books *This Whispering in our Hearts* (Allen & Unwin, 1998) and *Why weren’t we Told?* (Viking, 1999), so Bonyhady explodes the myth of the ignorant colonial land-exploiter. Despite the issues, this book is far from tractarian, managing rather to take within its compass a range of cultural forms, from political debates in the Tasmanian parliament surrounding the protection of “native game”, to a discussion of paintings of the Darling River in flood in the 1880s and 90s.

A rather different work is *Hearts and Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment* (Hale & Iremonger, 2000), written by the journalists Michael Pollak and Margaret McNabb. The work bears the fruits and the scars of the journalistic method. Quite clearly it covers a field – the cultural expression of popular environmentalism over the past 30 years – with a breadth not seen before. There are individual chapters on novels, poetry, magazines, children’s books and a number of other forms, incorporating over 1000 interviews (an average of nearly three per page). The book, however, is less interested in separating out what exactly constitutes environmental concerns. The chapter on novels praises Peter Corris for his awareness of inner-city Sydney in his Cliff Hardy detective stories and writes of the “spiritual pollution” in Peter Carey’s *The Tax Inspector*. Is this environmentalism? The submerged villain of the book is perhaps modernity itself, although it is hard to see how the ostensible heroes in *Hearts and Minds* will
defeat this adversary by living on hobby farms or designer homes in the Blue Mountains. To be fair to the book’s subjects this is not a claim they make, but is a generalised effect of the kind of narrative system underlying this book. This book too speaks of Judith Wright, but stops short of engaging with the more searching aspects of her appreciation of the environmental predicament.

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Last year *Southerly* published a series of essays by younger scholars on the topic of what the future was for Australian literary studies. Cautious optimism was perhaps the consensus, although all contributors saw changes and challenges to the practice of more traditional forms of literary analysis. The evidence of recent publication, however, somewhat belies these fears. A market remains, it seems, for literary histories – particularly if they are compendious and of the Oxbridge persuasion. Elizabeth Webby, who commissioned the *Southerly* essays for her final edition as editor, has edited the *Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (CUP, 2000). Like the annual race on the Thames, this work competes stroke-for-stroke with *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (OUP, 1998), edited by Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss. In fact, anyone with an interest in this field would certainly want to own both – and indeed they complement each other rather well. Penny van Toorn’s consideration of Aboriginal writing for the *Cambridge Companion* adds some interesting new dimensions to Adam Shoemaker’s version for the *Oxford History*; likewise Delys Bird can be read against Susan Lever on modern fiction, and David Carter intertwines with Jennifer Strauss and Patrick Buckeridge on twentieth-century literary culture. Unlike the 1980s when the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, whose coeditors included Bennett and Webby, was written in clear opposition to the *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, we seem at the turn of the millennium to have reached a point of methodological convergence in terms of the writing of literary histories. The precepts of the Penguin work – in which periods, genres and “literature” are maintained but problematised and in which cultural context takes the place of aesthetic evaluation – seem largely to have won the
day and are reflected in the contributions and organisation of the more recent works edited by Webby, Bennett and Strauss.

Incidentally, this form of literary history will find few finer practitioners than Ken Stewart. Stewart’s *Investigations in Australian Literature* (SASSC, 2001), for all its modesty in presentation, comprises a significant corpus of Australian literary history. Stewart’s well-known essays on Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson, Henry Handel Richardson and Christina Stead are all included, as are two classic pieces in literary scholarship, “The Cultural Missionaries, 1855-1915” and “The Australian Short Story Before Lawson”. Stewart’s meticulous research and fussy, engaging style make for absorbing reading, defining scholarship both inside and outside the canon. The essays also have the gift of concision and in a short space evoke complexities and nuances in the societies they describe, practising a kind of thick description in which past cultures emerge unreduced, brimming with life. Anyone interested in nineteenth-century Australian culture will get good value from this deceptively slender volume.

The apparent consensus in the writing of literary histories masks the enormous variety and change in the practice of criticism in works which operate with a less Olympian perspective of history. These works are involved in the cut and thrust of contemporary debates and the even more bruising world of book reviews. *Authority and Influence: Australian Literary Criticism 1950-2000* (UQP, 2001) allows us to examine and to some extent reanimate significant shifts and moments in Australian literary criticism over the past half-century. The editors of this anthology, Delys Bird, Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee, have periodised Australian literary criticism into four parts corresponding to decades (50s & 60s are combined), but have also discerned a number of transhistorical themes, including issues of (inter)nationalism, professionalisation, the canon and gender/race/class/ethnicity. The book renders accessible a lost world of half-remembered debates and certainly helps to dispel the myth that criticism coming prior to 1980 was without theory. While inevitably selective, this anthology allows a great deal more investigative scope than a discursive/institutional critique a la John Docker or Mark Davis. One of the persistent searches, for instance, is for a public –
someone “outside” for whom this whole activity has a value. Criticism, it sometimes seems, needs its public more than the public appears to need it.

The editors of Authority and Influence were right to transpose recurrent themes with temporal change. Recent publications prove there is still no single vanguard behind which criticism (literary, cultural or otherwise) is advancing. Eclecticism is the non-unifying theme of the literary studies that have shuffled across Westerly’s desk in recent times. Certainly the tradition of close reading remains alive. Annette M. Stewart’s Woman and Herself (UQP, 1998) is a psychoanalytical study of that curious artist and writer Barbara Hanrahan. The most enjoyable aspects of this book are the biographical dimensions and the author promises a biography will follow this critical study. Stewart’s analysis is assured and detailed, targeting by the closeness of its attention, the true Hanrahan afficionados. Lay readers will be mesmerised by the reproductions of Hanrahan’s troubling woodcuts which mix overt sexuality with grotesque primitivism – as if Edward Munch had decided to re-do the Bayeux Tapestry as an expressionist tableau. And if a psychoanalytical approach to art and literature can still be sustained, then it seems so too can Bakhtinian readings of classic Australian novels. Maria Panarello is an Italian scholar who cut her Auslit teeth in the early eighties at La Trobe. Her Studies of Indeterminacy in the Australian Novel (Bulzoni, 1999) takes as its case-studies the works of Furphy, Stead and David Ireland. The study of Furphy’s “epistemological doubt” is quite compelling and helps to theorise aspects of his work that have probably been sensed by Australian readers for some time without ever having been laid bare.

Of course close-reading and textual explication have their roots not in a secularised tradition of literary studies, but in the practices of theological explication. This comes through quite strongly in Colette Rayment’s appreciation of the works of Melbourne Jesuit academic Peter Steele, The Shapes of Glory (Spectrum 2000). Rayment has delved deeply into Steele’s oeuvre, ranging from the volumes of his poetry, to critical work on Jonathan Swift, and a welter of liturgical writings. Rayment’s treatment is a deferential one, allowing Steele to speak in generous servings of quoted material. As the title suggests, Rayment’s is essentially a
tropological study, discerning certain "shapes" that pass through all of Steele’s work. Of these Rayment contends that figures of emanation and radiance are particularly generative. Steele writes an essay, for instance, on "radiation" in the work of Peter Porter before this term evoked white suits, Geiger counters and seeping interminable half-lives. Steele works in the restless scholastic tradition of Loyola, but chimes intellectually with an optimistic Idealism founded in the recuperative light of the Word of God. And it is a productive faith, financing intellectual risks and adventures.

Emerging from a rather different episteme than Steele, is the poet John Kinsella. The filial rippling of God’s Word is replaced with the inchoate edges and transient discourse strands of postmodernism. The aptly titled Fairly Obsessive Essays on the Works of John Kinsella (FACP/CSAL, 2001), edited by Rod Mengham and Glen Phillips, is the first book-length consideration of the poetry and prose of Kinsella and it makes good inroads into the task of teasing out the significances in Kinsella’s proliferating works. Kinsella is not one figure, but (mainly) two. The first wears an Akubra and writes probing vernacular poetry about the West Australian wheatbelt. I met this Kinsella in The Silo. The second Kinsella sports a silvered Warholian bouffant and overturns l-a-n-g-u-a-g-e through terroristic assaults on “the contingency of genre”. I met this Kinsella recently when I bought a slim volume called Counterpastoral at a Vagabond Press book launch in a hotel in Sydney’s Chippendale. I was mugged on the way home and, while fifty bucks lighter in the pocket, kept a firm grip on this booklet. In it were poems that still focussed on humans living in-the-land, but this land had been subjected to a kind of ironic digitisation, as if a DNA code was now visible on each strand of wheat. The charm of both Kinsellas is that they occasionally meet, like in “Warhol at Wheatlands”, in which a chronically ambiguous artist reflects unreflectively that it “doesn’t remind me of America at all”, or in “Zone (echidna)”, dedicated to Derrida, where this burrowing marsupial and sometime Olympic games mascot “fades amongst the imported hydrangeas” and dissipates in the white noise of Jerry Springer and Dianarama. Forget trying to talk about Kinsella in terms of periods or phases, he does it all at once, inter-referencing and teleporting like the
Cheshire cat. The editors of this collection have assembled a formidable posse to try and bring Kinsella in, and it is an intriguing chase. I personally found the non-Australian readings quite helpful, simply because they tended to hit Kinsella’s work at different angles to the way I have tended to in my readings. Xavier Pons’ well-considered piece connected Kinsella’s different modes by examining some of the poet’s metaphorical habits, but also usefully situated his experimental work within the traditions of surrealism. Pons closes by quoting Kinsella: “have arrived nowhere / but hope to move on”.

Kinsella’s experimental and counter-pastoral poetry will defy many, but others (Mackenzie Wark is one) will find that there is something in his cryptic shards that is cognate with contemporary experience. In this context it makes sense to find a book called *Imagining Australian Space* (UWAP, 1999), edited by Ruth Barcan and Ian Buchanan. It is not a book about astronomy but about a place that can at times be every bit as strange known as the everyday or, rather more mellifluously by the French *la quotidienne*. What the essays in this collection seek to elicit is — to echo one of the key thinkers in this field of enquiry — an understanding of how societies produce the spaces in which they inhabit. Elizabeth Dempster writes about the spatialising practices in Australian dance, while Ruth Barcan in one of the livelier pieces evokes “the space of the urinal”. The contributions share no common methodology but a broad interest in the conceptualisation of lived environments. Stephen Muecke’s piece on the outback moves between Newtown and Alice Springs, the Kimberley and the Leyland Brothers. His point is one that recurs throughout this collection: spatial practices are overlapping and entangled. Sometimes this can take the form of radical, Kinsella-like, discontinuities, in which locality is ephemeral and diffused. But many of the essays, like Sue Martin’s on colonial gardens or John Macarthur’s on Brisbane’s Kodak Beach, show that societies evolve complex technologies for reordering (or “reterritorialising”) their spaces. And these spaces are also subject to contest, as Bob Hodge shows in his discussion of Perth’s Nyoongar community and the housing policies of successive Western Australian governments. Peter Read writes a moving piece about the way that people remember lost places, like the
towns of Jindabyne and Adaminaby, that were submerged in the construction of the Snowy scheme.

The histories of Jindabyne and Adaminaby are not lost in the mists of antiquity. Australia's paltry colonial history means that they could have sustained settled society for little more than a couple of generations. So why should it haunt us that they are now gone, replaced by planned towns assembled like Lego on the sides of man-made lakes that cover the remains of their Namesakes? There lies in all of this the symptoms of a certain malaise, driven into being by the vortices of erasure and detachment spinning out of modernity's jet-stream. One of the most substantial and sustained intellectual responses to the recognition of these delocalising forces, is the scholarly project of postcolonial studies. Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (Routlege, 2001) charts the conflicting strands of the evolution of the postcolonial endeavour. In an era where economic efficiency is the only unquestioned rationality, it falls to all disciplines to address themselves to the issue of purpose. Postcolonialism, however, reaches a new level of reflexivity whereby it sometimes seems that the main subject of postcolonial studies is postcolonial studies itself. Huggan is occasionally stuck within this loop, but of course aware of it as well, and his comments from within this loop are nevertheless lucid and insightful. The recurrent moment of realisation in Huggan's book is one of complicity. Does postcolonial analysis decolonise or recolonise? The postcolonial exotic is Huggan's term for the persistent impulses of cultural fetishing perpetrated by the centre against the margins. He sees, as if trapped in some Foucauldian contraption, the critical discourse of postcolonialism continuously struggling to avoid enacting the very processes it criticises. Postcolonial theory values the local and the different, but normalises each of these by a transnational discourse that emanates from everywhere and nowhere - although tending to congregate in the literature departments of western universities. These are not easy questions and Huggan does not shirk them. A striking example, neatly drawn by Huggan, is in his chapter "Prizing otherness: a short history of the Booker Prize" about an institution that has been integral in the legitimating of literatures in English outside of England and America. Here, he writes, is a prize
sponsored by a company which made its fortune servicing the needs of Guyanan sugar estates in the 1830s, which is now televised on national British television and whose outcome will directly lead to the realisation of many millions of dollars in the publishing and film industries. Huggan gives us, as he admits, a kind of sociology of the institution of postcolonial literature, but it is conducted by a participant observer, and is all the better for it.

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While Huggan participates in the discourse of postcolonialism, there is little sense in which, whether at Harvard or Munich, he is someone caught in the material processes of the phenomenon itself. The occasionally scientistic diction of postcolonial theory sometimes tricks you into forgetting that there are people all over the world whose lives are the products of colonialism and for whom the simple addition of a prefix will do little to change their predicament. All of this was forcefully brought home to me in Satendra Nandan’s eloquent collection Fiji: Paradise in Pieces (CRNLE – PiP, 2000). In a series of reflections and essays, Nandan paints with a mixture of passion and wry humour, the troubled course of Fiji’s history and politics that were set in motion by, principally, the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) company and its bedfellow, the indentured labour system. This system saw some 60,000 Indians shipped to the 300 islands of the Fijian archipelago. The first boatload arrived in May of 1879, mainly from land-locked villages in Uttar Pradesh. Through Nandan’s elegant prose, the complex story of modern Fiji unfolds with all its ironies, bitter disappointments and resilient optimism. Nandan put the final touches to this volume in the days when the newly elected multi-racial government of Mahendra Chaudri was being held hostage by the armed associates of George Speight. Nandan had himself previously served in the Fijian Parliament with Chaudri, and was in the House the morning in 1987 (also in May) that Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka strolled in with masked gunmen and seized power. Events like these intrude into the mind of most Australians through the evening news, mixed in with other stories of world turmoil. There is often little to place the events in Fiji in context, and even
the so-called analysis of the serious press still tends to present them as the result of some ingrained Pacific island fractiousness that must bubble to the surface from time to time, like the volcanoes that dot this ocean. At the time of writing this review, recent elections have Chaudry back in a parliament that has been voted in on strict racial lines, and the possible coalition partner of each of the major Fijian and Indo-Fijian parties is the party of George Speight, who is currently in gaol facing a number of charges. The price of coalition will almost certainly be the release of Speight. Nandan’s book recasts the Pacific sideshow presented in our media, into epic stories of courage and betrayal, and the tangled worlds born of colonialism. Entanglement is a watch-word of much of the historical writing emerging in recent times. One of the great ongoing battles that is fought in this country is to try and keep Australian nationhood simple, uncomplicated and well-defined. Complexity and confusion belong “outside”, and have no place in our national histories of settlement and progress. The problem with this vision is that it invokes an Australia that never existed. In this year celebrating the centenary of federation, historians have had cause to revisit the process by which the competing colonies formed into a federated nation. Frank Crowley’s, Big John Forrest, 1947-1918 (UWAP, 2000), subtitled “A founding father of the Commonwealth of Australia”, is an invaluable study of this process. Crowley’s biography presents Forrest as a figure of immense will and commitment. In many ways, Forrest is the type of the colonial turned national politician, having distinguished himself initially as an outback explorer, before rising to the rank of Surveyor-General of Western Australia and entering colonial Parliament. With the stirrings of Federal sentiment, Forrest fell firmly on the side of the Federationists, and having helped in the success of this political feat, went on to occupy several key cabinet posts in different Federal governments, including defence and treasury, and even a period as acting Prime Minister. However, Big John Forrest is not only a definitive biography of one of the most significant political figures to emerge from Western Australia, but a window into the complexities of our supposedly simpler past. One passage, from an address Forrest gave to the federal convention in Melbourne in 1897, struck me as particularly salient:
It is no use for us to shut our eyes to the fact that there is a great feeling all over Australia against the introduction of coloured persons. It goes without saying that we do not like to talk about it, but still it is so.

One of the classes of “coloured persons” which Forrest was alluding to were the Afghan cameleers who had become vital to meeting transportation needs in outback Australia, and particularly in the north of Forrest’s own colony. It seems that we are still not too keen on the people of Afghanistan in this country, although we have lost the courage to speak plainly about this, choosing instead to couch our concerns in familiar euphemisms of economic cost, religious “incompatibility”, fear of disease and – as if we were talking about supermarkets rather than civil war – outrage about jumping queues that exist nowhere except the imagination. And if Afghans have no place in Afghanistan, and no place in Australia, then the next most obvious location is undoubtedly Nauru, a land of 7000 people, surely at least double the number of Australians than could honestly claim to point to this Pacific nation on a map. So the process of entanglement continues.

As with Fiji, the “news” version of the Afghan boat people takes place in a temporal dimension which is both instantaneous and calamitous, ensuring that all responses are made with the maximum degree of alarm and the minimum degree of reflection. Yet if we take the time to learn the history of Australian relations with Asia, we will see that reactions to this latest “crisis” are simply a reenactment of a venerable xenophobia. This history is pertinently compiled in David Walker’s Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850-1939 (UQP, 1999). In 1921, Captain W.H. Thring of the Australian navy provided a confidential report to the Commonwealth Intelligence Department bearing the title, “Notes on the Racial Aspect of the Pacific Problem”. One of the key themes in Thring’s report, notes Walker, is the rising influence of the Moslem world. As they used to joke about the middle-class, Islam has been rising for so long it is a wonder that the entire religion has not proceeded into orbit. Walker’s book amasses a wealth of material which shows conclusively that Australia’s dealings with the region have been shaped by a profound anxiety, although
thankfully there have also been many instances of more productive relationships. In Jennifer M.T. Carter’s *Eyes to the Future: Sketches of Australia and her Neighbours in the 1870s* (NLA, 2000), the grotesque sketches held in our National Library show anti-Asian paranoia dating back still further.

Entanglement is not just a national phenomenon but permeates the lives of individuals and families. One day, an Afghan refugee who has confounded the forces of fate and found her way to this country (via Singapore, and the grinning mirrors of New Guinea, Nauru and Auckland), will write a powerful story of the impossible hardship of her life. This book might then perhaps be compared to David Landau’s moving memoir *Caged: A Story of Jewish Resistance* (Pan MacMillan, 2000). In Warsaw I once saw photographs which I thought at first were close-ups of a gravel path, but the ants were in fact people and the gravel was the strewn remains of the city once called the Paris of the East. They were pictures of a Warsaw that had been systematically demolished by the German army in retribution for the uprising of 1944. My imagination was not capable of seeing how it was possible to live in such a place, but Landau’s *Caged* has breathed life into this physical and moral wasteland. David Landau fought in the 1944 uprising and somehow, with his wife Luba, managed to survive in the sprawling inhuman rubble even as the trains continued to roll to Treblinka. The memoir was published posthumously by Landau’s family, who thank Australia, “where so many war-torn, tortured souls have found healing and solace”. Despite the horrific events that occur, Landau’s narrative is told with a chilling patience and restraint. The story is also characterised by a precision of detail and deft grasp of human frailty reminiscent of Gunther Grass, who also lived through (although as a German) the invasion and destruction of Poland. Landau tells us that his title refers to the cage of memory and history which does not let him escape, even once the physical means of his imprisonment by the Nazi regime were removed.

The Landaus arrived in Australia in 1947. In 1853, nearly a century earlier, Brina Israel arrived in the Swan River colony, where she married another Jew, an ex-convict named Theodore Krakouer. Their first child Abraham, born in 1853, was the first “Hebrew” born in the colony. In 1873 Theodore was certified a lunatic and
incarcerated in the Fremantle asylum, which like that in Sydney’s Rozelle, now houses an Arts Centre; in fact, the very Arts Centre whose Press published Terri-Ann White’s *Finding Theodore and Brina* (FACP, 2001) in which this intriguing story is related. The book is an object lesson in cultural entanglement. Theodore and Abraham ran a transport service to the Goldfields and their name seems to have become entangled in the wheatbelt country that lies between Coolgardie and Perth. Indeed, the name Krakouer would be made famous by the brilliant Krakouer brothers who, like John Kinsella (also published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press), left the Western Australian wheatbelt for Perth and then bigger things still, with Phil and Jimmy Krakouer playing for North Melbourne in the VFL. It transpires that White is descended from the Krakouer family and this book is in part an autobiographical reverie. White’s mode is fragmentary and speculative, merging traces found in documents with her childhood memories of Perth, and philosophical reflections on the process of finding family histories. I once viewed a preliminary version of this work on the net, in which its components were hyperlinked, and certainly White’s story is far from linear – but tangled worlds eschew straight lines.

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I want to finish this review by considering two works which celebrate Australian institutions that indicate something of the possibilities of public culture in this country, helping to move us beyond the dismal actions of the domestic polity in an election year, and seeking to genuinely comprehend the complexities and entanglements of our society and our world. The first is Peter Cochrane’s collection of commissioned pieces, *Remarkable Occurrences: The National Library of Australia’s First 100 Years, 1901-2001* (NLA, 2001). The 15 essays comprising this collection draw on some of this country’s most distinguished scholars, including Greg Dening, Joan Kerr, Nicholas Thomas, Tim Bonyhady and Stuart Macintyre. Each has taken a different aspect of the National Library’s collection and discussed it in the intimate light of their research experience. The title of the book derives from the opening page of the Library’s most treasured possession – “MS1” – the
Endeavour journal of Captain James Cook. Cook’s diary, and the act of reading it today, is wonderfully evoked by Greg Dening, who intersperses his own memories of working with eighteenth-century copies of the journal (in Nissen huts situated on a wasteland destined to become Lake Burley Griffin) with Cook’s own words drawn from the journal. Nicholas Thomas discusses the Pacific collections, while David Walker reflects on the Asian collections that helped to enrich his book Anxious Nation. There are also useful essays on the photographic and map collections held by the Library.

Not quite a hundred years old, but well into middle life are the annual Boyer Lectures hosted by ABC radio. There is no other institution quite like it. It seems to bring the best out in Australian letters. Rogue politicians and media barons become suddenly introspective and prone to insight. Muddle-headed academics blossom with an unexpected clarity of purpose, economists become impassioned orators, scientists want to talk about literature and justices of the High Court speak in a language that serves quite passably as English. Entering the Boyer foyer one leaves behind the lab-coat, the dark suit and all manner of academic and judicial gowns and wigs – and dons a crumpled cardigan that may have belonged to Barry Jones. Some Boyer lectures – like Manning Clark’s “Telling the Story” and W.E.H. Stanner’s “The Great Australian Silence” have become classics, and in the case of Stanner, the phrase has become a by-word for national amnesia. I enjoyed David Malouf’s 1998 lectures so much that I begged a loved-one to give me them for Christmas. The Boyer Collection (ABC Books, 2001) has been deftly edited by Donald MacDonald, whose closeness to the Prime Minister has made him a figure of some suspicion for many advocates of the national broadcaster. One of the beauties of the Boyer concept is that it involves a series of lectures, usually seven, in which themes can be developed and teased out. MacDonald has had to choose one lecture from each year, which cannot have been easy. Selecting Noel Pearson’s landmark lecture, “Mabo: Equality and Difference”, meant leaving out Mundaway Yunupingu’s wonderful lecture in the same year about Yothu Yindi and Yolnu culture. The book is well served by contextual material about both the author and the events of the time. As MacDonald
"points out", the essays respond to the "big issues" of their time. The first ever lecture series, just two years after the launch of Sputnik, was David Martyn speaking on "Society in the Space Age", a wonderfully utopian title, redolent of polished metal and friction-free, unentangled life.
Byron Bay, a back street at night.
Dream landscape of telegraph poles and a star-rolled sky mirrored on the road in broken glass.

Walking ahead, you crash without noise into moonlight, suddenly lit, edged in silver, burning, and then split three ways into shadow. Half turning towards me, you graze silence as you whisper, gravel-voiced, "he-llo", and although we have been walking and talking together for hours, I understand why you say this: the moment is new.

On the beach that afternoon we blinked into our open books but the sun had got in, a butterfly of glare golding large portions of paragraph. I looked over at one point and mistook your forearm for my own. Warm air swathed us, locking, unlocking, and our conversation was loose, lazy, weaving sideways like a crab 'til the wind took it up and roared with it over our
sand-saddled backs. One part I remember, you said, "I don’t know, I could end up in...Tasmania". I started laughing and you cut me off. "Shut up", you said, "I need a Devil". Purple flowers climbed a dune, their centres white, fire-bright. Chords of sea-foam gnashed and zinged, electric. A soccer-ball cracked on damp sand and rose again, chequered globe arcing skyward.

Clean beauty. So fraught, high-pitched. Strung up between poles, banner-like, full of colour, flown.

My eyes closed against the burn.

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Later, I crouched by a lagoon. Waiting for fresh feeling to burst and brim at my skin, the way black skins of water bled silver wherever quick-tailed creatures leapt or shimmied underneath. When you emerged from somewhere behind me, your face looked drawn, I thought, a drawing of sadness. A bush turkey fleetingly became a black dragon as it struck its wings drily against sky and arched its neck, and in the lagoon below, salmon-pink clouds ignited in a mercurial sea. You lay your head back and tears washed over your eyes, breaking the colours up, riverish. Four ducks made silently in a row for the lagoon’s far end, for the reed-splintered and weed-grabbed shadows held together by the stiff vertebrae of a telegraph pole,
its signal perspective. It caught me by suprise
when all four at once
beat the water with their wings and
heavily ascended, everywhere the air
churning with a sound like applause,
still-perfect V’s of wet light
tapering to the points at which they had
launched themselves, the world in their wake
tensed, exacted.

And breaking up already as I turned away.
SECRET SYDNEY

In Glebe we swung past frangipannied terraces
To a derelict red-bricked house with a garden
Planted with white washing machines and fridges.
In Beverly Hills, we ate roast pigeon and crab in a restaurant
Called Mas Thai where only Cantonese was spoken.
You called this secret Sydney as you swept me about
Pointing out a green corner door which opened only
On the weekends to reveal nests of egg noodles for sale
Showing me boutiques that sold individual designs sweated
Over by fashion students, cinderella-like, waiting for
Their break. From inside a swaying car I caught a glimpse of
Apple-green, heard wisps of names, saw our car flit by in
Glassy reflections off shop windows. I did not see a
ribboned sleeve
Lovingly stitched. I did not walk through a cool, dark
interior with
Foetal clumps of noodles. The Opera House, when we went past,
Opened up for a fraction before clamping shut like an oyster.
THIS ONE WAS DIFFERENT

THURSDAY A.M.

Me and Gibbo were sent over to check her out when that shitbag Baxter spilled his guts. "Listen Ray," Penman said to him in that smooth voice he puts on — the bastard's good, you've got to give him that — "Listen Ray," he said, "you tell us who else is involved. We know about the other jobs mate, so don't give us any shit — Narrabeen, Lindfield, Mona Vale, we know all about 'em mate — you tell us who else is in it — give us some names, mate — the prick who got away, and there's some girl in it, isn't there? We got witnesses, mate. You tell us about 'em Ray and maybe — I'm not promising anything, right, but just maybe we can do something for you. You didn't shoot that kid, right? We know that, you know that, but what jury's gonna believe it?"

"Only a kid. Eighteen, his first job and his mother sitting out in that courtroom with her eyes all puffed up with crying. Her hair gone grey overnight. You'll be sitting there Rayboy, and the court all looking at that mother and the photos and then back at you, wantin' to cut your balls out, and some other prick and his tart'll be out there, living the high life, readin' all about you in the papers and you're the one who's gonna do time, Ray. You. And the other cunts out there laughin' at their good luck."

"So Ray," Penman said, "how about you give us some names? How about it?"

So Baxter spilled his guts, dobbed in his mates — his cousin, his cousin's girlfriend who'd done the occasional drive for them. "I
didn’t shoot the kid,” he said, snivelling, “you gotta believe me, Mr Penman. It was Jimmy. It was Jimmy done it, Jimmy, not me.”

Shitbag.

So Penman sent me and Gibbo straight over to Manly, where this bird, Megan Murray was supposed to live with this O’Reilly bloke and it’s a nice old block of flats just across from South Steyne, bottom flat and the front door’s open, and we’re thinking she’s gone, but we can hear the radio going and see the television flickering and we burst in. We’ve got our guns out, but there’s only this girl sitting cross-legged in front of the tv, playing the guitar. She’s sitting right up close to the screen and the radio’s blaring and she’s playing the guitar, some folky thing, and singing really softly, and she doesn’t see us or hear us, she just keeps playing. So Gibbo checks out the house while I stand there behind her with my gun drawn and she still doesn’t notice us. The whole thing’s really weird, like something out of a movie — Gibbo diving through doorways into empty rooms, me with my gun at the ready, and this girl who just keeps singing away, her eyes fixed on the screen, oblivious.

And she’s pretty this girl — I’m saying girl, but I know now that she’s over thirty with two kids and hardly a girl — really pretty, with dark hair and long brown legs, and she doesn’t notice us till Gibbo moves over to the radio and turns it off and clears his throat softly to get her attention. I guess we’re both of us thinking the same thing: that maybe we’ve got the wrong place, it’s clean and light and full of air and the girl somehow looks all wrong. Oh, she fitted Baxter’s description alright, but somehow she just didn’t seem the type. Anyway, she finally looks up and sees us and I know it’s her — she goes pale and her throat kind of convulses and “Jimmy,” she says, “it’s Jimmy isn’t it? Something’s happened…” She goes to stand up then, but she loses her balance and trips, and she puts her foot right through it, right through the bloody guitar.

We took her back to the station after we searched the flat — there was nothing, no money, no guns, only some camping gear, packed and ready to go. So we took her back to the station, in cuffs though she came quietly, easily, and we handed her over to Penman.

He keeps his soft voice for the boys, Penman. “Can’t do it for ladies,” he says. “They like it rough, the ladies,” he says, “they
wouldn’t understand the soft touch. Wouldn’t appreciate it. Hard
and up the arse, that’s what they need,” he says, “that’s what the
bitches deserve.” And he was rough on this one, on Meg. Rougher
than usual.

“So, Meg,” he said. “Meg’s what you like to be called, isn’t it? So
Meg, you’re this murderer O’Reilly’s current fuck, are you? Good,
are you? You’d have to be, cause your bloke Jimmy’s had a whole
lotta pussy in his time, hasn’t he? Or maybe you don’t know about
the others, eh Meg, maybe Jimmy’s never told you about ‘em?
We’ve got one of his er ... old flames out in the cells, I believe. Tina
McGuire, busted her last night for something or other. Soliciting? Is
that right, Stratford? She’s a nice sort of a girl, old Tina. Perhaps we
should introduce these two ladies, they’d have a bit in common.
Could have a bit of a chat about Jimmy, eh? He’s had a nice bit of
cunt, your Jimmy, he’d be a real expert, I reckon. Got himself a bit
of a reputation round here, anyway....”

“So, it says here that you got kids, Meg. These them? Cute. Pretty
little things. Nice that you carry a picture about in your wallet, love.
Very nice. Sweet. Where are they, love? With their father, eh? Leave
him for this prick, did ya? No? Some other prick, then? See ‘em very
often, do you? Well, you won’t see ‘em after this Meg. Not for a long
while. You’ll be going away Meg. Don’t s’pose hubby’ll let the littles
visit you at Mullawah. Not a nice place for a picnic, not really. Not
nice havin’ a mother in prison, eh Meg. D’you ever think of that?
What’ll they tell their friends, darlin’? What’ll your sweet little
kiddies tell their friends?....”

He went on like this for an hour or so, the foreplay he calls it, and
then he left her with me. “She’s panting for it mate, open and
panting, hot and wet and ready for it,” he says, “you’ll get
something out of her Stratford, ya softcock... I’ve greased ‘er up for
you, mate, she’ll be easy.”

She was pale and trembling when Penman went, but not crying,
not then, and I offered her some coffee, a cigarette. She asked for
water instead, but she had a cigarette and when I lit it for her my
fingers were trembling too.

“Listen,” I said to her, “listen, Meg, you haven’t got a record. No
shoplifting when you were a kid. No drugs. Not even a speeding
fine. You’ve got kids haven’t you? You don’t want to end up in
prison, do you?"

"Can I ask you something," she said, ignoring my question. "Could you explain something?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"There was nothing on the news, I've been listening all morning. Why wasn't there anything on the news?"

I started to explain how we'd arranged with the media to keep quiet until the evening editions, how we persuaded them that their silence was crucial to our immediate investigation, but she'd begun to cry then, really cry.

I gave her a tissue, went out and made us both coffee, strong and sweet, and brought it back. She drank it. She wiped her face, blew her nose. I waited.

"Listen Meg," I said again, "this could all be over pretty quickly. You could be outta here now — no charge, no form. You seem like a nice girl, not the type to be mixed up with a bloke like O'Reilly. You just tell me where he's likely to be and you can go. Go back to your kids, your family. He's a bad man, Meg. You don't seem to understand. He killed someone today. A young bloke. Eighteen. You've got kids, what do you reckon it must be like for this poor fella's mother and father. His girlfriend. Tell me where he is Meg, and it'll all be over. You can go home, go home and forget any of this ever happened."

She smiled then, and it was the first time I'd seen her smile, and it was the best smile I've ever seen, don't laugh, the best smile I've ever seen on any bird — models, filmstars, whatever — and somehow, at the same time, when she smiled I felt like I'd never seen anyone sadder. It's hard to remember properly now, but I know that she looked sad, then, sad like somebody'd died, only she was smiling.

THURSDAY P.M.

I went back that evening. It was my mother's birthday and I was meant to be going out to dinner, so I phoned, left a message, organised flowers to be sent. I felt like things were beginning to happen between me and Meg. Not in any personal way, you understand, not that — but you can really feel it when they're about to start confiding. It's a gut feeling, an intuition. You can
sense them struggling to keep it all in. You can tell that they're starting to like you, that they want to trust you. You can tell that something's coming.

So I went back that evening and got Lennie to bring her over for a second interview. She'd been in the cells for a couple of hours by then and was looking a bit the worse for wear. I let Lennie have a go at her first — Lennie's a scary bitch when she wants to be and I thought she might soften her up a bit for me — but Meg seemed pretty composed, maybe even a little amused, by the time Lennie left to get coffee. I lit her a cigarette and sat down beside her. "Ah," she smiled, "here comes the good cop again."

"No," I said, "No, it's not a game Meg. You just seem like a nice lady— I'd be sorry to see you in trouble. I gave up a night out with my parents to talk to you tonight. I don't have to be here, I thought I might be able to help you. I want to help you."

She laughed then, and stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette. I noticed she had pretty hands, long fingers, and kind of graceful, elegant. "Well," she said, "Well I can understand that. I think I'd rather be anywhere than having a night out with my parents. But I can't tell you anything, Detective. I don't know where he is, I really don't. He's shot a bloke, he's got a bag full of money. He won't come back for me — what use am I to him? He could be anywhere. Anywhere...."

I thought she sounded pretty pissed-off, sort of resentful — which is always a good sign. It was coming, I was sure of it.

"I didn't really want to bring it up," I said, "but y'know that pro that Detective Penman was talking about — Tina Mcguire. Well Penman's a prick, but it's true y'know. She is an old girlfriend of O'Reilly's, they lived in the Cross together for a while. She had an AVO out on him a few years ago, he belted her up a couple of times. He's not a nice bloke, Meg. He's not a nice bloke by any stretch."

She shrugged. "So what's nice, detective? Is your Mr. Penman nice? That friendly lady you just had in here talking to me, is she nice? And what about you — are you nice? Why don't you explain nice to me? Give me some examples. So I can understand exactly what it is you're talking about. Come on Detective Stratford," she said, "why don't you tell me about nice."
I handed her another cigarette and tried to light it, but the fluid must have been low, it hardly sparked. I shook the lighter, tried again. Nothing. She took it from my hand. For her the lighter flamed steadily straight away. She inhaled, blew smoke towards the ceiling. "Come on Detective, she said again, passing back the lighter, her fingers brushing mine, "Come on Detective Stratford," she said, "you tell me all about nice."

"I can tell you about nice," I said, letting my voice heat up a little, "I can tell you what's nice, alright. Nice is having a bloke who doesn't beat you up. Having a boyfriend with a job — who doesn't rob people, who doesn't kill people for a living. Nice is having your little place by the beach, having a decent fucken job, having some decent friends. You know, friends — people you can go down the pub with, play pool with, go to the beach with. Picnics. Kids. People who are more likely to talk to you than rape you. But maybe you've forgotten that people like that exist, eh, Meg? Friends. Family. People who care about you. People who'll look after you. People who love you."

"People who love you? Love," she said, 'Love. Love's just an excuse for all kinds of shit. Love doesn't mean nice, or good, or happy, or any of those things. Does love mean nice for you? Do you have nice people who love you? Does love make you feel nice?"

"That's not what we're here to talk about Meg. This isn't about me."

"But I want to know, Detective. You're the one who's giving advice. Maybe you ought to back it up with some evidence. You lot are big on evidence aren't you? Isn't that your thing. You say that love is a good thing. Well, give me some proof."

"You want proof?" I said. "Proof? Well, I s'pose I can give you that. I'm a fucken expert on love, after all. You can ask anyone. It's little things, lady, simple things, things that make you feel good if you're someone like me. Like having your family around you. Finishing work and going home and your wife's got dinner ready and the kids are hanging out to see you, to tell you about school, to kiss you goodnight. And your wife's there and she's hanging out to see you, to talk to you, to touch you. And you touch each other all the time, Meg. You touch her, your hands round her waist, lips on her neck, when she's serving out the meal; your eyes are on her, touching her, burning into her, when you're opening a bottle of wine; your
hand's on her shoulder when you're sitting eating; you're squeezing her thigh under the table. And you put the kids to bed together. Both of you. You sit on their bed and listen, you touch her hair while she reads them a bedtime story. And the kids half strangle you to death when they say goodnight. Goodnight Daddy, Goodnight Daddy we love you. We Love you, Daddy. Everything's warm, everything's happy. You feel good about them. They feel good about you. That's it. Simple. Everything's nice. Nice. That's what love should be."

"Yeah," she said, "That's how it should be, and I had all that once, or something like it. But it doesn't last, does it? That's never the whole story, is it? Is it? There's always something you miss out on, something you don't know."

She was looking at me like she was seeing right into me, like she really understood. Like she knew. And there's been no one else like that — oh, you tell your mates, you try to explain to your family, but they don't really get it, it's as if they can't afford to. As if it's contagious, infectious. But this girl — I couldn't help it — it was as if she had nothing to lose, as if she already knew it all anyway.

"You're right," I said, "maybe there is always something you don't know. Maybe it is all a lie, maybe it's always been a lie. Maybe in the middle of all this niceness the woman you've loved for ten years, the mother of your children, is fucking your best mate. Maybe she's wondering whether she should tell you tonight — you're in such a fucken nice mood — whether she should tell you tonight that she's leaving. That she's going to take the kids, take your kids, Meg, and move in with him. That she's loved him for years, that she loved him even before she married you. That it's nothing to do with you: you've been good, you've been great, you're one of her best friends, she loves you. But she's in love with your best mate. In love. She can't help it.

She's in love and she's going to pack up your life, your nice life, Meg, she's going to pack up your nice life — pack it up and give it away."

"Yeah," I said, "maybe there is always something you don't know Meg, but that's no reason, believe me, that's no reason to give up. It doesn't have to be like that. It doesn't have to be a lie Meg. Maybe sometimes it's for real. Maybe if you try you can make it real."
She was sitting still. Looking at the table. Her cigarette was in the tray, untouched, still burning. I waited. She stubbed the cigarette out, her hand trembling. I waited. Eventually she looked up at me. “Look,” she said, her voice soft, but clear, strong, certain. “Look,” she started, “I think I’d —” but just then Lennie came in with the coffee.

Lennie marched in, keys jangling on her hip, with a tray of coffee and a packet of biscuits and “I reckon it’s about time for a break,” she said, giving me a funny look, “Time for a break, mate.”

FRIDAY

There was this court case the next morning, me and Gibbo, out at Bidura. A couple of little shitbags from Woolloomooloo. They’d beaten up a tourist — kicked the shit out of this bloke, a gang of them, but we’d only got two. They’d kicked the shit out of him and taken his wallet. A heap of traveller’s cheques and fifty bucks cash. Fifty bucks and three weeks later the poor guy’s still at Vinnies, permanent back injuries, he’ll be in a brace for years. So me and Gibbo had to give our statements, then listen while the legal aid softcock told the magistrate all about the little dears’ deprived circumstances, their abnormal family relationships.

Anyway, we didn’t get back until after three that afternoon and straightaway I checked with Penman about the Meg situation. I’d hardly slept the night before, thinking about her. I knew I was that close, that she was about to tell me something, that maybe if Lennie hadn’t come in .... So straightaway I checked in with Penman to see what the deal was. Could I have another go at her? Maybe me and him again? Maybe that was the combination.

He was in his office with a few of the others — Lennie, Hanson, Carruthers — checking out a wanted poster they were getting together on O’Reilly, laughing at the artist’s impressions of O’Reilly’s possible long hair, his possible beard, his possible moustache. “Whadda you think, Stratford,” he said, handing it to me, “good taste your little bird’s got, eh? Fucken good taste.”

“Listen,” I said, ignoring him, “listen Penman, how about we interview her again. I reckon last night I was getting close, I reckon she’s gonna crack, mate. I’m sure of it.”

Penman looked at Lennie, then back at the poster. Finally he
looked up at me. "Mate," he said, "didn't you hear?" He sat back in his chair then, stretched his legs out, folded his arms behind his head. "She got bail, mate," he went on, his voice soft, "she got bail this morning, some fucken hotshot lawyer, fucken softcock magistrate. She got bail this morning and disappeared around lunchtime. We're adding her details to the report now."

"Why're you so surprised mate?" Penman asked, grinning. "Why're you so surprised? Thought you'd have worked it out by now. They're all the same, Stratford. They're all the fucken same."
AILEEN KELLY

EFFORTLESSLY SECONDARY

for Lucy and in memory of Michael

I stand at the bedroom door in our dark
letting my eyes sharpen
through the swirl of old vision
until I can steer by the clock’s glow
as though someone would wake at a light

I shuffle to the bed and lie without encroaching
beyond my territory

Sleep sets me to Inanna’s journey
I strip my light music robes of state
abase myself before The keeper has no face
no name there is no parley

Waking at 2 or 3 it is not
to hear you spout easing your bladder
into the city-long sewer that begins
under the privacy of our house

I put on the jug with such a little water

Even in dreams I do not find you
and dawn’s flood will never
cleanse my mouth of dusk
JUDY JOHNSON

TEN POEMS IN THE STYLE OF THE LIANG*

The Cicada

The cicada weaves its voice through the forest.
In the west there is a weaving wife.
Her fine flowered silk is tangled.
By sundown her pattern is not finished.

Time flies like the Dusk Wind bird,
Above the faint srr, srr of the cicadas’ loom.

White, White Moon through the Window

My bed lies empty, lost to clear dust.
I watch my daughter apply beauty-spots.
She plays at sticking them between her eyebrows.
She paints kohl on her eyelids.

The white moon knows what lies inside my daughter.
It will soon undo her scarlet ribbons.

A Lovely Girl’s Loneliness

A maiden with cinnabar lips and slim fingers
Strokes a lute.
Who will look on her face?
She, who destroys a city with one chord.
In the Valley of The Secret Orchid

The valley teems with sweet orchids.
I pick and pick but don’t yet have one handful.
I have heard the music of the secret orchid.
Plink! plink! slim fingers strum.

My light skirts quiver.
Perfumed air pierces orange mist.

Env y

In the Jasper bedroom I hear bangles chinking.
I smell the fragrant dust amongst flimsy curtains.
My sister’s house has lapiz lazuli doors,
Jade cabinets, emerald chains.

My sister holds court with Emperors.
She grooms her sweet face with kohl and cinnabar.
Her eyebrows are moth wings.
The moon shines on her gold lamé dance gown.
I am green, green,
Sinking into the room’s cavernous shadows.

Pity me!

Pity me! I was not born a man.
I cannot yearn for the seas or spirited dust.
Because I was born a girl,
There were no gifts heaped at my feet.
When my daughter came along,
There was no celebration.

My husband was sent to the city
Soon after our wedding day.
He left me only his “always love you” pillow.

I lean over my winecup, but cannot drink.
This year’s end is slow coming.
Infidelity

1.
How attractive! someone else's wife,
Lifting a palmful of water from the river
To her pomegranate mouth.
Is she close or far, far away,
Pining for her husband's silk-wrapped letter.

2.
How attractive! someone else's husband,
Riding through my town.
This stranger has come far,
Perhaps as far as the border.
His wife has not sewn the stitching on his shirt
As finely as I could sew it.

A Woman once Beautiful has Grown Old

Stars sink below the garden walls.
The pure wind of evening blows.

The silk of a woman's face grows transparent
Stretching over cheekbones under the autumn moon.

There is a mirror in her room that she no longer polishes.
Her image says "I long for you as you once were"
And then "How soon we must part".

The Faith of the Ibis

The beak of the Ibis is as fine as two thin swords.
There is a legend of two swords who were separated.
They cried out in anguish then took on different forms.

The female sank in the river.
The male flew to the city.

Although the river is deep
And the city full of sinister omens,
Divine things do not part forever.

The Ibis can walk on scissor legs through water.
It flies over cities with its beak full of mud.

*Freedom*

I am a tiny dot in the night, braving the far road.
In this scented season there's always a flowery moon.

Bright, bright stars adorn my carriage.
The Herdboy in the sky turns north-west.
The Weaver looks back south-east.

My heart is set free of its sweetheart strings.
I no longer look for mandarin ducks.

*The Liang Dynasty, Sixth century AD.*
China is at present engaged with an unprecedentedly historical mission: building socialism ... based on an open-the-door policy. Such a policy allows for the introduction of some western technologies and administrative methods, which are being widely applied in the economic area and have promoted rapid economic development in the past two decades. Such openness has also brought about a lot of changes in intellectual and cultural life in China. The development of Chinese literature during the past two decades illustrates these changes, which are indicative of both the differences from the past and the challenges in the present.

The following five aspects have been chosen as examples to give a general survey of these changes. They demonstrate how Chinese writers are making an effort to extricate themselves from the terrible nightmare most of them have experienced and can never forget. At the same time, they illustrate how those writers are attempting to devise new modes of literary production by referring to what is conveyed from the west, in order to make up for what they have lost in terms of time and access to internationally-recognised work. The longing to narrow the gap with international movements is, however, modified by the fact that they want to preserve their roots in the soil which their ancestors have occupied for thousands of years and preserve traditional values. This mix of conflict and attempted reconciliation between old and new, east and west, seems to dominate the literary scene in China today: the development of a new type of
literature has to be risked at the cost of losing traditional values which once made China so proud but which gave rise to the long-term exclusion of external ideas. Is there any way to keep traditional values in combination with new ideas and techniques from the outside? Here is the response from the literary experiences of the last two decades in this, the world’s most-populated country and one of its oldest civilisations.

Weakening of Political Significance

Traditionally speaking, China is a country heavily charged with political concerns. This was particularly so after 1949. Many writers suffered by being labelled “rightists”, and this tendency culminated in the Cultural Revolution when not only writers but ordinary people dared not write or say anything in opposition to orthodox thinking.

When the Cultural Revolution ended, stories and poems were still charged with the central political concerns of the time, including melodrama which complains about the suffering and damage brought about by the Cultural Revolution, such as Lu Xin-Hua’s The Trace of Wound. Reflective literature and reformative fiction are in the same category. The former attempts to expose and repudiate ultra-leftist politics and bureaucracy and present tragic characters, as in Ru Zhi-juan’s A Wrong-Edited Story. The latter tends to focus on the reform situation that unfolded in China in the early eighties. The best representative is Jiang Zi-long’s The Appointment of Manager Qiao, telling how a reformer overcomes difficulties and carries on reforms to boost production in a factory.

However, the tendency towards politically-loaded writing was gradually checked as a younger generation of writers arose. One of the first examples of the kind is Chen Cun’s Death, which focuses on the death of the famous translator Fu Lei who suicided during the Cultural Revolution. The author, however, does not give an account of physical aspects of the real event, but concentrates on his own philosophical vision of death which transcends time, thus moving away from the political tone conventionally used to deal with kind of material.
Political concerns are further obscured and weakened in the neo-realism and neo-historicism which came into being in the late eighties when the literary magazine Zhong Shang set up a special column called "Grand Show of Neo-Realist Fiction." Many writers active in the 1980s could be included under this heading. It is inclined to reject the control of political power over literature and emphasize the return of the original nature of life, or represent the immediate features of life. Essentially it involves the removal of all ideological shadows, and frees literature from manipulation through political power by dismantling stereotypes and bringing the writer’s subjectivity into full play. It no longer concerns itself ideologically with the meaning of life, but is more illustrated in human nature and the varieties of human existence.

The representative writers of this group are quite numerous. Wang An-yi’s trilogy Love in Bleak Mountains, Love in a Small Town, and Love in Jing-xiu Valley highlights an aesthetic of sexual love by abandoning all externally-imposed social and cultural mores, returning to a fundamental nature of life based in human instincts and desires. Liu Heng’s Fuxi Fuxi is a story of adultery in which he seems to affirm the value of life by reproduction. Fang Fang’s novelette Scenery adopts a more naturalistic mode of description in presenting many details of the barbarous, mean, and ugly aspects of life in a city-dweller’s family. A violent father and a vulgar and voluptuous mother have ten children who are not only undernourished and poverty-stricken, but suffer a great deal in spirit. Fang Fang presents a realistic picture of the nature of existence without any ideological shelter, and produces a shocking sense of newness and genuineness.

Neo-historicism is closely related to neo-realism, but confines its subject matter to the trifles of life in a certain historical period, principally the years between 1912-1949, the so-called min-guo or Republican period. It also tries to exclude issues of political power and to reveal the original nature of social history. One example is Zhao Ben-fu’s The Sword-carrying Man and the Woman, a legend of the rough life of lower-class people along the Yellow River as they struggle against natural disasters and human evil. The best work of this kind is Mo-yan’s Red Sorghum. This novella focuses on the love story of a peasant bandit (Yu Zhang-ao) and a peasant woman.
against the setting of the anti-Japanese War. It does not devote much space to the political meaning of the war itself, like many other stories of its kind, but concentrates on violence and sexual love, on the rustic, coarse way of living common among peasants at the time. Thus it focuses on human nature without any didacticism.

This apolitical tendency also appears in poetry. Beginning in the mid-eighties, a large group of young poets, mostly born in the 1960s, have set their poetic writings against the poetry that preceded them. Their works present a multifarious and complex trend with the establishment of many schools and styles of art, generally referred to as “the third generation of poets”. The most noticeable feature of their poems is a strong sense of individuality and the exclusion of political and cultural ideas, an aesthetic which generally conforms to the neo-realist and neo-historicist principles of fiction writing. The best example is Han Dong’s poem “About Da Yan Pagoda” which strips the famous historic building of its cultural connotations and significances:

Da Yan Pagoda
What can we learn about
We climb upwards
and look around
for the scenery
before we come down.

Growing Modernist Influences

After the introduction in China of early modernist writings in the 1920s and 30s, modernism almost disappeared for 30 years after 1949. A heated argument about modernism occurred in the early 1980s when the open-door policy allowed its return. Shortly after that Chinese modernist writings in various genres began to flourish almost overnight.

The first sign was associated with a group of young poets headed by Bai Dao, Gu Cheng and Shu Ting. Their poems are characterised by the use of imagery, metaphor, of general perception akin to symbolism. Because of the new aesthetic sense
the poems convey, they caught the public attention soon after their appearance, and were nicknamed “obscure poetry” due to their difficulty. One of the representative poems is Bai Dao’s “Reply”:

    I don’t believe in the blue sky
    I don’t believe in the echoes of thunders
    I don’t believe in false dreams
    I don’t believe in death without retribution. 

Modernist fiction follows “obscure poetry” closely, as is shown in Wang Meng’s numerous short stories and novellas. Most of them involve psychological descriptions and an impressionistic style, an example is “A Dream of Sea”. The story tells of the meditations of an old scholar who, having gone through many years of political persecution, finally obtains a chance to go to the seaside. He has been longing to do this for more than fifty years. Yet he stays only five days before he leaves. This is because “The sky is too immense, the sea too broad and he too old.” If Wang Meng and other so-called “returnee writers” (a nickname for the writers once designated as rightist in 1957) regard modernist techniques principally as a way of exposing social reality, the younger writers simply concentrate on subjective mood. One representative is Can Xue, whose application of a distorted or alienated perspective reveals a world of absurdity, deformation and nightmare in the light of gloom, obscenity, fear, anxiety and oddity, in a style reminiscent of Kafka. In her story A Cabin on the Hill, the heroine seems to have something wrong with her senses. She feels that everything around her, including her parents, is abnormal. Her father turns into a wolf every night, while her mother causes her daughter’s body to swell whenever she fixes her stare on it.

Quite a number of younger writers, including Ma Yuan who is well known for meta-narratives in his series of stories dealing with Tibetan subject matter; Sun Gang-lu, reputed for his language experiments; Ge Fei, well known for his probing of consciousness, and Yu Hua, for his penetration of the nature of human existence, are famous for their modernist techniques. But compared with fiction and poetry, drama is less influenced by modernism. Gao Xing-jian’s play The Absolute Signal uses some surrealist lighting
and sound to highlight the subjective mood of the characters on stage.

**The Function of Market Forces**

As the economic system has become market-oriented, cultural and literary production has had to adapt to the new system and has become more controlled by the market. Inevitably literature falls into two kinds: elite and popular. Many writers have had to turn their attention to the market to satisfy their readers' taste in order to sell more books and make more money. Fiction and television series, poems and pop songs are no longer inseparable. In a word, market forces have had a great impact on literary development.

At the moment the most distinguished writer of popular literature is Wang Shu. Wang's early career is associated with stories of crime and love, such as the best-sellers of the 1980s, *Air Hostess, Play with Heartbeat*, etc. His writing style has gradually turned into a kind of parody, such as *The Game Master and other stories*, which has won him a large readership. The tendency towards commercialisation of his fiction has led him to abandon fiction in order to focus on writing television series. His involvement in television has resulted in a number of successful television scripts, including *Longing* and *The Story of the Editorial Board*, regarded as the most sensational television drama in China. Wang has become a pioneer in the production of commercial television series. Similar to Wang Shu in some ways is Cui Jian who is well-known for his rock singing, with all of the words and music composed by himself.

The commercialisation of literature has also raised some problems. For example *Raise the Red Lantern*, a film script adapted from the novella *A Flock of Wives*, turns on a different understanding of the heroine Song-lian. The question arises; to what extent should the adaptation of fiction remain true to the original? Or, rather, which is more important, the aesthetic value of the work itself, the taste of the audience, or the value of the box office?
Contributions of Tradition

The past two decades have witnessed great changes in the major concerns and techniques of Chinese contemporary literature under the impact of the West and the market. This raises the question of the viability of traditional values. The reply is positive. There have been many successful works based on the employment or reconstruction of traditional values. A common understanding among many writers is that no literature can be established in its true sense unless it is grounded in its national soil, with a particular identify of its own. There seems to have been a return to tradition among many writers since the mid-eighties.

There are two main groups in this category. The first consists of some older writers, who have stuck to their faith in the national cultural character throughout their writings. Most of them were labelled as rightists in 1957 and suffered a great deal in the subsequent twenty years. These terrible experiences made them better able to understand social problems and national culture. Many of their writings are deeply inscribed with their pursuit of various social features in the long traditions of the country. Wang Zeng-qi’s The Buddhist Taboo is about the monks’ secular way of living in a Buddhist monastery; Deng You-mei’s The Pipe is a legend of a declining aristocrat in late Qing Dynasty and his relationship with a pipe-manufacturer; Lu Wen-fu’s Delicacy-Taker concerns food customs in Su Zhou; Liu Shao-tang’s native land fiction series deal with the picturesque landscape and lives of the rural people; Feng Ji-cai’s The Miraculous Pig-Tail is about a legendary character’s playful fight and game with foreign invaders in the late Qing Dynasty. All these stories are strongly flavoured by Chinese traditional culture.

The second group consists of some younger writers. In spite of general concern for traditional culture, the majority of these writers remained engrossed with the modernist techniques and modes introduced in the first half of the 1980s. It was not until a root-seeking cultural current developed that traditional culture received more attention from the majority of writers, with the educated youth origin writers at their core. The shift in orientation was partly due to political pressure from above and coincided with the
international current of postmodernism. It seemed to take a stand against the modernist denial of all traditional forms, and re-evaluated and affirmed the function of traditional culture. The first representative work is Ah Cheng’s *The Chinese Chess Master*, which presents a physically feeble character, Wang Yi-sheng, who with strong spiritual power resists the chaotic forces coming from the Cultural Revolution and devotes himself to the study of the essential laws guiding Chinese chess, drawing on Taoist ideas about the subjugation of the strong by the weak. Han Shao-gong’s *Papapa* is an exposition of the history of a primitive tribe, handling local rites, superstition and native slang, and adopting a critical attitude towards backward forms of national culture. It centres on an idiot called Bin-zai who is incomprehensibly and ridiculously worshipped by the local villagers.

Other important works of this group include Han Shao-gong’s *Ma-qiao Dictionary*; Zang Cheng-zhi’s *The Northern River*; Jia Ping-pao’s *An Initial Account of Shang-zhou*; Li Han-yu’s *The Last Fisherman*, and Zhang Wei’s *The Fable of September*. These works present traditional subject matter, they also give new insights, new values and force to traditional culture. Some of them are even innovative in terms of literary forms, such as Han Shao-gong’s *Ma-qiao Dictionary* which tells a story in the form of a dictionary.

Feminism

In spite of the fact that there have been quite a few women writers in China, few of them have had any real sense of the position and needs of women as distinct from those of men. It was not until after the Cultural Revolution that more and more women writers became aware of their place in the historical process.

One of the early women writers with a sense of feminist purpose is Zhang Jie. Her *The Unforgettable Love* portrays the love between a divorced woman and an old cadre who still maintains a loveless marriage, showing that a morally justified marriage must be one based on love. Her more important work about women is *Ark*, in which three divorced, educated women are thrown into a helpless and desolate predicament without any understanding and
sympathy from society or men. They become alienated and abnormal to the extent that they are hysterical and unable to maintain their existence any longer.

However, feminist writing as a self-conscious trend did not fully arrive until the 1990s, when some literary feminists asserted their full awareness of sex and self-consciousness of gender. Their claim that women's writing has historically been concealed and overshadowed by male discourse in history should not be ignored. They refused to share a public consciousness with men, and insisted that women's writing should be part of women's life experiences. A number of young women, such as Chen Rang, Lin Bai, Hai Lang and Zhuo You-min have been the practitioners of such beliefs.

Chen Rang's novel Private Life describes a young woman with a sensitive, lonely and opinionated personality, hostile to public attitudes and conventions. She becomes totally depressed and withdraws completely, cutting off all contact with the outside world. Lin Bai's An Individual War shows a young woman, who suffers much from the male world and becomes a narcissist who describes her feelings as those of an individual war. The book is filled with depictions of the woman's sensual experiences in fragments of narration that are embedded with personal perceptions. Zhou You-min's long series of poems, "Women", establishes an image of "dark night," which represents a feminist world that takes shape after male discourse is dispersed, and grows into a totally marginalised and individualised living space for women. She writes in The Night Consciousness: "Actually every woman has to be confronted with an abyss of incessantly increasing and confirmed suffering experiences. This is the primitive dark night which guides us into a new world which is specially structured and only belongs to women."4

* * *

From this general survey, it is clear that Chinese literature has developed rapidly and vigorously in the past two decades, due to the relaxation of political tension and the greater freedom granted to writers and readers as a whole. This development is not only
located in the quantity of published books or the emergent but in a variety of schools or styles of writing resulting from the introduction of more western ideas and the rediscovery of Chinese traditional culture. However, the literary achievements made so far have been limited in their international impact, and time is still needed for more mature works to emerge, though no one should underestimate the significance of recent accomplishments.

Considering its long cultural tradition and large population, China has great potential for literary and cultural development. So long as the present political stability and economical development continues, further intellectual and cultural development is a reasonable expectation.

China has embarked on a route towards modernisation and has benefited from foreign, especially western, ideas. At the same time, the country is confronted with a powerful challenge to her national identity from outside. East or West is far from being a simple choice. It entails conflict and competition, which is intensified as never before, between western influences and Chinese traditional culture. Nonetheless, one need not worry about the dynamism of Chinese culture, which has survived so many tests in China’s long history. Competition, on the contrary, may help to fortify China’s ability to foster new strengths. If so, a more self-confident and optimistic nation with a new national identity and more sophisticated science and culture could come into being.

Notes

3 From *Shanghai Literature*, No.6, 1980.
SUMMER NIGHT. THE SKY LADED WITH GREAT STAR FRUIT
THROWS DOWN BLACK SHADOWS EVERYWHERE
AS LIGHTS PAINT THE WIND ON MY BROWN LEGS
THE WIND BLOWS THE LIGHTS INTO A POND OF RIPPLES

THE SLEEPY MAN TIRED OF HIS DISTANT DESIRES
DOWN THERE, THE WILD BARKING OF A DOG
TONIGHT, MY HEART LADED WITH GREAT STAR FRUIT
QUIET, HEAVY, AND RIPE
It's a miracle that anything grows here at all.
In the cracked ground near my window
she douses her chili plants
with water from a hidden well.
The plants don't seem to notice
and the leaves stay crumpled
like shrivelled thumbs.
I haven't seen a cloud for weeks
and the sun seems to rise and fall
in a parched monotone.
Even the pigs have stopped snuffling
in the dirt.
She says it will all change
when the monsoon comes
when the rains hit
like a sheet of prickle and tears
and the ground throws up a nail bed
of grass and strangling vines.
It will all change she smiles,
the sodden earth
and the sky crammed with angry clouds.
Even our longing will sprout green ends
like the first fiery nose of the pepper.
WAGAIT (FOR MY DAUGHTER, AGED 16)

Watching you sleeping on a ramshackle bed
under the straw hats on the wall,
the galvanised iron-
you are all languid south sea island curves
and generous mouth-

I am afraid.

The sun beats hard on the tin roof
and strange birds cry out
in the pandanus
by the sea.

No longer the child
round cheeked,
curly haired, laughing-
a little green bear tucked under her arm-

today there are only your embroidery threads on the table,
your glass with that half inch of juice
you never finish -
the mower in the doorway we never moved.

The sky outside is heartless blue,
the sea, the bush silent as
our piles of books and papers, pens and promises.

I wonder when you'll go.

The future accumulates on the horizon like the afternoon monsoon.
For just one year, 1956, I went to school with Aboriginal children. Alice and Norveen sat in my third grade class at Blackwood Primary, in South Australia. These girls were considerably older than the rest of us, and rarely spoke.

One day Norveen (I’d never heard such a name and called her Noreen) — one day Norveen said to me “I just want to go home, back north, to my aunties and sisters, the little ones.” I didn’t understand what she meant. Her home was Colebrook Home at Eden Hills. At Blackwood Primary we thought Colebrook Home was an orphanage for Aboriginal children who had no relatives.

Suddenly the Aboriginal children weren’t there any more. I don’t remember asking any questions. It wasn’t until Colebrook Home at Eden Hills was demolished in the early seventies that I began to wonder what had happened. It wasn’t until last year, when I was looking through State Records for another project, that I discovered that a group of parents had complained about the Aboriginal children at the school. They were accused of stealing — lunches, mainly. The then headmaster had capitulated to the wishes of the parent group. All that remains as a record of whatever happened in those negotiations is a letter from one of the senior masters. Ian Auhl had written to express his view that a mistake had been made.

It is because Alice Millera and Norveen Turner didn’t tell their stories of Colebrook Home, and because I didn’t ask, that I have been compelled to read autobiographies by Colebrook kids. Two were launched towards the end of last year. They were Nancy
Barnes' self-published *Munyi's Daughter*, and Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin*, published by Spinifex Press. They appear to be contradictory stories, and they produced contradictory responses, both in the community of Colebrook kids and the community of non-Aboriginal readers interested in reconciliation.

Doris Kartinyeri's *Kick the Tin*, the most recent autobiography, was professionally edited, promoted and marketed by its publishers. They launched it last October in front of a large crowd, including media people, at the newly created Colebrook Memorial Park, on the site of the former Colebrook Home at Eden Hills. It was a moving occasion. Lowitja O’Donoghue, herself a Colebrook kid, spoke. Doris appeared on television on *This is Your Life* and *A Current Affair*. A full page story, titled "A life reclaimed" by Samela Harris, appeared in *The [Adelaide] Advertiser* prior to the book’s release (October 21, 2000). The accompanying photograph showed Doris at the base of the Grieving Mother sculpture in the park. The caption reads: “The mother I never had. I broke down and wept when they unveiled this”.

The launch of Nancy Barnes’ autobiography was a much smaller affair, remembered by those who attended as disquieting and uncomfortable. There were arguments. What is the difference between the two stories? Why was one snapped up for publication and the other rejected?

In *Kick the Tin*, Doris Kartinyeri tells us that she was stolen as a baby from Murray Bridge Hospital, when her mother died. Welfare Officers from the Aboriginal Protection Board placed her in Colebrook Home at Eden Hills without her father knowing (6). She stayed at Colebrook Home until she was 14, was not told that she had a family, nor told that her mother had died.

At 14 Doris was shunted about (57) — removed from Colebrook Home by the Protection Board and placed with a white family of six in the suburbs. She was expected to attend high school and eventually mind the four children, cook for the family and keep house. “No money was ever exchanged” (60). Then, without any explanation, she was taken away again to a house in the hills at Coromandel Valley, not far from Colebrook. There she lived as a servant, and there she was sexually abused by a lay minister of the church.
This was a traumatic removal for me once again. I felt isolated. I lived in horrible cold quarters separated from the house about thirty yards. They were poorly lit and at night it was pitch dark. I used to be scared coming back after doing the dinner dishes.

Here was this lay minister of the church who I soon experienced as a man who constantly exposed himself to me. At night I could hear him at my bedroom window. I lay in bed frigid [sic] with fright, wondering if he would try to get in my bedroom window. I was too terrified to tell his wife as I knew that she would not believe me. For the first time in my mind I wanted to leave. I felt unsafe and insecure. I wanted to leave but because of my age I didn’t. I did not have contact with any of my family, my uncles, my cousins, my father, my aunties, and my brothers and sisters at the time. Because of the Protectors and Sister McKenzie, I had no one to contact. How would anybody know what I was going through? Where is the guiding hand a child is meant to have? (61)

Before she was 16, Doris felt that her life was ruined. “I had lost all my dignity, self respect and, most importantly, my identity and sanity” (62-3). She moved in and out of relationships, carrying her belongings in plastic glad bags (70). Two children. A marriage. Another child. Divorce. She sought the company of Aboriginal people and found it in the Carrington Hotel. Lost to drink, she was arrested and shamed. She was about to leave for Western Australia when a friend rescued her and offered her accommodation at Raukkan, on the Coorong, with the Ngarrindjeri community. It was hard for her to fit in: the lingo was a problem (76). Doris moved out again, to Murray Bridge. She still couldn’t fit in to the local Aboriginal community. More drinking. And then she became unwell. The latter part of Doris Kartinyeri’s story tells of acute episodes of bi-polar disorder. There is a time when Doris’s daughter advises her: “Insanity is the safest place to be, Mum” (101). But Doris survived and is healing. She begins her final chapter with her statement of Aboriginality:
I am a fifty-four year old Ngarrindjeri mimini [woman]. I am proud to be Nunga. The battles and struggles of living in two worlds that I endured throughout my life have proven my aboriginality. (135, my emphasis)

Kick the Tin is a heart-breaking story, one that we recognise and respond to. It slips comfortably into the genre of battler stories that occupy so much space in the Australian psyche. It shocks and elicits pity. Nancy Barnes story, however, doesn’t fit the bill. Barnes begins Munyi’s Daughter with these sentences:

We are referred to as “The Stolen Generation”. I consider myself “Saved”.

This is an Aboriginal autobiography that nobody wanted to publish, and few have gone out of their way to read. I’ll admit to feeling uncomfortable myself from page one. But now I am wondering about preferred stories. And I am also wondering about the silences in stories like Nancy Barnes’. Is Nancy Barnes’ version of a life saved really so reprehensible? Is her crime really that she chose to define her life as something more than suffering, more than survival? Has she deprived the non-Indigenous readership of Aboriginal narratives of what we condescend to give? Pity? Has she failed to observe the line between “them” and “us”?

Like David Unaipon, who, in fragments of personal narrative, written in the fifties, enthusiastically embraced what the white world had to offer,2 Barnes felt “the need to make something” of herself (63). She seized the opportunities that enabled her to become a fully qualified kindergarten teacher and eventually, in 1965, a Regional Director with the Kindergarten Union of South Australia and first Aboriginal woman appointed to the Aboriginal Affairs Board. Like David Unaipon, Barnes believed in an ideal of racial harmony, and did not expect her achievements to be harnessed exclusively to Aboriginal causes.

It was a great surprise, or rather, a shock, to learn that I was expected to work only with Aboriginal children. That was not my mission in life. (106)
Yet like Unaipon’s autobiographical fragments, Barnes’s life narrative embodies the contradictions of a life that is both stolen and saved. While she writes about Colebrook Home as “a loving sanctuary” where she “didn’t miss out on anything” (1), this life is defined by absence. The absent mother is not known and cannot be spoken about. Yet she is there, from the first page:

We didn’t miss out on anything as I recall. Except perhaps our mothers (1, my emphasis).

Four words, and the title of the autobiography, say all that can be said in words about what is not there in Nancy Barnes’ childhood and formative years. Barnes treasures the knowledge of her mother’s name, Mimyi. For Barnes the very sound of that name is, she says, “motherly” (2). Rather than dwelling on what is lost, however, Nancy Barnes reconceptualises motherhood; she fills the gap with older Colebrook girls who are both mothers and sisters. Ultimately, she devotes her life to an ideal:

I had not known my mother. In my new work, I could strengthen the mother-child bond of other children, I had so deeply missed. My surrogate parents in my early days, the missionaries, taught me that I could help other people succeed. (101)

Nancy Barnes chooses to tell the story of her public life: a story of achievement and acceptance by a Christian community. This public life is framed by the absent mother, and shaped by the desire to fill that gap. Barnes met her mother twice, briefly, much later in life. She recounts these meetings in just a few pages towards the end of her story. As in Unaipon’s autobiographical writings, Barnes’ sense of cultural identity keeps shifting. She is recognised by some of the Pitjantjatjara people “as one of their own” (161). While she briefly recounts adventures “with my own people” (162), she is distanced from “them”. Recognising something of what is said in Pitjantjatjara (words she last heard at the age of three), Barnes nevertheless cannot converse with the old people who claim her as one of their mob (164). Yet she perceives the irony in having to obtain

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permission from the Presbyterian Mission Board to enter the land of her many grandmothers. “It’s cruel, really, isn’t it?” she asks.

The first time Nancy Barnes met Munyi she recognised her mother immediately: “I could see her in my own self” (165). Yet mother and daughter struggle to communicate, defeated by language. Barnes says she was content just to be with her mother, “there in her environment” (166). It is Munyi who cries. Looking back on her meetings with her mother Barnes reflects, “How much grief this caused Munyi, I could not imagine” (169). The image of Doris weeping for the mother she never knew is certainly more emotive than the awkwardness and discomfort of Nancy Barnes’ meetings with Munyi. But how many faces does grief have? Surely more than one? Nancy Barnes keeps her silences, but she does not forget.

Oh, truly, my memory of this is so vivid, I can hear it all again. Was [Munyi] going to die with anger towards me in her heart? Was she blaming me for our long separation, or for the fact that we now belonged to two different cultures? She was not to blame, but neither was I. We were both innocent victims of a Government policy that did not take into account the pain of those separated as we were. (167)

It is not unproblematic, politically, that one of the first book-length autobiographies by an Indigenous South Australian should be one that distances itself from others who articulate different memories of what it meant to be taken away from their families. In effect, Barnes’s autobiography could be read as an endorsement of colonial policies and as confirmation of the view that was used by Leon Carmen to justify the publication of his now-removed novel, My Own Sweet Time, under the name of an Aboriginal woman, Wanda Koolmatri.3 Ironically, Wanda Koolmatri, a young Aboriginal woman who didn’t exist, attracted more attention, locally and nationally, than any other South Australian “Aboriginal” writer in recent years.

Most of us would agree that Carmen violated the protocols when he used the persona of an Aboriginal woman to further his own ambitions, particularly when the view of that persona was that Aboriginal people need not be weighed down with the burden of a
sordid past. But should we extend censorship to an Aboriginal woman who defines herself as “saved” rather than “stolen”? Such a response is not that of the majority, and we can’t forget that too many of the stolen generations (particularly the boys from Colebrook Home) are no longer here to say anything at all. Nevertheless, why should we expect all Aboriginal people to tell the same story in the same way?

The meanings of Colebrook are still under negotiation. Geographically, Colebrook Home was a shifting site. It began as the United “Aborigines” Mission Children’s Home, an iron shed in the back yard of a boarding house in Oodnadatta, in 1926. It moved to Quorn in the following year, where it was named Colebrook Home, after one of the founders of the Mission — a white man, of course. This is where Nancy Barnes begins her story. In 1944 Colebrook Home was established at Eden Hills, and when that was demolished in 1972, children were shifted to a cottage in Blackwood. Along the way there were other homes, loosely gathered under the umbrella of Colebrook. Officially, the Quorn and Eden Hills sites were Training Homes. The shift to the city facilitated a policy of assimilation, enabling placement of the children in some cases, but not all, as servants. Life narratives change as the site shifts closer to the city.

Let me go back to an earlier Colebrook story: Molly Lennon’s “That’s how it was,” printed by the Aboriginal Heritage Branch in 1989, two years after Sally Morgan’s My Place became a best seller. In her life story, told to Jen Gibson, Molly Lennon articulates a philosophy of forgiveness.

It’s not the Christian people now that were cruel to Aboriginal people. That was in the past. I know the Church we go to today, our Pastor he’s upset by the things in those days. What they did to the Aboriginal people. We’ve got to forgive. (72)

Gibson tells us in her Acknowledgements that “Younger Aboriginal people [were] critical of [Molly] for remaining loyal to her Christian principles”. This was also a criticism expressed in relation to Nancy Barnes, who wrote at length about what she
described as her “life-long friendship” with the Duguid family, particularly Dr Charles Duguid, whom she praises for his efforts “to support [she says] Aboriginal people, both in the outback and the city through the Aborigines Advancement League” (66). Barnes says she was “adopted” as a daughter (66) when she moved to Dr Duguid’s home, to become his receptionist. Some of the Colebrook community, however, feel that she has failed to realise that she was, in fact, a servant in the Duguid household. And indeed, for those of us who call ourselves “postcolonialists,” it is easier to applaud the overt resistance of Alice Nannup or Daisy Corunna, who turned the tables on their masters and made fun of their apparent inability to pour their own tea.

Molly Lennon’s story now gathers dust on library shelves. It has never been professionally edited. It’s raw. Abbreviated. Incomplete. Interrupted with Gibson’s explanations and quotations from policy documents. But Molly Lennon’s story is profoundly unsettling. While this is the story of a stolen child, it is also a narrative of unexamined violence and jealousy in the extended family from which Molly was taken away. One of Molly’s sisters, who like Molly had a white father, was allegedly murdered. Molly remembers her Aboriginal step-father telling her; “We was sorry for you. We knocked the others in the head” (15). Molly herself was scarred for life by a boomerang used as a weapon against her mother by her stepfather in a domestic argument. In her second chapter, “Losing my mother”, Molly Lennon describes how, as a young child, she witnessed that same stepfather set light to the shelter under which her mother was sleeping.

Flames went everywhere then, my mother just got me and threw me out, a long way from that place and she got burnt! All her head and everything burnt, it was cruel. I always think of my mother because she was sitting there trying to take her clothes off. She had one of those dresses that used to have buttons at the back and a high collar. It was like a Chinese dress. He wouldn’t try to help her to take the clothes off. No! he just stood there. (10)

Molly’s mother died the next night, with her daughter in her blistered arms.
Molly Lennon forgave her Aboriginal step-father. She describes him, as she was taken away:

The old man was knocking himself in the head, himself on the head. My old stepfather, crying for me. At least he did that for me. Poor old man was knocking himself around although he killed my mother. Some Aboriginal people had step-fathers, they was all right. I still had feeling for the old man you know. (25)

She also forgave the cruelties of former white missionaries. What would have happened to Molly Lennon, had she not been taken away? For that matter, what would have happened to Nancy Barnes, who was disabled by polio? How do we ask these questions without diminishing the significance of suffering attributable to colonial policies? Should we not ask? By refusing to read autobiographies by those who tell alternative stories, however, aren’t we really perpetuating colonial practices? Confining lives to boxes, cells, cattletrucks? Refusing the freedom to move? To move on? Giving only pity?

Perhaps we need to think again about the genre of Aboriginal autobiography. Are those of us who read in this genre complicit in the reproduction of otherness, defined exclusively by suffering? The Colebrook Home I knew has been taken away. The fence is gone. Colebrook Memorial Park is now a space for remembering, not without tears, but surely not just for tears. I can now go to a place I never visited before. What I hope, not without anxiety, is that one day, there on the site of Colebrook, I might see Alice or Norveen. And we might talk about how to begin again.

Notes
3 Wanda Koolmatrie [Carmen, Leon], Her Own Sweet Time (Magabala Books, 1997).
4 Molly Lennon, “That’s how it was,” (Adelaide: Aboriginal Heritage Branch, 1989).
Her skin, soft as old chamois.
When I touched her hand
a jolt like faraday: several centuries
of slavery, the tribe of Shem
and the white man’s burden
were in those five cool fingers
and the smile, with sceptical
orange lipstick she offered. The voice
was inner London, the smile
was startled deer, but the eyes
were perfect Africa, sub-Saharan
savannah and wildebeest.
Tight plaits parted rigid as a quaker,
a slender sprinter’s body. Tomorrow
was in that glance, reticent
and appraising. Tomorrow
we march. And you? Gently
withdrawing her hand. I’ll be there,
I lied, reluctant to let her go.
A backward glance
as she entered the underground.
Tomorrow, she said, departing,
where will you be?
Nowhere, I said to myself
and that cool departing voice.
Enough

Small ladder of daffodils,
yolk cups easing into ribs
of bark, iron bark, trunk
so solid, so car proof.
Younger trees gave way instead,
struck the death blow.
And relatives, friends
bring flowers, fragile
bruising. They scour the ground
for clues, try to catch
the vapour, the very elixir
of the last breath, bring
a fist to mouth, try to stopper
the grief. Yet that one sheaf
of daffodils leaning into tree
catches my eye.

They don’t
need to paint a cross on the trunk,
the loneliness of such hothouse blooms
in the dustiness of the sideroad
is death-splash enough.
The first time the electricity fails, Ryan is in his hired ute, crossing the Mae Lao River. The streetlamps swing over the road with the vibrations of the bridge. They flicker, flashing in and out of sight, and then they are gone. Ryan turns his headlamps to full beam, cutting bright swathes through the lush, suddenly dark, night.

There was a bar on the riverbank, he’d seen it before the lights went out, and he turns off the main road towards it now. The darkness is thick and close, and he doesn’t want to drive on. He doesn’t want to sit alone with his thoughts in the silence and the dark. Doesn’t want to feel again the silent tension of the marriage he has left behind. He looks forward to the adventure and noise of a local bar, off the tourist track.

The ute dips and rattles on the unsurfaced road, throwing stones up from the tyres. It’s fifteen years old, from a backstreet car-hire operator in Chiang-Mai, and all that Ryan could afford. Still, it’s served him well, and he’s not afraid to be rough with it.

The brightly lit bar has vanished into the night, but Ryan knows he will reach it as long as he keeps the river close beside him. The river can’t be seen, or heard over the sound of the engine, but he knows it’s there: the rich, rotting smell of it comes into the cab, blown in through his open window on the warm wind. He breathes it in, focuses on it so that it fills his mind and pushes out all other thoughts.

The electricity comes back as Ryan pulls off the road to park, and the bar appears in front of him. There’s no gradual fade-in – one
moment there's only blackness ahead, the next moment the bar is there: its neon signs in swirling script; rows of bright lights around the bar; the glowing faces of customers at tables in the open air.

When the electricity fails for the second time, Ryan is sitting alone at a table, a Singa beer in his hand. The lights dim, and then die. He can hear the river flowing, and over it the high-pitched song of cicadas.

Two waitresses walk from table to table, placing candles and bringing soft light to the bar. One of them comes over to Ryan, her dark hair falling in front of him as she bends to secure a candle. She strikes a match, and her face glows. She looks at him and smiles.

"You are from UK?" she asks in slow English.
"No, Australia."

She smiles more widely, and her eyes shine.
"Can I sit with you?" she asks.

Ryan feels a burst of irritation - he isn't looking for that. He's travelled north to escape the cheap bars of Bangkok's Patpong. He is uncomfortable in the company of women, he prefers to be alone.

"Don't you have other things to do?" he asks.

"My shift is end," she replies. She's still standing, uncertain. "The owner, he want you feel welcome. I like practice my English, but if you don't want ..."

"No, it's fine." Politeness wins over judgement. He waves his hand at the empty chair across from him, thinking that at least she will be a diversion, keep his mind from turning to his problems at home.

She hesitates, then smiles and sits, looks across the bar's decking towards the invisible river. Ryan stares down at his hands on the hardwood table, spreads his fingers, feeling the close grain through thickened skin.

"You like the table?" she asks.

He looks up into her laughing eyes. "I like wood," he says. "I'm a carpenter."

"You on holiday?"

He smiles. You could call it that. He does call it that, although Caroline had said it was running away. "Yes, I am," he tells the woman. "Doesn't mean I can switch off my love of wood. Teak is one of the best kinds. Rich grey, and warm, but hard as stone.
People take wood for granted. They don’t look at it closely the way I do.”
He is most comfortable when he’s working with wood, he understands it, has a feeling for it. People are harder for him to understand. He could talk forever about his love for wood, but he could never talk to Caroline. He had never been able to say the things she’d wanted to hear.

The woman says: “It’s only wood.”
“But wood can be beautiful. Beautiful. How do you say that in Thai?”
“Beautiful? Soo-ay.”
“Soo-ay,” he repeats.
She laughs. “No, not like that. That way means you have bad luck.”
He smiles. “Say it again.”
He listens to the sway of the word as she repeats it, this time noticing the tonal rise at the end, like a question.
“Soo-ay,” he tries.
She nods. “That’s it.” Then she asks: “You travel alone?”
He shrugs. “It’s better that way. Get to meet more local people, absorb more of the culture.” He has taught himself to say this, it sounds convincing now even to him.

She nods again, but doesn’t say anything. Ryan wonders how much she understands.

“Where did you learn to speak English?” he asks.
“I live one year in Bangkok—”

Loud male voices come suddenly from behind him, talking over her words, and he turns to look. A group of men in brown short-sleeved shirts, police uniform, guns at their belts, have arrived. They arrange chairs around a large table, heavy boots clattering on the wooden decking.

“I know Australian man,” she says, making Ryan look back at her. “Maybe you know him? Paul Johnson?”
He’s surprised by this question that’s come out of nowhere. Blames it on her poor English, which must make it hard for her to follow a conversation’s flow. “Paul Johnson ...” he shakes his head. “I don’t think so. Which part of Australia’s he from?”
“He from Perth.” Her voice is tight, as if she’s holding her breath.
He shrugs. “I’m from Melbourne. Never been to Perth.”
The candlelight shows her disappointment, but still she smiles.
Then her eyes shift from his face to look beyond his shoulder, and the smile disappears.

He turns around. One of the policemen is standing right behind him, so close that Ryan can smell the sweat on the man’s uniform, can tell that he has eaten garlic that day. The policeman’s colleagues watch silently from their table. From the river comes the sound of frogs croaking.

“Come with me,” says the policeman, in English. He puts a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. There is no possibility for refusal.

They walk together across the wooden boards, the policeman’s firm, guiding hand on Ryan’s shoulder, past the curious faces of the other customers. Out in the parking area behind the bar, beyond the reach of the candlelight, they are hidden from interested eyes. Mosquitoes brush Ryan’s skin, but he barely notices them, does not trouble to slap them down. Thoughts race through his mind, stories he’s heard of travellers robbed, abducted, or simply disappearing. He is travelling alone, he is a long way from the nearest town, and the risk of this is only now apparent to him. He imagines the things that might be about to happen.

The policeman says nothing, and Ryan is too afraid to draw him into conversation. Ryan thinks of Caroline, wishes he were able to send her some final message, he does not want to leave things hanging and unresolved in this way. But even if he were able to send a message, he has no idea what he would say.

Moving further away from the bar, they walk over uneven ground. Ryan looks down, and can see small stones and holes clearly enough to avoid stumbling. He realises that they should be in darkness, and he looks up from his feet to find the source of the light. Two headlamps shine directly ahead.

As they draw closer, he sees it is his own utility truck that is illuminating the night. Beside him, the policeman’s stern face creases into a boyish smile.

“You left your lights on,” he says, and laughs at the relief in Ryan’s face.

Ryan’s sitting with the policemen at their table. One of them pours him a drink, clear as water, an inch of it in the bottom of a glass.

“Mekong whiskey,” says the policeman, his smooth cheeks
shining in the candlelight. “You have to try it.”

The whiskey is rough and sharp as knives in Ryan’s throat. He coughs, longing for water, but his glass is filled again with the same distilled fire.

“You speak very good English,” he says.

“We learn it at university,” one of them tells him. “In Thailand, you have to go to university before you can be a policeman.”

“Isn’t it the same in England?” asks another.

“Australia. I’m from Australia,” Ryan tells them. “And no, it’s not the same.”

“You’re not drinking.”

empties his glass again, throwing it down quickly so as not to prolong the pain. There are already three empty bottles of whiskey on the table, and the waitress brings a new one.

The policemen start telling jokes, at first in English, and Ryan joins in their laughter. After a time, they fall into Thai. Ryan continues to laugh when they do, for a while, then he says: “Thanks for the whiskey, but I’ve got to go.” They nod at him absentl,y barely noticing as he slips away, back to his old table.

He’d forgotten about the girl. She’s still sitting at his table, with a piece of worn paper spread out before her. The paper’s been folded so often that it’s torn along the creases. She’s reading. He sits down opposite her. She quickly folds the paper up and puts it away, but not before he sees that it’s a letter, and the writing is in English. He also sees the date: the letter is a year old.

The whiskey has made him brave. “Is that from the man you know in Perth?” he asks.

She looks surprised. He realises the question was too direct.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “It’s none of my business.” He has told her nothing of himself, after all, nothing that really matters.

But she shakes her head. “No, it’s okay.” She looks out into the darkness beyond the bar, where the river flows unseen.

“Paul has new business. He writes for computers,” she says to the water.

“He’s a computer programmer.”

“Yes. He says he fetch me, when business is good. He want I work for him in Perth.”
Ryan says nothing. Her eyes turn on him, and he can’t bear their weight. He looks at the candle. A winged beetle, singed by the flame, is caught in a pool of melted wax at the candle’s base.

“He doesn’t forget,” she says. “Does he?”

Ryan watches the beetle struggle on its back, legs waving in the air. “I’m sure he hasn’t forgotten.”

He notices that the frogs have fallen silent, and then he hears heavy splashing from the river. The policemen have left their table and are down on the bank below the bar. They are out of sight, but he can hear their shouts and laughter rising into the humid air. They’re swimming at the edges of the Mae Lao’s dark waters.

Ryan smiles. “I could write to you,” he says. “When I get home. Would you like that?”

He feels her sudden coldness. She pulls herself straight and holds his eyes with her own, so that he cannot look away.

“I am sorry” she says. “You not understand. I not want …” she searches for the right word. “… pity.”

She stands. Ryan can only watch her as she walks away, weaving through the other tables. He had thought that language was the only barrier. Now he realises that culture goes deeper than words, and human connection must occur at a deeper level still. A carpenter cannot make use of bark, he must get beneath the surface and touch the heart of the tree.

The sound of laughter floats up from the river. He watches her step off the wooden deck, moving from candlelight into night.

He sees her later, walking at the side of the road. His headlights pick her out against the teak plantation trees, her long hair swinging across her back with the movement of her steps.

He slows down as he gets near. The cab window’s open – he could call out to her. He wants to tell her that he’s beginning, just beginning, to understand. But he fails to find the words. He’s right beside her, but she doesn’t look up, doesn’t slow her pace. She keeps her eyes straight ahead, her hair doesn’t falter in its swing.

Swollen moths gather around the truck’s lamps. Some find their way inside, beating rice-paper wings in front of Ryan’s eyes. He picks up speed, leaves her behind in the darkness. He thinks about writing anyway, finding the address of the bar, and sending his
letter there. He could tell her he’s sorry for his mistake, sorry for his heavy carpenter’s hands.

His headlights show empty road ahead, and tall, hardwood plantation forest on either side, the tree trunks shining ghost-white. Then without warning, streetlights flash into being, as if they’ve stepped suddenly out from hiding in the forest. He realises, too late, that he doesn’t know her name; but he keeps the words he would have written, repeats them over in his head. He keeps them to use when he gets home again.
You were wild, searching the rolling shoreline,
bringing back stragglers of seaweed, luminous shells,
driftwood, all the carriage of the sea.

This absorbed your years. You painted books
to show the shoreline to all unbelievers,
the smell of the ocean covering your hair.

Now an emptiness. You went away
far into that absence called your future,
barely holding the smile to your face.

Remnant collections remain—your bicycle
with rust in its gears, and cobwebbed driftwood—
I have these. You lived like a gipsy,

knew solitude like some sort of dwelling,
holding your hands against the sets of breakers
then diving for your prized and salty takings.
Breyten Breytenbach: The Wise Fool and Ars Poetica

why bother with the word?
  - "the bifid route"

and sometimes the language rings a familiar bell
as if I could remember myself out of this predicament
  - "the commitment"

The Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach occupies an unusual and particularly important place in South Africa’s literary history. From the publication of his first book die ysterkoei moet sweet (1964), which was awarded the Afrikaans Press Corporation prize, he was singled out as a poet of considerable distinction. In the decades that followed he won many of South Africa’s literary awards and several of them more than once. After being published in an Afrikaans-Dutch version, skryt (1972) was awarded the Netherlands’ Van der Hoogt prize. Subsequent volumes rapidly appeared in French, Dutch and English translations. In 1978 Breytenbach was awarded a special prize by the international jury of the Prix de Septs, in the terms of which he would have a single volume translated into the major European languages. The English translation appeared under the title in africa even the flies are happy: selected poems 1964-1977 (1978) and was published in London by John Calder, the publisher of many experimental writers and several Nobel Prize winners, William Burroughs and Samuel
Beckett among them. By the time Breytenbach entered South Africa as an agent of Okhelo, a mysterious revolutionary organization for whites who aimed to engage in the struggle against Apartheid, he was well on his way to becoming the most famous South African poet. His consequent arrest and his nine year prison sentence for “terrorism”, seven of which he would serve, elevated him to the status of an international cause célèbre. From then on Breytenbach’s name would be associated with rebellion and martyrdom.

In many ways Breytenbach’s cultural identity is ambivalent. He is an Afrikaner by birth and language, and the Afrikaner literary establishment had emphasized this by awarding him many prizes. But he was also a cosmopolitan, having lived in Paris from 1961, and as such he was outspoken on cultural and political matters as they pertained to the country of his birth. When invited to speak at a conference on Afrikaans literature at the University of Cape Town in 1972 he told the participants that “their people” were doomed to destruction through isolation and it was “their” duty to do something about it.

During his incarceration he was granted the privilege to write. The poetic works from the period September 1975 to December 1982 were issued as a series of books entitled Die Ongedanste Dans (The Undanced Dance). It is from this series that Breytenbach drew the poems which he would - to use Octavio Paz’s term for translation - “transform” into the English and collect under the title Judas Eye. The conditions under which these poems were written are remarkable and deserve consideration as they have a bearing on the poetic of Judas Eye. As a political prisoner, Breytenbach was to serve his sentence in maximum security prisons. Two of the years were spent in solitary confinement in “Beverly Hills”, that is Pretoria Prison. While Breytenbach was allowed to write he was obliged to hand the manuscripts to the commander of the prison in the understanding that the Department of Prisons would retain them and return them to him on the day of his release.

Breytenbach’s poetic is, I believe, determined by the context of the poetry’s creation. Being in solitary confinement and knowing that his work would inevitably be read by prison censors led to a type of negation of meaning in which images and the play of meaning perform an important role. This context necessitated a
form of reflection, a self-reflexivity that entailed consideration of the
"constructedness" of language in a sense similar to that of post-
structuralist discourse. As Breytenbach's writings show
considerable evidence of his intimacy with Zen Buddhism, I will be
examining his response to the problem of Afrikaans and voice by
reflecting on Zen practice. Before I go on to discuss the
implications of Zen in *Judas Eye*, I first need to consider the problem
of Afrikaans for Breytenbach as his relationship with the language
is a determining factor in the complex politics of his work.

In his poem "The Struggle for the Taal"("Taalstryd"), the poet's
speaker takes up what appears to be the voice of the Afrikaner,
addressing the reader from the point of view of the Afrikaner
nationalist, exploiting tones that ranges from that of resignation
("We ourselves are aged" and "and who will be able to sing as we
sang/ when we are no longer there?") to that of the vengeful ("we
had black contraptions built for you, you bastards"). With little
ambiguity this poem depicts relationship between the
disempowerment of the majority of South Africa's population and
the implementation of the learning of Afrikaans. The speaker states,

But you have not fully understood.
You have yet to master the Taal.
We will make you say the ABC all over again,
we will teach you the ropes
of Christian National Education

You will learn to be submissive
submissive and humble.
And you will learn to use the Taal...

At first reading it seems that the speaker is an Afrikaner addressing
the oppressed population. It would be fair to assume that the "you
who will serve as bodies for our thoughts", the "bastards" for whom
the black contraptions were built, are those "spoilt blacks" who do
not appreciate what the Afrikaner believes he has done for them.
However, on closer inspection, several impediments to that reading
may become apparent. The title itself, "The Struggle for the Taal"
("Taalstryd") connotes the struggle of the Afrikaans Language
Movements and the policy of Afrikaans in "Bantu education" that would lead to the Soweto Uprising. Thus the allusions of the title encourage the reader to imagine that the voice is that of an Afrikaner speaking in favour of the Afrikaner nationalist’s political and linguistic imperialism. To some degree the allusion can engender empathy for the speaker as the language struggle of the early Afrikaans Language movements are brought to mind, the reader remembering that at one stage the Afrikaners, too, were an oppressed people. (This aspect of the allusion, of course, is addressed to Afrikaner readers.) On reflection, and as is developed in the poem, the occurrences that are here suggested to be a struggle for Afrikaans are actually incidences of the imposition of that language, examples of the attempts made to subordinate the population of the country:

For we are Christ’s executioners.
We are on the walls around the townships
gun in one hand
machine-gun in the other:
we, the missionaries of Civilization.

We bring you the grammar of violence
and the syntax of destruction -
from the tradition of our firearms
you will hear the verbs of retribution
stuttering.

Breytenbach’s synthesizing of the terminology of language and the imagery of violence seems to display a regard for the relationship between language and thought similar to that proposed in the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis. It would appear that Breytenbach holds the view that thought can be influenced, if not determined, by language. Ironically, it is this belief that language can determine thought that also underlies the Afrikaner nationalist’s desire to force his language onto the oppressed. The result of this type of brutalization is clear when the poet writes,

Look what we’re giving you... new mouths,
... red mouths
so that you can spout the secrets of our fear:
where each lead-nosed word flies
a speech organ will be torn open ...

While the speech is murderous, its grammar violent, its syntax
destructive, it is also capable of undoing itself, allowing the victim
to enter into the realm of the spoken for through the wounded “red
mouths/ ... you can spout the secret of our fear.” Perhaps, the fear is
that the Afrikaner and the black African have the same blood.
Further, the speaker in a schoolmasterly tone, simultaneously one of
pleading (heard better in the English) and of threat (more obvious in
the Afrikaans) says, “And you will please learn the Taal,/
with humility use it, / abuse it...” The coupling of “use it, abuse it” in the
English has the effect of seeming like a slip of the tongue, a Freudian
slip, a truth that underlies the spoken. This kind of “tripping up” of
meaning is one that occurs very frequently in Breytenbach’s work.

It is possible to take “The Struggle for the Taal” as a gloss of
Breytenbach’s corpus because in it we encounter the persona of an
Afrikaner who speaks out, in what appears at first to be a relatively
simple fashion, but which on closer inspection reveals the
language’s weakness, its ability to expose its own premises. Even to
presume that the subjects of the Taal are the oppressed non-white
population is to overlook a reading of the poem from the point of
view of the dissenting Afrikaner. It is possible to read the work as
though “the bastards”, those who will be humiliated, are also
Afrikaners. The obstacle to this possible, although admittedly
unlikely, reading is the image “We are on the walls around the
townships” which stongly implies that “we” are probably white and
Afrikaner as it is they who believe themselves to be the guardians of
the township-dwellers. Nevertheless I feel that it is important to
entertain this notion that Afrikaners could be included among the
oppressed as the poem’s author was in gaol and writing in a
language which he would later say was fit only for the inscription
of tombstones.9

For a poet to be in the predicament of writing in a language that
is used to implement oppression is to be in a schizophrenic
situation. The advantage of characterizing the predicament as a
pathological one is that it places the writer's responses within the context of the psychological. As I will demonstrate, Breytenbach's counter to his situation is holistic: it is psychological, linguistic, and philosophical. Undoubtedly his internal experience was affected by his being imprisoned, first in solitary confinement for two years and later with other inmates, and by his use of "the oppressor's language". For Breytenbach the trauma implicit in Afrikaans was inescapable: his mother-tongue was partly responsible for the consolidation of the Afrikaner nation, the implementation of Apartheid and for his incarceration. It was responsible for the oppression of the black peoples such that it sparked the Soweto Uprising. It was also responsible for his acclaim as a poet. To assume his point-of-view: if he were to use Afrikaans, he would have to determine its operations, reclaim it from the stigma of its being the tool of the oppressor. One way to respond would be to subjectify it, render it unstable and unofficial to such a degree that in his mouth it would cease being a weapon of oppression and become instead a weapon of liberation, maybe also an object of beauty or a game. Reading his work from this point of view makes its self-reflexivity and labyrinthine nature appear logical. Both of those aspects of his work - its mirroring - non-Afrikaans critics have tended to regard as self-absorbed.

Interest in the self, a concern with the person as a self/non-self duality, is one of the central issues of Zen. Breytenbach's concern with subjectivity, I suggest, is a product of his heritage as an Afrikaner and is closely related to his practice as a Zen Buddhist of the Soto sect. Zen is a well-known but frequently misunderstood school of Buddhism. From a Western perspective it is difficult to elucidate as its followers usually negate the conventions of logic and deny the significance of scripture. Its central notion is that an understanding of, to use a Western term, Being can only be achieved by passing beyond the intellect, and this is achieved through the practice of zazen. Zazen is the form of seated meditation performed by Zen Buddhists. What occurs during the course of this sitting is "beyond words" and is a form of knowing in which the faculty of direct awareness of Reality is developed to the full. A Zen poet is, therefore, sceptical of language and considers it to be, like
any other type of "conventional" thought, an illusionary mode of Being because it is conceptual and closely related to what is seen as a false apprehension of the nature of existence.

Bearing in mind the particularities of Breytenbach's situation, as readers of a poem in *Judas Eye* we are presented with several complex problems, each of them have implications for reading the poet's voice. As an Afrikaner, Breytenbach is using Afrikaans but aiming to reverse the values instilled in it by the Apartheid regime. As a polyglot intellectual, able to speak several European languages and write fluently in English, French and Dutch, he is able to hear subjective sounds, echohigs, interlingual resonances, allusions and connotations that are not available to readers like myself who do not have the facilities of those languages. As someone schooled in "poetry", particularly that of the European languages, Breytenbach's literary allusions and influences are multi-layered and often at the level of image. And as a Zen Buddhist, his scepticism regarding the efficacy of linguistic representation can tend to render the act of writing apparently futile.

Is it, therefore, possible to speak of the poet's voice, that is an identifiable presence in or behind the text, in *Judas Eye*, especially considering the fact that the book is constituted of poems "transformed" into English? I believe that one can, but only if one also accepts that the particularities of Breytenbach's background are seen as having a direct bearing on the mode of the voice. To Breytenbach the Buddhist, for whom words are vestiges of memory, the voice is a tool for remembering, its sounds resembling and mimicking the past. For Breytenbach the prisoner in solitary confinement, the voice is Being freed of the constraints of his present.

In the poem "the wise fool and *ars poetica*" (24-5) issues of the self, its relationship to the imagination and expression, are foregrounded as Breytenbach articulates and often parodies his creative process. The beginning of the poem represents a "descent", like that into the Buddhist "mindless" meditative state of *samadi*. Through this descent the protagonist is taken beyond the creative arena of language, "where sounds sprout... to areas where/ sense and nonsense flourish". This space is one where "strange and bitter
fruit may happen”. While the first half of the first stanza reveals what appears to be a recounting of the descent past linguistic thought into samadi, in it there is also the implication of the provisionality of the description. When the poet writes, “or so he was told”, the exteriority of discourse, discourse on the meditative and creative state, and perhaps also discourse in general, is brought to the reader’s attention. If the description up until that point at which it is asserted “or so he was told” is largely a second-hand account of the process of meditation, then the reader is entirely within the realm of the conceptual/subjective. Therefore the reader is unable to extricate the real (first-hand) from the unreal (second-hand) description. If, alternatively, the description is first-hand and the phrase “or so he was told” is simply to “problematize” the account, the reader is made aware that alleged accounts can devalue the authenticity of a first-hand account.

Were it permissible to suggest that Zen has one aim, it could be said that it aims to open the meditator’s mind to the reality, the authenticity, the quiddity of Being itself. By “problematizing” the difference between an authentic and an inauthentic account, Breytenbach is following the Zen tradition of rendering groundless what was thought to be well-founded. The undoing of language in this way creates a situation in which the reality or authenticity of inner experience is made distinct from the exteriority of the means of describing that experience.

It may seem from my earlier suggestion regarding the poem “The Struggle for the Taal” that Breytenbach’s view of language parallels that of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, and that the notion that language determines thought contradicts his Zen understanding of language. This is not the case because, following the Zen view, all language is unable to represent the true nature of reality. The discovery of Buddhist Emptiness is, at least partly, a recognition of the emptiness of language. In this experience of language words slip easily from one meaning to another. Words are by their nature profoundly involved with the subjective. Moreover, words are constantly verging on the meaningless because their meaning depends on the assumption of self, that is the presumption of a correlation between interior and exterior realities. As Breytenbach (para-)phrases it, “vanity, all vanity; all about him
the barren whords..." Perhaps, instead of simply stating that the meaning of language depends on a correlation between inner and outer worlds, it could be said that, as it is a social phenomenon, language requires social interaction for it to function "meaningfully". It would seem inevitable that for someone in solitary confinement, someone for whom the written page is a metaphoric mirror, the confrontation with "useless" language would expose the importance of the social and thus the vacancy of inherent, as opposed to social, meaning.

Indeed, Breytenbach’s gaze is turned towards himself. The "wise fool", the poet-character of this poem, is pictured as a cannibal ("the fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh"), as someone "bullfrogged/ with pride", a monad lost in the desert of "barren whords" that are "as sand upon sand..." In mock prophesy Breytenbach writes:

...(thus it is written:
the offended will spit and shriek against the wind
but the lips of the fool will devour him
and darken the nest egg to nought):

Why is it that the fool will devour himself, whereas “the offended will spit and shriek against the wind”? As I read it, assuming that the nest egg signifies meaning, the offended are those, possibly the Afrikaners, who wish to assert their language or meaning in defiance of the proverbial winds of change. The offended have their voices stolen by the wind. The fool is in a similar predicament as regards expression in language. He is, in a sense, “swallowing his words”, internalizing his language, chewing what he can neither spit out nor say. Underlying the fool’s linguistic dilemma is the possibility of expression through physicality: of the embodiment of voice in the form of expressive non-linguistic or pseudo-linguistic sounds; or of thoughts pictured, as written dream-images.

Before discussing the voice in this poem, an obvious point should be made: there are two aspects of voice represented in it. The first is the poet’s commentary on voice. This commentary may be in the form of statement or in the form of enactment; by the latter I mean that aspect of voice which is embodied, rather than
conceptualized (an example of this is "of oh and ay"). The second aspect is the voice in which this poem is taken to have been performed or spoken. This aspect is the poet’s or narrator’s voice, and it is in this voice that most, except the typographic, elements of the poem are "heard". It is in this voice that the music and drama of the poem exists.

To follow traces of the voice through this poem it is necessary to attune the ear to unusual stresses and demands made on the sonic qualities of certain words. It should be immediately apparent to most readers of English poetry that Breytenbach’s work in "the wise fool and makes much of alliterative and assonantal repetition. I believe this is an effect of Breytenbach’s being a non-native English speaker. Coagulations of words, like "sounds sprout", "the fool/ folds his hands and consumes his own flesh", "unpolluted by orb or orifice", "well-chewed cast-away", and several other phrases or word-bunches in "the wise fool, make evident his hamming-up of the word’s sounds. Frequently, as in "orb or orifice" or "vegetation or visitation", the reader can get the impression that the sounds are playing an important role in the generation of associative thinking and are thus required in the poem. It seems as though one word’s sound brings to mind another word, and that the poem unfolds according to an improvisational musicality which in turn generates associated concepts. For example: "a thrumming silence, a calm redolent of smack/ and suck, of oh and ay' leads to the image "he was at sea". To native English speakers this kind of musicality can appear forced, even inept. I caution readers not to rush into opinions of this sort. That would cause them to assume that the poem is not functioning well when it is in fact functioning differently.

There are other non-musical reasons for stressing words, too. It can be that the mimetic sound of the word is most evocative. "Oh and ay" is an interesting instance of pseudo-linguistic wordsounds suggesting movement, the buffeting of waves. Also, there are the specific stresses produced in certain speech acts. When the poem’s speaker encourages the reader to look ("look, laid out he was/ in a striped galabia"), he is exhorting in a manner that, while it is recognizable and understandable to most English readers, to my
ear seems particularly resonant with South African English. Its function is akin to the exhortation "listen!" In light of Breytenbach's awareness that he was simultaneously being silenced by his being imprisoned and that he was indeed being heard, because as a poet he was a spokesperson for the voiceless, the appearance that the exhortation seems to imply a preference for vision instead of hearing should be noted.\(^\text{13}\)

The sound of that exhortation to "look" rings the familiar bell of South African English. As such, "look" in this context is a word that, eliding the strangeness of the South African English for non-South Africans (causing the word to sound normal or usual to non-South Africans), has most of its significance placed on its conceptual content, the exhortation to the act of visualization. For South African English-speakers this idiomatically stressed word in its imperative form is brought to their attention. They might not understand why, but there would be a slight oddness to the stress, a slight discomfort, a perhaps unidentifiable recognition.

Elsewhere the incidence of an apparently oddly stressed word serves to reveal the Afrikaans that underlies these poems. When Breytenbach writes, "who was he to be bullfrogged/ with pride"; placing the pronoun in italics, the poet's interlingual voice is rising to the surface. The Afrikaans for the beginning of that phrase would place most of its stress on the pronoun, whereas a standard English reading would place similar stress on the pronoun and on the word "bullfrog". Besides there is no semantic reason to place stress on the pronoun. Either way, stressed or unstressed, the pronoun performs the same function within the sentence. The only possible reason for the stress is the interlingual: it signifies the existence of a bony Afrikaans beneath the poem's English skin - "Wie was hy?"

Evidence of this also appears in the third stanza where an "h" is inserted into "word" ("whords"). As I understand it, there is little for Breytenbach to gain semantically by inserting the "h". There is the possibility that it is a Derridian in-joke, a tongue-in-cheek allusion to "differance". If that is its purpose, it could cause sufficiently informed readers to remark on the nature of this poem as written text, perhaps drawing their attention to other aspects of the poem's language play as "writing". I recognize that that is certainly one
possible intention; however, there appears to be another, a more
specific one which has a bearing on Breytenbach’s writing in
English. By inserting the “h”, the letter that to the English reader
would appear silent, which would be read as the common silent
“h”, causing that reader to articulate “word” and “whord” no
differently, Breytenbach has surreptitiously inserted an Afrikaans
presence into the English. To say the noun “word” conventionally
using a South African English accent would place more emphasis
on the “ur” sound at its center. To say the noun as many Afrikaners
would place the emphasis nearer the beginning, producing a
sound more like “w-herd”. The difference is quite subtle and
probably one that depends on the sensitivity of the reader-listener’s
ear, but it is one that I can hear clearly. Further, Breytenbach’s
transformation of that word goes beyond drawing out an Afrikaans
accent in written English, it also makes present an example of a
sound that is common to South African English and Afrikaans. The
accent of that word is close to that which is to be found in South
African English speech, the pronunciation of “wh” being slightly
deeper in tone than that of Australian or Standard English.

Furthermore, Breytenbach’s emphasis on the individual word
also extends to the word’s semantic range. In the third line of the
third stanza a familiar English word “moan” is used. To understand
it as it would be used in both Standard and Australian English
would mean that the wise fool uttered a groan. The implicit
“meaning” would then be that he was in pain and that it was
indicated by his utterance. If the reader hears it as a South African
English word, a different meaning would be recognized. It would
be understood that the wise fool is (be-)moaning (in the Australian
sense, whinging about) his self. Like “whord”, the verb “moan” is
not one that would seem to be of remarkable semantic or
conceptual importance within the structure of the poem. It is,
apparently, largely denotative. Its expressive function to a non-
South African reader, perhaps even to a non-native South African
English speaker, would be relatively insignificant. But to a reader
who recognizes the “appropriateness” of those words they are
deply resonant, and that resonance brings the actuality of the
voice’s “South Africanness” to life.
One of the difficulties presented to me as a reader interested in the voice of Breytenbach's work is its switching of conventional modes of address. In poems by other writers the type or tone of voice is usually indicated by the mode of address, that mode being the way in which the "speaker" directs the physicality of vocal expression towards the "listener". The mode tends to be indicated by the context in which the "utterance" is presumed to occur and by the type of discourse in which it is functioning. An example of this: at a Christian church service changes in speech register are infrequent. The two or three that would occur are the elevated tone of ritual speech, singing, and the less elevated, although significantly formal, speech of the sermon. Were the limitation on the speech registers be transgressed it would be disturb the norms of the performance and confuse the participants.

In all verbal contexts the voice's range of expression is curtailed and only "appropriate" language is allowed. The social codes which determine our mode of vocal address are so profoundly internalized that it can seem very strange when our attention is drawn to them. In poetry modes of address are largely related to different types of poems. Readers of elegies, lyrics, epics or experimental poetry, in recognizing the type of poem, presume its mode of address, and therefore expect to "hear" a certain kind of physical voice. That "voice" is the voice that they hear when they read. If their recognition of the type of poem is somehow interfered with, either by their not knowing what type of poem it is or by certain parts of the poem contradicting the norms of its type, they may be unable to hear the voice fully. They may be unable to hear it at all. Code-switching, the moving between different types of address, different types of texts, different registers, and different modes of address will inevitably create problems for the reader-listener who fails to recognize the nature of the changes.

The rhythm of the voice of "the wise fool" is that of an internal monologue. The paraphrasings, allusions and other appropriated codes in this poem each have an effect on the voice due to their connoting different modes of address. The result for the sounding of voice is that the mode of voice is constantly undergoing change. Readers who expect the internal monologue to unfold with the dynamic of a person evenly recounting thoughts aloud will be
unable to hear the full dynamic of the poem.

As I hear it, the voice is self-dramatizing. Its complex, jokey self-reflexivity depends on the reader's being able to recognize the type of change of language genre and the concomitant change in voicing. When the poet writes, "for a live dog is better than a dead lion", it is necessary for the reader to note that the text is proverbial, that in this context it is platitudinous, and then to prepare for its correction in the, at least partly, despairing echoing of "vanity, all vanity". Elsewhere there is the shouting voice of prophecy proclaiming, "thus it is written", which is reined-in, both by its being in brackets and by the following image of the offended biting and shrieking against the wind. Later in that same stanza, there are the insults which mimick proverbs and which are uttered with a mock intoning. The irony of the insults "may you swallow an umbrella... may you lose all your teeth except one... may the flies..." is that they are multivalent, their stridency being determined by the pace of voice, which here is very rapid and loud, by the repeated "may..." structure, and by the intensity of the imagery. At the same time there is also a sense of the author's fine control of this section that is characteristic of Breytenbach: a sense that while the voice is able to shout outrageously, the intelligence behind it is aware of the provisionality of the proclamations and the ultimate absurdity of any pretensions to truth and reality in their assertions. The last point, reflects Breytenbach's understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

In the last stanza of this poem a similar ironic reflection is brought to bear, not on language in general, but on poetry specifically. The voice of this section strikes my ear as that of a narrator, a narrator who is to give us readers the moral of the story-poem. The moral is paradoxical in that it denies itself a "meta-critical" role. Failing to encompass the "meaning" of the story-poem on which it appears it might comment, it averts its role as a moralistic coda, functioning instead as a faulty mirror, the mirror that reflects the images of the carnivore (lion) which itself, on a different level, reflects the cannibal (fool). The "moral" thus prevents the reader from "knowing" the end of the poem. Excluding the reader then becomes one way of reaffirming the authority of subjectivity. The mode of voice of the moral, so typical
of resolution, is in this instance profoundly parodic because it contradicts the norm of its genre.

It may be said that Breytenbach’s being an Afrikaner, and using Afrikaans as a poetic medium, has placed him in a situation where language is inherently discriminatory. To overcome its prejudices he was compelled to develop a method of writing that would allow other, non-Afrikaner nationalist ideas free expression. I suspect that his becoming a Zen Buddhist was also part of a process of psychic emancipation. Zen could allow him to detach prejudicial feelings from what they signified to his self, allowing him, like Buddha, to break the chain of causality.

Following this view, and bearing in mind his being imprisoned at the time of writing the original Afrikaans versions of these poems, I assert that Breytenbach was able to take advantage of the schizophrenic predicament of the Afrikaner dissident. He was able to convert the alienation and feeling of unreality of the dissident’s powerlessness into the freedom of imaginative play. Where another poet might have felt suicidal, trapped in a futile situation, Breytenbach the Buddhist was able to recognize that the futility of the situation was akin to the futility of samsara, the illusionary nature of the mundane world, and that as such it was absurd. Taking reality to be absurd, Breytenbach responded by making his language, if not absurd in the sense of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, at least predominately anti-mimetic and self-conscious.

The gravitas of mimesis in writing in general, its ability to depict the solidity of reality, is replaced by the translucent claritas of the Afrikaner Buddhist’s explorations, where words are as in placable and fleeting as sand in a magical desert.

Breytenbach plays with the voice in the same way that he plays with words: registers, modes of address and conventions are freely integrated. His poetic English is a mimicking of English proper, and his poetic Afrikaans is an implosion of the Taal. Unless the reader of “the wise fool and ars poetica” understands the important part played by the “nihilism” of Zen in Breytenbach’s work and its solution to the problem of language that the poet inherited from Afrikaans, I believe it is virtually impossible to appreciate the poet’s contribution to South African writing and the literature of the wider world.
The Struggle for the Taal
(Translated by Denis Hirson)

“Clean as the conscience of a gun”
- Miroslav Holub

We ourselves are aged.
Our language is a grey reservist a hundred years old or more
his fingers stiff around the triggers -
and who will be able to sing as we sang
when we are no longer there?
As we did when we were alive we will spurn the earth
and the miracles of the flesh which grows
throbbling and flowing like words -
It is you who will serve as bodies for our thoughts
and live to commemorate our deaths,
you will conjure up tunes from the flutes of our bones...

From the structure of our conscience
from the stores of our charity
we had black contraptions built for you, you bastards -
schools, clinics, post-offices, police-stations -
and now the plumes blow black smoke
throbbling and flowing like a heart.

But you have not understood.
You have yet to fully master the Taal.
We will make you say the ABC all over again,
we will teach you the ropes
of Christian National Education...
You will learn to be submissive
submissive and humble.
And you will learn to use the Taal,
with humility you will use it
for it is we who possess the mouths
with the poison in the throb and flow of the heart.
You are the salt of the earth -
with what will we be able to spice our dying
if you are not there?
you will make the earth glint, bitter and brackish
with the sound of our lips...

For we are Christ's executioners.
We are on the walls around the townships
gun in hand
machine-gun in the other:
we, the missionaries of Civilization.

We bring you the grammar of violence
and the syntax of destruction -
from the tradition of our firearms
you will hear the verbs of retribution
stuttering.

Look what we're giving you, free and for nothing - new mouths,
red ears with which to hear red eyes with which to see
pulsing, red mouths
so that you can spout the secrets of our fear:
where each lead-nosed word flies
a speech organ torn open...
And you will please learn to use the Taal,
with humility use it, abuse it...
because we are down already, the death-rattle's
throb and flow
on our lips...

As for us, we are aged...
The Wise Fool and Ars Poetica

thus he decided to go forth
deep into the region of vowels and consonants
where pure sounds sprout (though also other throat thrusts
and clever lips cutting short the very breath:
mouse-birds among Adam's figs), to areas
where sense and nonsense flourish where strophes
climb in odd places and strange and bitter fruit may happen —
or so he was told, and mused:
the oppressed goes out in the early morning
to look for solutions or failing all
an ersatz for the bloated fidgetiness; the fool
folds his hands and consumes his own flesh

it was quiet there (unpolluted by orb or oriface),
a thrumming silence, a calm redolent of smack
and suck, of oh and ay; he was at sea,
and deprived of the stick-and-track of needle and map
his eyes slithered over the boned black expanse
scouting for vegetation or visitation or just a flash
that might point the way to the well of inspiration,
even, if needs be (who was he to be bullfrogged
with pride?) a ladle of well-chewed cast-away victuals:
for a live dog is better than a dead lion

vanity, all vanity; all about him the barren whords
were as sand upon sand; he scanned his self
in the sand and moaned (thus it is written:
the offended will spit and shriek against the wind
but the lips of the fool will devour him
and darken the nest egg to nought):
"fathead, may you swallow an umbrella
and may it go open in your bowels..."
or: "may you lose all your teeth except one
and that one be honing the ache..."
or: "may the flies settle shuddering colonies
in the clefts of your armpits and the shuttle of your thighs..."
when at last there was a lunar paleness
and he was spent as time and tide, he went
to lay down arms and bones in the desert
(beyond horizons the neon verdict of night-clubs);
and tumbled into sleep: look, laid out he was
in a striped galabia with his lute as mute as a flower,
and a dog-tamed lion alive with the moon's silvery mane
came to sniff his breath and eavesdrop at his ear...

so that no we'll never know
whether the mangy meat-eater
mustered sufficient curiosity or teeth
to make an end
to this poem

Notes
1 This is the title of a poem in Judas Eye and Self-Portrait/Deathwatch. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
2 The list of Breytenbach's poetry publications is extensive. His most easily obtainable volumes are Judas Eye, and the comprehensive Afrikaans selected poems die hand vol vore. Cape Town: Human en Rousseau, 1995.
3 For an account of the period leading up to and including Breytenbach's imprisonment see his The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
4 This incident, together with the text Breytenbach presented, is recorded in his travelogue A Season in Paradise. New York: Persea, 1983.
5 The series was comprised of Lewendood, Buffalo Bill, ekips, and ("yk"). There was to be a fifth volume, die kus, but it was not issued. Also included in Judas Eye are poems from the collection Voetskri, a volume not published as part of the series. All these books were published by Taurus in Emmarentia, Johannesburg.
7 This poem, in Denis Hirson's translation, is to be found in True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (p. 356-7) and in in africa even the flies are happy. London: John Calder: 1978. p. 93.
An example of this type of response is Dennis Walder's "Elbow Room".

Christmas Humphries has described this aspect of Buddhist art: "A sculptor or painter is describing a memory picture, a compound of thought and feeling based on past experience." *Buddhism*. London: Penguin, 1951. p. 208.

Being a painter as well as a poet, Breytenbach often relates visualization to articulation. This issue is beyond the scope of my essay, but I recognize that it may have important implications for the poet's word choice and for his voice.

Several English readers of his text have remarked that "whord" would be pronounced differently, but they were nevertheless unable to give a reason for this.