



## Chapter Six

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### Richard (Müller) Miller

It has been said of Patrick White's fiction that 'the body is the starting-point in the achievement of knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> This study has demonstrated how the deformed body in particular has been used as a cultural and literary locus manifestly indicative of the supposed revealed knowledge, or *gnosis*, of god. In C. J. Koch's novel, *The Doubleman* (1985),<sup>2</sup> deformity and knowledge of the supernatural as articulated in faerylore, folklore, and mythology is interwoven with gnosticism,<sup>3</sup> a system of belief that takes its name from the Greek word for knowledge. Richard Miller's knowledge of the supernatural is gained directly through the crippling of his body. He is born physically normal; but when he contracts poliomyelitis and experiences a changed body, he notes that 'it was now that my interest in the Otherworld began' (p. 21).

As well as a source of knowledge the body is the source of identity; though it is arguable whether the two are distinct at all. Through the body and with the body one makes choices which contribute to the identity of oneself. In Miller's case there is not 'oneself', but two selves, each self comprising body, spirit, and mind; it is the defining of and understanding of the two selves which give rise to the notion of the doubleman. Miller's body is

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Hansson, *The Warped Universe* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1984), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Koch, *The Doubleman* (1985; rpt. London: Triad Grafton, 1986). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Though 'gnosticism' is never mentioned in the novel, Koch confirms its use in his conversation with Michael Hulse, 'Christopher Koch in Conversation with Michael Hulse in London', *Quadrant* 29, No. 6 (1985), p. 23.

divided into the perfect and the imperfect; as we have come to expect with the imperfect body, there is a contingent spiritual division; and finally (less common in respect of deformity in other works of fiction, though a thematic concern in Koch's novels) there is a body-mind split. In Koch's scheme of things this division occurs because the body is located in a different geographical and cultural hemisphere to that which is located in ancestral memory; the divided self as a result of cultural pull was dramatically objectified though the character, Billy Kwan, in *The Year of Living Dangerously*. In *The Doubleman* deformity also plays a part in the divided cultural self, since through the coming of his polio and the disruption of his body Miller achieves knowledge, and the understanding of what it means to own a spoiled identity.


The notion of the spoiled identity has been explored by sociologist Erving Goffman in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). He cites an autobiographical account of a woman's experience with polio. It is quoted here to demonstrate that Miller's personal disruption by the onset of his handicap is, as well as being a literary device, a felt truth. The account reads:

Suddenly I woke up one morning, and found that I could not stand. I had had polio, and polio was as simple as that. I was like a very young child who had been dropped into a big, black hole, and the only thing I was certain of was that I could not get out unless someone helped me. . . . Something happened and I became a stranger. I was a greater stranger to myself than to anyone. Even my dreams did not know me. . . . I suddenly had the very confusing mental and emotional conflict of a lady leading a double life. It was unreal and it puzzled me, and I could not help dwelling on it.<sup>4</sup>

The passage is also useful because the comment on dreams raises questions about the nature of reality and illusion which are at the core of Koch's novel; and the comment about doubleness is, as well as being related to the notion of

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<sup>4</sup> N. Linduska, *My Polio Past* (Chicago: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1947), p. 177. Quoted in Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963; rpt. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 35.

reality and illusion, particularly appropriate. We might gain a personal understanding of the doubleness expressed if we see it as an abrupt experience of that which occurs gradually to each of us with the aging process: as when the older individual now less firm, less agile, admits to the feeling that, inside, he or she is still a  child trapped, looking out. As Wan Hoe in *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940)<sup>5</sup> says: 'Everyone remembers himself as a child and cannot recognize himself in the tatters and wrinkled, dirty flesh, in the stench and hairy moles he is forced to inhabit'. The main distinction between Linduska's experience and the example given is that in the case of aging, which is a natural degenerative disease, the body changes gradually and is not immediately alien.

Susan Sontag has observed in a recent article, 'AIDS and Its Metaphors', that the most feared diseases are not those that are fatal, but those that 'transform the body into something alienating'.<sup>6</sup> Koch's *kunstlerroman* brings us to another phase in the study of the 'languages' of deformity. The novels discussed so far have dealt with what is broadly describable as *in utero* deformity - a convenient catch-all phrase used in this study to indicate a congenital abnormality present at birth whether inherited or not. Miller's deformity is the result of a disease which carries with it its own fictions, in particular those found in Celtic lore. Polio, or infantile paralysis, was there interpreted as the direct result of supernatural interference; its victims were considered not to be human, but changelings. Mythic motifs and preconceptions provide the sub-text to Miller's particular deformity, and it is used explicitly within the novel. The occultist Darcy Burr tells Miller 'You should know about changelings. They ought to have a special meaning for

<sup>5</sup> Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*, introd., Randall Jarrell (1940; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 249. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, 'AIDS and Its Metaphors', *The New York Review* (October 27, 1988), p. 89.

someone who has had Paralysis' (p. 133). The same Celtic folklore effectively condemned to death the afflicted child; Katharine Briggs notes that: 'as a rule the parents would be advised to beat it, expose it on a fairy hill or throw it on to the fire'.<sup>7</sup> Though this dramatic reaction against the deformed in previous times would today be considered barbaric, it was nonetheless prompted by a sustained attitude towards the deformed similar to our own; it is one which has been articulated and demonstrated throughout this study. As Goffman notes:

The attitudes we normals have toward a person with a stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. (p. 5)

He goes on to say that 'we tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and at the same time to impute some desirable but undesired attributes, often of a supernatural cast, such as "sixth sense," or "understanding" ' (p. 5). Being deformed or abnormal in some way is symbolic of some Other; and although the text *The Other Child* (1951) deals with the brain-injured child, the title demonstrates how accepted is the notion of the abnormal child as Other.<sup>8</sup> In *The Doubleman*, 'Other' (in the sense of deformity) is used conjunctively with the Celtic sense which refers to the world of the supernatural.

The protagonist's experience of double worlds contributes to a type of *doppelganger* identity - which is itself suggested in the title of the novel. The crippled body invokes an analogy between visible and invisible worlds which, despite differences, is 'held jointly by the pagan religions of the Lower Empire, by neo-platonic and Christian doctrines'.<sup>9</sup> It therefore provides an

<sup>7</sup> Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* (London: Allen Lane, 1976) p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Richard S. Lewis, Alfred A. Strauss, and Laura E. Lehtinen, *The Other Child* (1951; rpt. New York: Gune & Stratton, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Routledge &

excellent vehicle through which to confront similar-but-different ideas. Koch himself noted in an interview that: 'I wanted to confront orthodox Catholicism with the old Manichaean heresy: the idea that the world is under the control of two powers - of an evil power and a power for good' (Hulse, p. 23). The supernatural being, or the transcendental Infinite, is metaphorically split into two worlds: in one, there is the Infinite being as defined by Catholicism; in the other, there are the Brodericks, who also will 'wait through eternity' (p. 351). If we are to accept that, at their highest level symbols function to imply a meaning and a longing for 'spiritual determination and physical annihilation' (Cirlot, p. xxxvii), we see immediately an equation with the gnostic wish to free the spiritual element so that it might 'be rescued from its evil material environment'.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense then, the body defines Miller: its flesh-ness or materiality places Miller alongside material evil. Alternatively there is *ecstasis* - standing beside oneself (OED); splitting the body from the spirit. The seemingly innocent implications of this concept are introduced to the reader through the ballad of Tam Lin, part of which forms the opening epigraph in the novel. One text of the ballad tells of three paths that can be taken: the 'path of righteousness,' 'the path of wickedness,' and 'the road to fair Elfland'. The last road is treacherous because it is not instantly recognisable either as a path to 'righteousness' nor as a path to 'wickedness'. Elfland belongs to the world of faery and myth which is the world of illusion or altered *perception*, achieved through 'glamour', in which 'glamour' is a fairy enchantment cast over the senses so that things are perceived as the enchanter wishes (Briggs, p. 191). It is therefore the road of self-deception, not knowledge. A

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Kegan Paul, 1962), p. xx.

<sup>10</sup> 'Gnosticism', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 2nd ed. (1974), p. 573.

combination of faery, glamour, altered perception, and illusion is in play when Darcy Burr 'who is essentially a Gnostic',<sup>11</sup> tells Miller: 'let Rod-baby think I'm a gypsy if he likes to, right? I'm whatever anyone wants me to be' (p. 234). The altered perception induced by the faery glamour finds its contemporary, material parallel in drugs. Patrick Dillon tells Miller that the mushroom cookie will 'make things big or small; whatever you want' (p. 347). In the novel's scheme of reality and illusion, drugs are placed in the solipsistic world of the self-deceiving. The other side of the doubleness of 'perception' occurs in orthodox Christianity, where ultimate perception once referred to the receiving of the Eucharist, in which perception was the intuitive knowledge of moral and aesthetic sensibility (OED). In other words a type of spiritual grace is gained through consumption of the material, and yet *divine*, host. Although both ideas deal with the invisible, the Catholic version professes the advent of informing grace; it is a very different idea from the faery idea of altering perception to produce illusion.

Whereas every novel is in a sense about illusion and reality, *The Doubleman* has questions of illusion as its central theme, and it constantly presents minor performances to test out Miller's glib comment that 'the whole visible world's an illusion' (p. 122). Just as fairy perception and drugs present the world as an altered state, not as it is, so the characters of fairy and myth are the epitomes of illusion, since their ability to change bodies, or 'shape-shift', creates ambiguous identities. In faerylore, Tam Lin is a shape-shifter, bearing many names and corresponding *personae*: he is Tamlin, Tamlane, Tam-a-Lin: he is found to be a 'fairy, sometimes a page, sometimes a knight and sometimes a grotesquely comic character' (Briggs, p. 453). And in folklore, Miller's Otherworld entity 'Pooka' (p. 130), Phouka, or the *pouke*, later

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<sup>11</sup> Koch tells us this in his conversation with Michael Hulse, 'Christopher Koch in Conversation with Michael Hulse', p. 23.

became Puck, and then the fairly respectable Robin Goodfellow.

In this novel's treatment of the world of myth, Darcy Burr is depicted as the embodiment of both Pan and Dionysus. The latter is discussed later in this chapter; but in Pan, too, we encounter an ambiguous identity: as was noted in the *Jonah* chapter, Pan is recognised as the personification of nature in Milton's 'Lycidas', and as the personification of paganism in Milton's 'On The Morning of Christ's Nativity', where the birth of Christianity spelled the death of Pan. Both the *pouke* and Pan have been identified as satyrs, as unfriendly to night travellers, and more importantly, as devils.<sup>12</sup> The question, then, is how to identify this plethora of Otherworld characters who are competent shape-shifters, and who, with their corresponding changes in name and form, express a corresponding change in character: whether as deity, devil, and prankster? How then to know which identity is 'real', when the word 'identity' means, after all, the wholeness and oneness of the self? In *The Doubleman* Pan appears to be a conscious reversal of the myth on which Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' is based. Clearly, in *The Doubleman*, Pan's resurrection (primarily through Darcy Burr) is symptomatic of a resurgent *paganism*.

Koch has expressed the belief that we are in the final phase of Goethe's three phases of culture: the returning to the pagan and faery in the face of lost or chaotic belief; he says 'the present phase is an aberration' (Hulse, p. 23). Miller's aberrant body is an epiphenomenal, metaphoric projection of Koch's concerns regarding the present aberrant phase. Koch's gloomy view of a resurgent paganism is by no means typical of other views presented in Australian literature. Writing fourteen years before the publication of *The Doubleman*, Tom Inglis Moore observed of Pan that 'such a god, pagan, is

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<sup>12</sup> Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 326. See also: William Woods, *A History of the Devil* (London: W. H. Allen, 1973), p. 89.

the symbol most characteristically Australian'.<sup>13</sup> Moore claims that Pan is a common literary symbol in Australian writing, which predominantly expressed 'a widespread paganism preferring the hedonist and stoic outlooks in life to the faith of orthodox Christian religion' (p. 305). In his chapter titled 'The Palingenesis of Pan', Moore proposes that pioneering indifference and convict hostility (sparked by 'flogging parsons') created an atmosphere of anti-clericalism, and a proclivity for the image of Pan through identification with the land, or what Moore has called 'earth-vigour'. We are told that Darcy Burr says: 'Australia's especially suited to the new religion' (p. 316). In the light of Moore's conclusion that Australian literature 'reflecting the society, is predominantly pagan' (p. 306), and of an awareness that there are a multiplicity of identities in a pagan world, we are left with a unique question about Australian identity: can the settler Australian who identifies with the pagan claim 'real' identity?

As we have seen, 'identity' for characters of fairy and myth is illusory; so we find that for the characters of the novel identity is in question. The body of Miller of Tasmania, or indeed, Müller of Van Diemen's Land (p. 27), changes shape through the coming of his deformity as a result of poliomyelitis; he too, is a shape-shifter. So is Deirdre Dillon, also a Tasmanian Catholic, and Miller's first love. Deirdre, comfortable with representation, not reality, is content to be 'the Hobart girl with the Irish sense of humour; the old-fashioned child; the cool and cultivated Sydney matron; the cruel and lovely Elle-maid' (p. 327).<sup>14</sup>

Deirdre's cruel confrontation with the flesh, when raped by her stepson, finally destroys her; the incident seems to authenticate the gnostic belief in

<sup>13</sup> T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), p. 305.

<sup>14</sup> Miller's use of 'Elle-maid' is in the Danish folk-tradition of the Ellewomen. As Briggs notes: 'The defect of the Danish elves or ellewomen is that though they appeared beautiful and engaging from the front, they were hollow behind'. Briggs, p. 122.



the spirit's need to escape from its 'evil material environment'.<sup>15</sup> Darcy Burr, who is later to assume the identity of Thomas Darcy in *The Rymers*, is the spokesperson for the alternative world, the Otherworld, attainable through magical bliss: 'the way of Faery; the way of Dionysus'; through Dionysus one could 'get free of the world' (p. 266); he says. Early in the novel, Burr tells Miller that 'only the spirit mattered; but the spirit was imprisoned in the body' (p. 127). Believers in the 'unreal' in the novel are described as shape-shifters, and as hollow-bodied; or indeed, in the case of Broderick's supposed astral travel, as body-less.

Yet part of rightly assessing what is real lies in accepting the body and spirit as integral, not separate. The syncretisation of the body and spirit is affirmed when Miller recalls the phrase 'And the word was made flesh' (p. 42), which sees the invisible as subsisting within the material. The reader understands the religious and symbolic meaning of 'the word' even when it is not further signified by a capital letter. On the other hand, the importance of the body is denied by Broderick's assertion that 'No true redeemer would take on human flesh' (p. 124). A perversion of the first belief occurs when, as producers of images and music, Miller and Darcy Burr are placed in the situation of 'giving their fantasies flesh' (p. 261). Miller's and Burr's is a situation which points to the inauthenticity of the artist as creator. The high degree to which characters act out life can be found in Deirdre's attitude towards words, which betrays her insubstantiality:

Words, probably, were all that she'd ever wanted; she had no real need of anything else. Child of a literary culture, of an island where most of our messages had come through books, she found words endlessly exciting. Child too of Irish Catholicism, she had made the telephone a perverse confessional; a place where lapses into salaciousness or betrayal had neither flesh nor penalties . . . . (p. 298)

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<sup>15</sup> 'Gnosticism', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 573.

On a literal level the passage raises questions about the author as creator, in as much as he is producing a novel which comes to be regarded as a representation of or substitute for life. The role of the artist as inferior to the authentic self is discussed later in this chapter.

Though less obvious as a device, in *The Doubleman* the partially crippled or divided body represents a mind divided between the contemporary place of current-culture consciousness and the ancestral place residing in the collective unconsciousness. (The contextual significance of the past interacting with the present was discussed in depth in Chapter Four.) Within Miller's ancestral memory resides another, or an *other* culture. The novel presumes a settler Australian to be in possession of both a current-culture and an 'other-culture' (in Miller's case, European) consciousness. I am proposing that Miller is symbolising the Australian experience of what Spengler has called 'historical pseudomorphosis'.

When he coined the phrase Spengler was referring to a situation in which an alien culture predominates so greatly that a young culture, appearing into the land, 'fails not only to achieve pure and specific expression forms, but even to develop fully its own self-consciousness'.<sup>16</sup> Spengler concludes that the effect of 'young feelings' being forced into 'old moulds' is for the younger culture to 'hate the distant power with a hate that grows to be monstrous' (p. 189). It is too extreme a conclusion in terms of the European-Antipodean context; the point however is not lost on Bruce Bennett, who notes that Eurocentric ties have 'often been treated unsympathetically by writers and critics, as if they threaten Australia's identity'. He goes on to say that Koch, however, is 'one writer who registers sympathetically the changing relations

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<sup>16</sup> Oswald Spengler, 'Historic Pseudomorphoses', in 'Perspectives of World-History', Vol. II of *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 7th ed. (one volume edition 1932; rpt. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), II, p. 189.

with Britain'.<sup>17</sup>

And he does so in this novel, attempting to synthesise rather than to amputate the disparate: but Miller's obsession with the European past, in his asking 'why were we here, and not there?' (p. 33), is seen as no more 'healthy' than the denial of an Antipodean past, where Tasmanians 'wanted to forget this had once been another island' (p. 33). Miller's pseudomorphosis (his deformity) is the reminder of an immediate past of a younger culture that must co-exist with all that has gone before. The older culture is simultaneously related, yet alien, in much the same way as disease has transformed Miller's leg into something alien yet integral to the rest of his body. Symbolically both cultures are represented in the form of Miller's disability, the limp. In terms of his other-culture consciousness, the moment of Miller's paralysis becomes a tightly-knit evocation of the pagan and faery myths. The pagan god Pan was credited as the bringer of sudden illness;<sup>18</sup> Celtic tradition attributed deformity to fairy blows; and the 'druidical club' figures prominently as a means of cutting down the hero in certain Celtic stories.<sup>19</sup> Such reference is suggested when, at the onset of paralysis, Miller says the pain feels like a blow from 'a great silver club' (p. 19). Further, the actual illness (polio) is in keeping with the novel's use of shape-shifters and confused identities: as mentioned, in Celtic lore children suffering from infantile paralysis were often perceived as changelings. Clearly then, this particular deformity provides an avenue for expressing Celtic culture.

Beyond the Celtic myths there lies the pandemic myth of deformity as the figurative personification of punishment (Jayne, p. 201). Miller's limp is a

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Bennett, 'Perceptions, 1965-1988', in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, p. 436.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Addison Jayne, *The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilization* (1925; rpt. New York: University Books, 1962), p. 224.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (1903; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), p. 132.

penitential paralysis in more ways than one: the physically deformed, and criminals, have historically been lumped together as 'social deviants' along with the mentally disordered; it is an image graphically captured in the well-known Ship of Fools. The *Narrenschiff* is, of course, a literary composition, but it has its basis in fact.<sup>20</sup> The fifteenth-century Ship of Fools shuffled its unwanted cargo from port to port, and discharged it into sixteenth-century confinement, such as the *Hôpital Général* in Paris. Later, writes Foucault, confinement frequently meant not hospital, but prison (pp. 38-64). The abnormal being became associated with criminality; and it could be said that the diseased and the criminal are victims of a shared language (indeed in Australia, to be 'crook' means to be 'sick; disabled; bad; infirm'),<sup>21</sup> in as much as it has generally been felt best to isolate both in order not to contaminate the healthy aggregate body of society. As we have seen, the deformed and the disabled body carry with them attendant stigmas; and although Goffman notes three major types of stigmas, the deformed body is often accompanied by the baggage of the other two:

Three grossly different types of stigma may be mentioned. First there are abominations of the body - the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment . . . . Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family. (p. 4).

Goffman's use of the word 'contaminate' to describe the perceived effect of tribal stigma is a precise one in a discourse on social stigma since, like deformity and criminality (with its implied genetical causes resulting from 'bad seed' and 'bad blood') there is the suggestion that contact will corrupt. In the

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (1967; rpt. Vintage Books: New York, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *The Macquarie Dictionary*, St. Leonards, N.S.W: Macquarie Library, 1981).

Old Testament, Cain is a prime example of all three stigmas as defined by Goffman: he is marked, criminal, and exiled. And of course, Australian history can well supply examples of humans experiencing Goffman's last two stigmas - imprisonment, and exile. Additionally, convicts are notoriously able at identity-shifting: aliases can be produced in order to practise public victimisation or in order to escape being the personal victim of social stigma. The abnormal body easily becomes a convenient, ready-made symbol for the attendant two stigmas, as evidenced in the characterisation of Jonah, discussed in Chapter Two of this study. The stigma-interchangeability of the criminal and the physically abnormal is evident in the following passage, where the myth of the Ship of Fools could loosely be translated into the great Australian Transportation myth:

Poor Van Diemen's Land! The leg-irons and the lash of a hundred years before still hung near, like bad dreams; now, suburban and respectable under your new name, you found your children in irons once more, tormented by pains more searching than the lash. (p. 16)

Miller's limp is a link with Tasmania's convict past and becomes an inescapable part of Miller's mythic consciousness. The actual physical disability recalls one writer's observation that freed convicts often dragged one leg as a result of moving shackled to other convicts, and that 'a mode of hurting anyone with convict connexions was to assume the limp in their presence'.<sup>22</sup> Put all this together along with the popular Australian belief that the 'typical convict was an innocent creature who had sinned once and been savagely punished for it',<sup>23</sup> and Miller's imposed deformity has made him a victim of punishment without due process; which is how convicts are seen from a popular sympathetic viewpoint. In keeping with the myth of deformity in which the visible reflects the invisible, Miller is symbolic of a belief

<sup>22</sup> Xavier Herbert, *Disturbing Element* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1963), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), p. 163.

expressed by Koch that: 'the convict past is like a wound, scarring the whole inner life of Tasmanians'.<sup>24</sup> In this respect deformity and convictism relate in metaphorically suggestive ways, and the link between the convicts and polio is not as 'spurious' as one critic has suggested.<sup>25</sup>

So far we have examined how Miller's identity has been determined by the different and double aspects of his body, spirit, and mind. But as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, it is through the body and with the body that one makes choices which contribute to the identity of oneself. Miller wants to be an artist; it is an occupation long concerned with the nature of reality and illusion, and also with the notion of the divided self. In *The Vivisector* White explored the concept of the artist as the divided self confronted by his freakish Other. In *The Doubleman* the idea that deformity and artistry share a state of unhealth through a common experience is expressed early in the novel: 'The artist, the amateur of the arts and the convalescent all pass through the same door. Those, that is, who have been truly broken - but who have afterwards been able to mend' (p. 24). The last statement qualifies the condition of deformity's relationship with artistry; Katrin's son, Jaan Vilde, a quadraplegic as a result of a motor accident, is thus excluded.

In the early part of the novel the young Miller explores his artistic self through 'Pollock's Toy Theatre', given him by his grandfather. The circumstances recall Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796); as does the use of the *doppelgänger* motif: the use of dreams; and the motif of *ecstasis* - of seeing one's self stand outside one's self. It has been said that Goethe helped 'to establish the type of the passive, sensitive hero and thus offered a prototype for the Stephen Dedaluses and Marcells of later fiction'.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> C. J. Koch, *Crossing The Gap* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Susan McKernan, 'C.J. Koch's Two-Faced Vision,' *Meanjin*, 44, No. 4 (1985), p. 434.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 37.

The character Wilhelm Meister arguably provides a prototype also for the electronic-age Richard Miller. Miller's enchantment, as he calls it (p. 24), begins with the single frame of his toy theatre and intensifies into the twenty-five frames per second of television's transient images, with its 'second-hand images more vital than the real one through the window' (p. 269). Through Pollock's Toy Theatre and books on Elfland, Miller experiences the Dionysiac-theatre mastery of magical illusion: 'I smelled their pages in a rite of worship' (p. 30) he says. Dionysus, the lame god<sup>27</sup> and shape-shifter<sup>28</sup>, was the Greek god of theatre. And, Miller, like Dionysus, is twice-born. He is *re-born* into deformity, and introduced to the parallel, secondary world, of illusion:

in its earliest form the worship of Dionysus was what we would now call a cult, whose aim was to achieve *ecstasis* - the word from which our own word 'ecstasy' is derived. *Ecstasis* could mean anything from 'being taken out of yourself', to a profound alteration of personality.<sup>29</sup>

Deformity shares with 'artistry' the fundamental aim of the Dionysiacs - and the gnostics: the wish to escape the body, in this case the crippled body. We now begin to see a difference between this novel's assumptions regarding deformity and the artist, and the assumptions of some Romantics, in the novel of disease, as explored by Jeffrey Meyers.<sup>30</sup> In their view, terminal disease, as the forced acknowledgement of one's mortality, was often regarded as the deviceful spur for creativity and genius. Indeed, Miller as 'metaphor' seems at first a tiresome evocation of the patho-narcissistic vision of the artist crippled by the burden of heightened sensibility and imagination. Yet 'Miller' is not a

<sup>27</sup> 'Nysus' means lame, according to Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Vol. 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> His aspects include a lion, bull, panther; he was raised as a female. See Graves, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Harwood, *All the World's a Stage* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *Disease and the Novel, 1880-1960* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

metaphor for the artist's nature. Early in the novel the 'artist' is synonymous with *ecstasis*, the illusion of escape from the physical self that is experienced through both inadvertent and overt role-playing or shape-shifting, be it as 'Arthur', the IXL labourer (p. 101), or as a character in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, or in Rattigan's *Ross*. The author questions the authenticity of his art when he portrays the insubstantial Deirdre as the prototypical reader, a 'child of a literary culture' (p. 298). As we shall see, the conclusion in this novel is that the 'artist' is a metonym, only a part of the whole. 'Miller' is the metaphor for those components that help make up a total individual identity, in which the physical body is an integral part; and if total artistic saturation, or *ecstasis*, is the attempt to escape from the body, then artistic saturation is the antithesis of wholeness or identity.

It is this temporary form of *ecstasis* that the young artist chooses: through the theatre and via Elfland, the road to self-deception. He says: 'I was creating another theatre; a theatre I would actually move inside, here in the sewing-room. I would be in Elfland, its creatures all around me' (p. 30). What is happening here is similar to what Tolkien - also a Catholic and therefore of the same 'school' - calls the Faerian Drama (plays that elves present to humans), which has the effect upon humans of causing them to believe themselves bodily inside its Secondary World, and so to award it Primary Belief. The result is that the human observer is deluded.<sup>31</sup> Tolkien speaks of Primary Belief as the world of reality, and art as 'the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) 'Secondary Belief' (p. 48). Believing himself bodily inside this Secondary World, Miller experiences life at one remove, a distorted perception.<sup>32</sup> He instinctively

<sup>31</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Although Tolkien and Koch differ in their view of the value of art's ability to produce Secondary Belief, there is no disagreement that art, human or elvin, is a presentation of altered perception.



senses the *unhealthiness* of the preoccupation with illusion: 'I know that my yearning to go there [Elfland] is sickly, foolish: and yet I fiercely deny it. Nothing can be wrong with escaping the ordinary world' (p. 31). In that last sentence, one can hear the uncertainty that rages within the young Miller. He recognises the battle within himself when he asks: 'Why then do I tremble with exquisite unease . . . . Perhaps because I'm made to long for something else; something maddeningly vague; some absolute escape, some icy ecstasy found in far, pure reaches of the air' (p. 31). The wish to escape is expressed by Miller in terms of ecstasy - standing outside oneself - and it is the wish to escape the body. Art is one means of temporarily satisfying this wish. We have already seen how ancient beliefs posited a spirit-body parallelism; which is why Broderick recognises Miller as a potential acolyte. But Miller instinctively understands that he offers not temporary but total *ecstasis*: 'It seemed to me that the man wanted me to be crippled and that it was very important to contradict him' (p. 14). Later Darcy tells Miller: '. . . you were different. Brod offered you knowledge, and you blew it. You weren't receptive enough' (p. 264); to which Miller answers: 'Maybe I didn't want it'.

Miller has already experienced the kind of knowledge that Duffield in *The Vivisector* envies Rhoda, when he says: 'because she might possibly have experienced something far more intense than he could guess, he tried to drag her with him to the surface' (p. 169). It is the knowledge of deformity which is, metaphorically speaking, the mark of mortality: they represent those who have peeped at death, and as a result are fixed reminders of the Other side of life. This, Miller has experienced:

There was a fatal moment when people succumbed to the wish for that region, I said; when they reached for the Otherworld. And then everything was changed. It happened in dream, or else in sickness - at times when the will and the life-force were weak. It happened to me in the Red Room. Paralysis had put its mark on me, and then spared me; I was one of those who had looked into the grave early, and had then

drawn back. (p. 264)

After the paralysis, Miller assumes his physical crutches. In its literal sense the crutch is 'the invisible, moral or economic means of supporting any form of existence that may "lean" on it' (Cirlot, p. 71). Thus, the body leans upon the crutch. About the symbolic meaning, which derives directly from its literal sense, Cirlot informs us that: 'Frequently the crutch stands for an immoral, hidden or shameful support; this is because the foot is a symbol of the soul, and an infirmity or mutilation of the foot is the counterpart of an incurable defect of the spirit.' (p. 71) Thus the spirit leans upon the crutch of illusion. On this interpretation, Miller's 'defect of the spirit' is incurable, since he does not, and indeed cannot (due to the nature of his crippling), 'seek to revenge himself upon the cause of his mutilation [which would show] that in his spirit he still retains some of his moral strength' (Cirlot, p. 71). If loss of a particular faith is a 'defect of the spirit' the interpretation still holds, since Miller never recovers his Catholicism, and his lameness is never cured.

Though he never returns to the Catholic faith, he does achieve a lasting and a spiritual understanding. When Miller attends the Easter mass, he affirms the importance of the body in the description of the beatitude of the old man in church, where Miller comes to recognise healing through the ritual of a specific part of the Catholic mass, the Communion: the intercourse between the body and spirit. In terms of identity, the novel's use of metonymic description (the old man's bent frame) is compounded by the use of mask (his pin-striped suit) which reveals itself in the words 'Christ inside him' (p. 339). This simple description with its use of metonym, and its Yeatsian overtones, throws light on the division of identity: the body is an integral part of a whole person, but never the whole, and never excluded. This evoking of a familiar Yeatsian metonym<sup>33</sup> reveals a definite shift away from the Deirdre Dillons of the world

who live in their 'landscape of Limbo' (p. 285). (Consistent with Koch's use of the lexical *doppelganger*, 'Limbo' also means penal confinement.<sup>34</sup>) Deirdre had expressed to Miller her love of Yeats; but whereas Yeats starts with Christian ideas and moves towards the idea of fulfilment through spiritual entities, Miller goes in the other direction.<sup>35</sup>

Further, when Miller recognises the 'transitory gleam of joy' which 'human beings can never sustain for long, and are perhaps not meant to' (p. 339), he has placed value on the sensuous *above* art - the religious art seen moments before as 'resembling a comic strip'; he has also possibly experienced a temporary religious *ecstasis*, acknowledging spiritual joy without permanent betrayal of the body. (Words, too have their *doppelgangers*: 'ecstasy' (pp. 60; 210; 229; 296; 310; 331) and 'perception' provide a further dimension in doubleness.) The feast of Easter incorporates two distinct pagan practices: the Dionysiac rite, implicitly in the description of the old man with 'his mouth munching frankly on the Host' (p. 339) during the Easter Mass (and of course, Dionysus, son of a god and virgin mortal woman, also had an annual feast of resurrection); and the feast of Easter itself, based on a pagan festival, possibly related to the Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, Eostre.<sup>36</sup> The Christian Easter Mass portends resurrection and renewal, stressing the importance of the body as an integral part of the self since, in Christian thought, it is through the sacrifice of Christ's body that humanity is redeemed. In affirming the importance of the body, artistic *ecstasis*, and gnostic notions of *ecstasis*, are rejected, in which the goal of the gnostics was

<sup>33</sup> In 'Sailing to Byzantium', Yeats's metonym of man is 'a tattered coat / Upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hand and sing'.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of the Underworld: British and American*, 1949; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).

<sup>35</sup> One critic goes so far as to suggest that 'Yeats was no sort of Christian'; saying that Yeats 'demonstrates that man can walk alone'. See A. G. Stock, *W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 163-164.

<sup>36</sup> 'Easter', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd. ed.

to free the divine spark from the material trap of a decaying body.

The taking of the mushroom cookie (p. 347) towards the end of the novel parodies the Eucharist ritual, just as at the beginning Miller's rebirth into deformity 'had been a parody of [his] original birth' (p. 21). But just as the rebirth had signalled a birth into the possibilities of another religion as signified by the occult, so the communion-parody of the cookie signals a move away from the occult; away from artistry, towards aesthetics, through ultimate Perception: and here, 'Perception' is best interpreted in its religious meaning of receiving the Eucharist; as stated, one meaning of 'perception' is the intuitive knowledge of moral and aesthetic sensibility (OED). In terms of the novel, the *content* of the parodic Eucharist is significant, though it does not signal a move, or return, to Catholicism. Totally immersed in illusion - 'stoned' - Miller is able to recognise illusion, and then reject it, by figuratively turning from the pagan way and telling Darcy 'you're too late' (p. 351). Miller is moving away from the crutch, or the promise, offered by the supernatural - pagan, gnostic, or Catholic - and towards a concretely locatable spirituality: He has found a sense of belonging and fulfilment of need in the Other of his marriage. In this sense, the female as Other is brought into play.

His is not an unquestioning acceptance of the reality of the sensuous, since his relationship to Katrin has been marked by misperception and doubt. Katrin is the embodiment of the European past that was only a felt, not an actual presence for Miller. Marriage to Katrin satisfies a need in Miller to think he has 'married Europe as well' (p. 240); she typifies the tribal stigma, being the Estonian once labled ' "*Die Vertriebenen*": the driven-out' (p. 202). Marriage represents a unity of two persons, or what might be called a secular

unitas. Miller notes:

I had begun to learn now what it meant to be married: to become a

double person; and I saw that my life had only been half-nourished, before this. The European home-spirit that Katrin and her grandfather created in the flat was like the black Estonian bread they brought in the Cross, baked by their countrymen in exile. Unlike the lifeless white bread I'd been reared on, these heavy loaves were a food one could live on: a staple. (p. 240)

The image of bread is central as the metaphor for substance. It is compounded by the Millers *living* in Challis Avenue, since 'challis' is phonetically identical with 'chalice', the eucharistic cup. Katrin has become the reachable, and the reality - myth and spirit incarnate. That she differs from Deirdre Dillon can be seen in the women's attitudes towards Miller's limp: 'Katrin, unlike Deirdre Dillon, refused to see [Miller] as a cripple' (p. 194). As one would expect of the Elle-Maid, Deirdre recognises only the otherworld aspects of Miller, and identifies him by the icon of his physical deformity. She is re-inforcing the notion of physical and spiritual unhealth.

Miller comes to recognise that Deirdre represents 'a true fairy nurse', and that: 'she offered nothing but the thin milk of dream, in which there was no nurture, but merely addiction. Adult love threatened her; she cared only for the callow or the handicapped, and I had been both' (p. 285). Their telephone-calls are 'a shared guilt without substance' (p. 297), which she made into 'a perverse confessional; a place where lapses into salaciousness or betrayal *had neither flesh nor penalties* (p. 298; my italics). Katrin on the other hand is described in terms of 'the substance of [Miller's] life, whose flavour was one with the heavy Estonian rye bread she'd never let the house be without' (p. 335). It has been noted that 'the idea of coition as supper is still current',<sup>37</sup> in terms of a 'feast', or eating someone. The thin milk of Deirdre belies her teasing, all-appearance, childish sexuality. Katrin is mature and life-sustaining: at Patrick's beach-house, Miller is tricked into consuming a

<sup>37</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces* (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), p. 121.

bread whose very substance is 'illusion'. In the state of oneirism induced by the mushroom cookie, Miller replays, through imagination, the death of Deirdre Dillon. Her death provides closure in the novel. At the beginning of this chapter, and the beginning of the novel, the resurrection of Pan (in association with Burr and Miller) was presented as symbolic of the re-birth of paganism. Similarly, throughout the novel Deirdre is portrayed as the embodiment of Titania, who was in origin Artemis the ancient moon-goddess. Significantly, Artemis 'was pushed underground when Europe became Christian', an allusion Koch himself points out in an interview.<sup>38</sup> Deirdre suffers both literally and metaphorically a similar demise.

The interweaving of the two events, Deirdre's death and the parody of Eucharistic ritual, indicates the death of Miller's preoccupation with 'illusion', and Miller's return to the symbolic substance of his wife's bread. The novel acknowledges the meeting and merging of pagan myth and Catholicism, exemplified in the notion of the eucatastrophic ending that Tolkien ascribes both to the Resurrection and to the true form of the fairytale (p. 60)<sup>39</sup>; and of course in Koch's novel the motifs of Resurrection and fairytale are significant. Tolkien adds that there is no true end of any fairytale: the end allows only a fleeting glimpse of joy. And this is how Koch has ended his novel. Miller's understanding of joy is expressed in one of the many antinomies that occur throughout the novel: 'I was kept awake that night by a mixture of sadness and joy. They weren't as incongruous as they seemed; joy wasn't happiness, I'd learned that long ago' (pp. 340-341). And here we begin to see where Tolkien and Koch part company, though both are speaking about art from a Catholic-informed perspective: for whereas Tolkien sees imaginative man as a sub-

<sup>38</sup> Adrian Mitchell, 'Christopher Koch on "The Doubleman"', *Southerly*, 45 (1985), p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien uses 'eucatastrophe' to express the opposite of tragedy; it is the 'good' catastrophe.

creator, who can bring into being, through secondary imagination, 'essentially the same spiritual state as does the Almighty when he bestows the gift of final beatitude', the figure of Miller in the novel contradicts Tolkien's assumption that the two are the same. Miller's *dis*-illusionment with the world of faery is made apparent on the last page of the novel: there is 'no more glamour' (p. 352). 'Glamour' is an allusion to the magic that fairies cast over the senses so that things are perceived as the enchanter wishes (Briggs, p. 191).

The novel admits also to the meeting and fusing of faery, myth, and Catholicism, but insists on a distinction based on the relative emphasis placed on the material or the physical, self. With this mixing of mortal and fairy, where Titania and Puck (in the shape of Deirdre Dillon and Miller) appear in this novel of ideas, one is reminded of the familiar Shakespearean metaphor of art, as illusion greatly intensified, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is a metaphor Koch has gone to pains to illustrate. But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* beckons us to partake of dream; thus it portrays a world that is antithetical to the world Koch has created, a world he posits to be in danger precisely *because* it is rapidly surrendering to the dream.

In this novel, in what I have called the splitting of the Infinites, the obvious question is *why* is the body of integral importance in considering what is the *via tuta* or safe path? Early in the novel, the unspiritual, scatological presence of the body is expressed in the description of Mick Paterson; who 'has farted, and it isn't funny; no one dares laugh; it's a wretched whiff from the pit, a reminder of the body's foulness and the squalors of the flesh' (p. 37). Perhaps indeed there are certain disadvantages to owning flesh; but the reference demonstrates a particularised, superficial disgust with the body. In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984)<sup>40</sup> the narrator tells us: 'the ancient Gnostics felt as I did at the

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<sup>40</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim

age of five. In the second century, the great Gnostic master Valentins resolved the damnable dilemma by claiming that Jesus "ate and drank, but did not defecate" ' (pp. 245-246). On a grander scale, the declaring of the body as foul, or in Darcy's terms, simply as 'matter, where we didn't belong', (p. 265) has far-reaching political and moral consequences. If we look at Koch's early descriptions of Van Diemen's Land, we are shown how the convicts were treated, and how some in turn, murdered and practiced cannibalism (a reference that demystifies the parallel Dionysiac rite); it is a land where:

the sealers and shepherds and convicts, out of reach of the government in Hobart, had made slaves and victims of the doomed Aborigines, hanging the heads of the husbands about the necks of the wives, using amputated fingers to tamp their pipes. (p. 74)

Here, the fairytale precept that evil destroys form and that good restores form - witnessable in the tradition of metamorphosis (for instance, as when the prince becomes the toad) - is recreated as an historical national fiction. The Aborigines, faced with the evil by-products of colonialism, attempted to appease the demon Rowra by sacrificing their infants. The genocides of nineteenth-century Australia and twentieth-century Europe come together when Old Vilde pits Christianity against the Other in his description of Hitler's crimes against the body; he tells Miller: 'the Nazis were very much interested in witchcraft - paganism. Naturally; they had denied Christ, now they had need of the Other' (p. 237). The ballad of Tam Lin told of three paths that could be taken: in Koch's idiolect, the dangerous path is that of the Otherworld, populated by hollow people; the danger of the Otherworld is its denial of the body and the danger becomes apparent in the Otherworld understanding that 'The material world, it seemed, was in the grip of powers over which God had no control, and this made the idea of fleshy sin



ridiculous. There was no sin'. (p. 127)

Although the autobiography of the crippled Richard Miller could be seen as a particularised account of the individual, this would be a severely limited reading. As has been demonstrated time and again in this study, rarely is deformity included in a literary work simply because the character described happens to be deformed. Here and elsewhere, the crippled body in literature is a locus for the philosophical, its metaphors extending beyond the particular: reflecting and expressing universal concerns.



## Chapter Seven

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### Rowley 'Jack' Holberg

In the previous two chapters we encountered deformity that is an *in utero* manifestation (Rhoda Courtney in *The Vivisector*), and deformity that is the manifestation of disease (Richard Miller in *The Doubleman*). In *The Vivisector*, White chooses to represent an ancient Hellenistic concept of deformity, disease, and death, which were regarded as dispensed as revenge, in anger, and as punishment; although the supernatural agencies also had equal power for protection.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Rhoda's deformity is schematically consistent with the paradoxical creator-persecutor, creator-protector that is part of the Whitean perception of divinity. In *The Doubleman*, Koch chooses to represent the Celtic response which traditionally associated deformity with punishment. Both Koch and White draw on ancient mythologies while recreating cultural archetypes in which the disabled and disenfranchised person is integral to the language and subject of the novel. In the novels examined deformity is an epiphenomenal device, allowing some dialogue regarding a supernatural Other; physical deformity acts as part of the language of the novel in which the search for spiritual truth is the subject.

Thea Astley's *The Acolyte* (1972)<sup>2</sup> is also concerned with deformity

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Addison Jayne, M.D. *The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilization* (1925; rpt. New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1962), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Thea Astley, *The Acolyte* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972). All subsequent references are to this edition.

and the artist, but it departs significantly from the two *kunstlerromanen* already discussed. It also represents a shift into a third category of deformity: one that exists as a result of human cause, whether caused by intent, or neglect. There is no secondary quality of the supernatural associated with this category of 'deformity-of-known-cause', largely because the fictions of the supernatural are born of an imaginative and superstitious attempt to explain some *unknown* cause.

How is the reader's perception challenged by the distinctions implicit within the categories cited? And how much does a text rely on the subtext that is provided by the etiology of a particular deformity: *in utero*; disease-manifested; or human-caused? As I have suggested throughout this study, the etiology of deformity will often determine how one perceives its teleology, or in other words how a culture perceives its purpose or design within existence. To summarise: the third category of deformity we are dealing with in this chapter includes abnormality of the body after it has entered into existence as physically normal, but is then made abnormal through a known cause. Because this category can be construed as deformity that is the result of an action of one body upon another, or even a body upon itself, the literary device of the body-spirit correlation that is in operation for instance, in *The Doubleman*, does not automatically follow. In *The Acolyte*, physical deformity is a result not of perceived super-natural interference but of extraordinary occurrence.

Having made these distinctions of causation in deformity, I should add that in *The Acolyte* the blindness of Rowley Holberg (better known by his cognomen 'Jack') is not, strictly speaking, only deformity, but sense-deprivation. Although one eye is entirely closed and the other eye is reduced to yellow clotted muscle with a smear of blue, the deformity can be masked

by dark glasses and unmasked for effect, as the young acolyte, Paul Vesper discovers:

His outdoor handsomeness was dissipated for a horrible couple of minutes: one eye entirely closed - no eyeball? I wondered - and the other permanently opened on a yellow clotted muscle with a faint smear of blue where the iris had once been.

I buried my outrage in sherry. 'I'm sorry,' I mumbled. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's right, matey,' he said, slipping his glasses on again before I had time to make a greater fool of myself. 'It doesn't worry me m'self.' (p. 7)

Holberg's blindness gives him a power which lies partly in the ability to shame others at no further cost to himself, and the effect of his blindness, coupled with the compensatory gift of music, is to create a group of dedicated followers; as Vesper comments: 'Holberg's social monstrousness brought out the masochist flagellant in all of them' (p. 83). Holberg's unmasking of his eyes to his pseudo-nephew, but actual son, Jamie, is intended as a lesson to aid 'the maturing process' (p. 91):

Holberg has his glasses off before we can do a thing and he propels the child's head firmly with his hands until it is pointing towards him . . . . Jamie is staring with horror. He has never seen his uncle unblinkered before. This is the first time.

Finally he finds words.

'Does it hurt?' he asks. His soft muscles are contracting to back away.

'For forty-seven years,' Holberg says. (p. 90)

The fact that force is used in the so-called 'maturing process' demonstrates a wish to belittle and shame the sighted; at his concert the deformity is again disrobed: 'Holberg took his glasses off for the introduction. But Neilsen [the critic] took it like a man' (p. 104). Blindness as power is one of the by-products of the disability that is in operation in *The Acolyte*. As with deformity, blindness carries with it multiple fictions and functions as a metaphor for a multiplicity of faults - literal as well as metaphorical.

Blindness is used in this way in the case of Derek Cabell in Brian Penton's *The Land-Takers* (1934);<sup>3</sup> lack of personal hygiene, resulting presumably from the inability to *see* dirt, contributes to the putridity of the blind ex-postmaster, Charlie, in *The Misery of Beauty*. Charlie derives power by consciously creating conflict within his visitors who are trapped by their wish not to offend a blind man and by social conventions regarding hospitality, no matter how filthy: Charlie can eschew blame because he knows he has a good excuse. Anecdotes about visual impairment have provided other writers with fodder for short stories. For instance, D'Arcy Niland's 'Help' is a laconic interpretation of 'the blind leading the blind';<sup>4</sup> and John Morrison's 'The Blind Man's Story' is a vitriolic interpretation of the familiar 'love is blind' theme.<sup>5</sup> Tim Winton's *That Eye, The Sky* (1986)<sup>6</sup> parodies the notion of the All-Seeing Eye: Henry Warburton is the false prophet with the false eye. Taking his glass eye from his head, he tells young Ort Flack: 'This is like the eye of God'; to which Ort replies: 'That's glass. Doesn't see anything. God sees everything, and he's got two real eyes. I think you're full of crap' (p. 133).

On the basis of the texts examined, it could be concluded that those which include physically abnormal characters and which explore some aspect of the supernatural would be more likely to choose the literary device of *in utero* deformity (more specifically, that which is the result of unseen causes). For instance, punishment and the supernatural operate in Christina Stead's short story, 'The Triskelion' (1934): Arnold Jeffries is born blind - the product of an incestuous relationship that culminates in parricide. In addition

<sup>3</sup> Brian Penton, *The Land-Takers* (1934; rpt. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> D'Arcy Niland, 'Help', in *The Penguin Best Stories of D'Arcy Niland*, comp. and introd. Ruth Park (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987), pp. 77-79.

<sup>5</sup> John Morrison, 'The Blind Man's Story', in *Australian by Choice* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973), pp. 51-69.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Winton, *That Eye, The Sky* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble-Penguin, 1986).

to *in utero* deformity, disease-turned-deformity (also a result of unseen causes, but with the distinction that the deformed person has experienced a previously perfect body) carries with it the fictions attached to the act of altering, and by extension of metamorphosing, in which the outer self is often portrayed as representative of a disrupted inner self. A bleak example of this would be Thomas Keneally's *A Dutiful Daughter* (1971), in which Damien Glover's neo-bovine parents figuratively epitomise 'people's animal latencies'.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Acolyte*, deformity is not the result of unknown or unseen causes, nor of disruptive inner forces erupting mysteriously as manifested deformity; as we might therefore expect, there is no hint of a supernatural agency at work. In fact, Astley is a symbol-destroyer: beginning with the title, her novel is the text of a confessed iconoclast. She has said that in writing *The Acolyte* she set out to write an 'anti-symbol novel'; in her words: 'I'll use as many symbols as I can, and send them up'.<sup>8</sup> The artist as a god-symbol comes under fire: where god is held to be all-seeing, Jack is blind. Beyond the unmasking of the blind eyes, Jack goes out of his way to be disruptive, and uses his music to confront and to destroy. Vesper senses at the concert that 'we were all sitting on the edge of some deformed revelation' (p. 102); and the revelation leaves Vesper angry while 'Holberg was smiling like some rubbish-tip saint' (p. 104). The 'masochistic flagellants' and 'fringe spongers' (p. 148) erect and encourage the god, clapping the rising star at Grogbusters: 'His life wound was smiting us, I see now, I see now, but we thumped our feet and walloped our hands in painful redness. We thought we were doing it for him, but I know now we were

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Keneally, *A Dutiful Daughter* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1972), p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Ellison, 'Thea Astley', in *Rooms of Their Own* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986), p. 54.

doing it to ourselves' (p. 26). The wilful assumption of pain and suffering is the catharsis for the guilt of normalcy. Vesper, Hoberg's primary acolyte, remarks to Ilse: 'Your wounds bleed profusely and you display them with pride. The Holberg stigmata, that's what you've got' (p. 150).

The subject of the artist-as-god (or as not-god, as the case may be) is suggested in the title: within the Church an acolyte refers to an altar boy; or to a minor order leading to priesthood. The title suggests that we are once again to witness the spiritual quest of the artist as creator, as is the case with Hurtle Duffield, and to some degree Richard Miller. About *The Acolyte* one critic noted that 'like *The Vivisector*, which had appeared two years earlier, it takes up the notion of the artist as a destroyer of human lives, feeding off the flesh of lesser mortals in the service of his sacred art'.<sup>9</sup>

'Cannibalism', the 'sacred' and 'art' are in play in the novel, but themes and tropes are decomposed and exploded: it is the *hostess* who is 'impatient to devour Holberg before the cocktails' (p. 68); and though Jack Holberg, the music composer might be perceived as 'a patron, like a God' (p. 9), this is undermined: the narrator and acolyte, Paul Vesper, who identifies art with religion (Clancy, p. 48), observes that 'It gets tiring, this worship' (p. 107). This *kunstlerroman* about the artist and deformity is rooted in the secular. The ordinary, everyday Australian nuisance of swarming blow-flies provides the *modus operandi* for Jack Holberg's blindness: he is robbed of sight through fly-strike when he is a baby; as a successful musician he is surrounded by the buzzing adoration of mortals who are 'helplessly attracted to him and allow themselves to become his sacrificial victims' (Clancy, p. 48). The reader is assured that Jack Holberg's blindness is not an act of divine retribution but of 'parental neglect' (p. 9). Furthermore, the artist Holberg does not set out on a spiritual and creative quest; he is thrown out of

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<sup>9</sup> Laurie Clancy, 'The Fiction of Thea Astley', *Meridian*, 5 (May 1986), 48.

the house by his Aunt Sadie:

At eighteen she had thrown Holberg out. 'I love you, boy,' she said. 'But I'm not going to have you as a bludger. And if you trade on your blindness I won't raise a finger. Not a finger. Get out and make something of yourself. I'll send you a hamper at Christmas.' (p. 58)

Holberg does trade on his blindness, though not in the economic sense. Humanity pays the price for his affliction; confronted by guilt it excuses Holberg's anti-social behaviour. He is allowed to trample across the lines of etiquette in the name of tolerant acceptance and personal brilliance. He defies the boundaries of the institutionalised misfit, though in this novel 'misfit' is a misnomer when applied to Holberg.

Astley has expressed an interest in writing about 'the outsider, the loner, the misfit' (Clancy, p. 44), and the notion of 'the misfit' in Astley's work has been thoroughly explored by others.<sup>10</sup> She has said that she is not interested in 'the spectacular outsider, but the seedy little non-grandiose non-fitter who lives in his own mini-hell'.<sup>11</sup> Astley continues to decompose the trope: the misfit of this novel is the physically-abled, uninspired but technically capable artist and acolyte, Paul Vesper. He is the musician who learned piano for twelve terms, but says of himself and his teacher that he 'disappointed both of us' (p. 10). He is the born acolyte, a 'natural assistant' (p. 19). The artist and visually-disabled Holberg, dressed 'in the noisiest of shirts' (p. 25), is the spectacular outsider. As Vesper says of Holberg, 'the non-tragedy among us is him' (p. 54).

The deliberate play of words in the title and in the name Vesper indicates an irreverence, a skewed view of the quest of spiritual transcendence often associated with the *kunstlerroman*, which is uttered as parodic

<sup>10</sup> K. M. M. Sheehy, 'Magic in Strangers: A Study of Misfits in Thea Astley's Novels', M. A. Diss. University of Queensland 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'Thea Astley's Writing', *Meanjin*, No. 42 (1983), p. 482.



commentary of such pursuits. The idea of the *doppelganger* in which the artist is linked to an Other through deformity, as in *The Vivisector* and *The Doubleman*, is presented by Astley not as a spirit double, but as a bodily half: it is Vesper who is 'cut in half' (pp. 113; 125; and 154); an image that is epitomised by the cutting language and razor-sharp humour of the opening epigraph:

"There's been an accident!" they said,  
 "Your servant's cut in half; he's dead!"  
 "Indeed! said Mr. Jones, "and please  
 Send me the half that's got my keys."

Astley rips away any preconceived notions that equate disability with victim status, and instead presents a novel whose premise is that rather than to be merely blind, 'to be human is a hideous burden' (p. 130). In this she echoes the same sentiment expressed by critic Paul Robinson, that: 'being disabled, like being black, or being homosexual, or even, I think, being female, pales into insignificance before the awesome reality of being simply human'.<sup>12</sup> And to be human in a world of spiritual absence is to live the paradox of a soul-destroying existence; the spiritual absence represented in the novel is remarkable; as Vesper notes wryly of himself and Holberg: 'We both munch the eucharist and no grace enters our souls' (p. 154). Astley's use of religious imagery is often ironic and parodic, as one critic notes: 'the three-way relationship between Paul, Holberg and Hilda . . . is both a version of the eternal triangle and a deformed revelation of the Trinity'.<sup>13</sup>

The institutions of the church, the artist, and the deformed are surrounded by taboo - that which gives a sacred or privileged character to something, or debars it from ordinary use or treatment (OED). Thus taboos

<sup>12</sup> Paul Robinson, 'Responses to Leslie Fiedler, II', in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*. Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled, in collaboration with the United Nations (October 27, 1981), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> David Gilbey, 'Writer and Reader: The Sense of a Novel', *Southerly*, No. 33 (1973), p. 8.

present fertile ground and a vulnerable target for an 'anti-symbol'<sup>14</sup> novel; and taboos in this novel are indiscriminately violated. Taboos surrounding the deformed are blatantly de-troped in Vesper's comment that he is 'emotionally broke':

'It's like those collection days,' I went on. 'Those button days. There's always the worst of the spastics wobbling in his chair on the hottest part of the pavement, the day I haven't a cent to spare. And he goes urghh brarck at me with his head lolling and I can only smile stiffly because I haven't a bean and my compassion makes me want to shove him over the railway bridge.' (p. 43)

Vesper violates the conventions of acceptable behaviour. He responds to the 'spastic' by feeling discomfort, and he deals with it by fantasising violence. His fantasy provides an escape from the social confinement of conventions about how one ought to behave in particular circumstances. His reaction indicates a deep-seated resentment at being confronted by the unknown and not having the knowledge to deal with it; it is much the same thing as when the audience clapped its hands into 'painful redness' as an expression of echo-empathy, guilt, and anger. Vesper actually responds with violence when he punches Holberg: 'Hit a blind man, dad! *Mea maxima culpa*' (p. 118); and Holberg refuses apologies ('You belittle me by them, matey') because Vesper's reaction is directed at an equal - not a blind man. In the context of conventional behaviour, violence is in direct opposition to the so-called predominant response of tolerant acceptance. Holberg's 'monstrous behaviour' has been excused in part because of his blindness. He has not had to toe the line of acceptable behaviour because he carries the great excuse to be considered 'different'; as the young Richard Miller says in *The Doubleman*: 'I have the sad immunity of the marred' (p. 37).

<sup>14</sup> Thea Astley said of the novel: 'I wrote it especially for Joan Kirkby [a critic] as an anti-symbol novel'. Conversation between Thea Astley and myself, Southern Teachers' Conference Centre, Hobart, Tasmania, 5 September 1987.

The conscious intention of sending up symbols is extended through the metaphor of the crippled, in which inanimate objects are made animate: 'the intolerable sadness of the trams jerking like cripples to predestined ends' (p. 13); 'crippled tables' (p. 35); and 'crippling sounds of wrecked pottery' (p. 155). These descriptions bitinglly reflect those signs that greet us daily with messages such as 'Handicapped Parking'; and 'Disabled Toilet'.

What is emerging is an intentional authorial subversion of symbols - and by necessity, language - by the very medium of which they are part and the whole. From one reading of the novel's title (its initials are also Astley's) it is possible to see how Astley upsets familiar expectations and presents an 'anti-symbol novel'. Yet it is questionable whether it is at all possible to be totally successful in writing anti-symbol novels unless one were to write a lot of nonsense, which would still be in danger of yielding meaning. Is it possible to destroy, with words, what meaning must rely on: symbols? For instance, another interpretation of the word 'acolyte' (apart from 'altar boy') is 'pupil': the word 'pupil' can mean a student, which Paul Vesper is as he works under the auspices of his artist master, Holberg. Here, the word 'pupil' functions within the context of 'knowledge'; and 'pupil' also refers to sight, since it is the contractile aperture in the iris of the eye, which Vesper muses he might also be: 'Sometimes I have thought in azurous moments of divination that perhaps I am Holberg's other self, his seeing self' (p. 39). In keeping with Vesper's place as 'pupil', we find that in myth 'the Egyptians defined the eye - or rather, the circle of the iris with the pupil as centre - as the 'sun in the mouth' (or the creative Word).<sup>15</sup>

Admittedly this is unashamedly symbolic interpretation of the word 'pupil' in terms of Astley's novel; but it is forgivable given that it immediately

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<sup>15</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 95.

focusses the appropriateness of using blindness as a device which provides a rich source of ambiguity, in a novel that is self-consciously lexical and intentionally iconoclastic. Blindness allows for language reflection and deflection, and provides an oft-used linguistic connection between a physical defect and a cognitive defect, as when one is 'blind to something'. This use of the body in which an outer defect is associated with an inner failing (which is after all the very definition of symbol: in which the visible and invisible are analogous) is frequently used in an intentionally derogatory sense; because of this, physical 'blindness' is increasingly referred to as 'visual impairment'. Other examples of disability used as a form of insult to the able-bodied include the usage of the term 'deaf and *dumb*', since 'dumb' is used to suggest stupidity; which 'mutism' or 'speech-impairment' does not. Fiedler himself, in his discussion of the offspring of Siamese twins Chang and Eng, notes that 'two were born deaf and dumb'.<sup>16</sup> Seemingly, to be deprived of one of the senses is to be interpreted as being sense-less. In addition 'spastic', as used by Vesper (p. 43), is also used demotically to refer to an unco-ordinated, incompetent, able-bodied person.

But blindness carries with it myriad associations. The verb 'to see', meant visually and cognitively, is crucial to the narrative technique: the reader here witnesses a myopic narrator become synoptic (characterised by a comprehensive breadth of view) through the narrative. Astley plays the pun mercilessly: Hilda mimics blindness in her attempt to 'know' the man she has married; she tells Vesper: "'I'm trying to understand him, don't you see?" (Of course I see)' (p. 99). Vesper admits early his misunderstanding of Holberg: 'Not that I discovered all this till much later when it began to be realized that he exaggerated his genius and his helplessness and took advantage of the

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<sup>16</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 216.

nongs to put on ballerina turns of *temperament*' (p. 4). Vesper, the pupil, speaks from knowledge that is gained from *hindsight*: a re-conceiving and re-vision of the tradition of the seer-oracle; with the qualification that the 'blind' oracle has both eyes, and looks not forward, but backward, for knowledge. In this, Astley has also broken with the *epistemological* paradox that is traditionally associated with images of blindness; the critic Sandra Gilbert lists examples of this *epistemological* paradox by way of explanation:

the sightless heroes from Sophocles' Oedipus, Shakespeare's Gloucester, and Milton's Sampson, to say Charlotte Bronte's Rochester, Lawrence's Maurice Pervin has [*sic*] had to lose physical sight in order to gain spiritual insight, so that he might well declare, with Emily Dickinson, that 'When I see not, I better see'.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from classical myths in which blindness is featured, lack of sight carries with it a compensatory myth. For instance, there is the myth of compensation in which sound is exchanged for sight:

God or nature or life compensates handicapped people for their loss, and the compensation is spiritual, moral, mental, and emotional [such as] blind people with special insight into human nature (for instance, the blind, old, black man in "Boone," a short-lived 1983 TV series).<sup>18</sup>

The metaphysical compensation of 'special insight' or the 'sixth sense' for the loss of some original sense is a popular folk-myth; but fly-strike is not a likely harbinger of serious special insight. On the other hand, Holberg's musical genius could be said to be an extreme example of auditory compensation for visual loss. The interchange of sound for sight is a fact in certain technologies: reflecting sound-waves build pictures of the ocean floor; sound is used in echo-cardiograms to build pictures of the heart; and ultra-sound is commonly used to view the developing fetus. Loss of sight can also be

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Gilbert, 'Responses to Leslie Fiedler, III', in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*. Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled, in collaboration with the United Nations (27 October, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Paul K. Longmore, 'Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures', *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, p. 71.

compensated for by touch: braille allows books to be read; and faces can be read through touch: Holberg is described at one point as 'placing the words on [Vesper's] arm with his fingers' (p. 84).

Holberg's blindness is paradoxically the compensatory gift that is also the curse: sound for sight is Holberg's compensatory skill; but Holberg is trapped by his disability since he cannot weep. Holberg's lacrimal ducts are destroyed; as a result the tears cannot flow. Says Vesper: 'he told me he had never cried, could never cry, When he first discovered this wetness on a playmate's face he had marvelled, accusing the weather and then envying the explanation. "Is it like your heart running out?" he once asked me' (p. 85). Sense-less, he is denied the gentle response to music, and his disability provides the impetus for the ungentle music he creates. Vesper, however, casually accepts his own tearful responses to places, faces, and above all, to music - he finds himself crying 'during the *tempo alla marcia* from a serenade by Dag Wiren' (p. 10).

Hilda had earlier called Holberg gentle, 'so that you do not notice he is brutal, too'; she locates Holberg's brutality as being a result of his 'complete involvement in his own darkness' (p. 12). As Milan Kundera has written in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*<sup>19</sup>: 'We all need someone to look at us' (p. 269). Through the gaze of others we construct ourselves and are made real. From the normals' point-of-view, the blind man can not gaze at us, unless, like Holberg, it is to throw an affronting blank stare. The intimidation felt by the not-seen must surely arise from the knowledge that he or she does not exist for the other person, since the blank eye sees nothing; it *must* therefore annihilate all others. Unlike the obliterating glance of the normal, who annihilates the deformed-person by un-seeing the deformity, Holberg's

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<sup>19</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (1984; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

unmasking obliterates the normals. His complete involvement in his darkness arises from his inwardly-turned gaze that authenticates only himself. Thus the ex-postmaster, Charlie, in *The Misery of Beauty* cannot see the freak Frogman; the only freakishness Charlie perceives is himself. Part of Holberg's exterior brutality is in defence of the fact that self-authenticating exchanges of gaze cannot take place; his interior vulnerability is revealed by the braille sheets that Vesper discovers, in which he says: '[People] move through my own sort of landscapes and because they have a true picture of me while I have not of them, I feel disadvantaged' (p. 124). Holberg too, needs the gaze of others, so as to be authenticated in their eyes; stripped of this, he uses sightlessness for power; and Vesper recognises the disturbing nuances that are daily presented to the sighted:

Could it be right to suspect that, protected by his blindness from visual shock and suffering less emotion, oh quantitatively less emotion, there was, too, less lineal registration of complaint, petulance, envy? Cushioned in dark. Eiderdowned by his own disability. For everything I saw affected me, now I consider, more than those things I heard. Words are only words. The thinness of the mouth that utters them is the shot in the sling. I've been more wounded by muscle twitch than flash phrase. And more rejoiced. You see? At that moment my sympathy, my traditional conventional sympathy, changed to envy. He was spared such a lot. (p. 25)

But both Holberg and Vesper share the capacity to wound with words; Ilse pointedly notes after one of Vesper's barbed comments: 'You're very like Jack' (p. 39).

It is language - words that exist to be heard, and to be seen and to be touched (through braille), and that are themselves symbols - that we find continually interchanged with the concept of sight in this novel. Sightlessness and speech are inversely proportional to sight and speechlessness: Vesper says with intentional irony that 'blindness is the gift of tongues' (p. 56); he complains that he and the other Holberg followers must continually be

'watching our goddam tongues' (p. 84); at the airport Hilda and Vesper await the arrival of Holberg from Austria and stand 'watching the overseas door like pointers. Something had stripped our tongues' (p. 24). Vesper's envy of Holberg's blindness is a questionable mixture of 'gloating that Holberg could not see' (pp. 85; 131; and 141) and minor taunts: 'Holberg I *wish* you could see!' (pp. 32; 91; and 150). The hyperbole of verbal and visual brutality occurs at Holberg's outdoor concert when Jamie's mother, Ilse, is raped (Jamie is Holberg's illegitimate son):

It was Jamie who had found her - as he found everything - just as they were finishing with her. He had lost the power of speech, - only his shocked and plucking hands had succeeded in guiding us back to [Ilse], now kneeling in the marshy stanzas of her epic. (p. 134)

The brutality of the scene and the pathos of its actors, a son and his mother, are undermined yet accentuated through the flippancy of the narrator's language (in what must surely be one of the cruellest lines in the book) which is itself abusive, and symbolically self-reflexive: the author (female) as creator (mother) in 'the marshy stanzas of her epic'; the victim of critics. More importantly, the reaction of Vesper and Holberg to the rape of Ilse is revealing:

"Ilse? Raped?" [Holberg's] shocking ironic howl. "*She* calls it rape!"  
 He knew all about italics for a blindman!  
 " - and Jamie saw the lot!"  
 The cold-water cure. I'm sorry, Holberg. (pp. 135-136)

Holberg's brutality is located in his wounding of Ilse, in his lack of concern for Ilse's broken self; Vesper's brutality is less direct, deeper, more calculated, and aimed at wounding Holberg: Holberg is an inadequate *sightless* father; he has failed to protect his son, and the terrifying knowledge his son has gained through sight is a knowledge that is beyond the possibilities of 'Holberg, the All-Seeing Eye' (p. 100).



The novel convincingly presents distortions of conventional attitudes towards blindness: Holberg is no blind Bertha Plummer, saintly, sweet, and grateful for the charitable attention of others as, classically, in Charles Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846); just as the 'spiritual' is removed from religion, so the culture is removed from the 'cultured' artist; romance and idealism are distorted in the images of marriage, and motherhood. Yet there is a man beneath the chitinous mass, as Vesper discovers through Holberg's braille sheets:

Sadie never used colours. She did not say 'yellow' or 'blue' or 'red' or 'green'. Her sensitivity wanted to spare me so much. But I learned the words from other children and no matter how they tried to explain colour, I could never understand it. 'What's red?' I asked Sadie one day. 'Hard,' she said. 'Not to feel but to look at.' And touched off by this defined blue as 'soft'. That's how I see colours: as variations of texture. . . . (p. 124)

Presented through colour is the absolute impossibility of exchanging sight for sound; though the artist Wassily Kandinski (1866-1944), whose early training was in music<sup>20</sup> attempted to capture the reverse in his painting 'Green Sound'. More than anything the use of colour demonstrates the absolute barrier between the blind and the sighted, where, however wonderful the sense of touch, it cannot comprehend colour. The revelations of the braille sheets allow the reader to see the man and the depths of his darkness. For Leonard Kreigel<sup>21</sup> the image of the cripple in American writing stopped with William Einhorn, in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1949).<sup>22</sup> Einhorn is crippled, not blind; he is a rounded character who is aware 'that self-creation is limited by the very accidents that give it shape' (Kreigel, p. 22); and unlike Holberg, he exteriorises and expostulates the

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Charmet, *Concise Encyclopedia of Modern Art*, ed. Roger Brunyate (1965; rpt. Chicago: Follett Publishing Co, 1974), pp. 121-122.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard Kreigel, 'The Wolf in the Pit in the Zoo', *Social Policy*, 13, No. 2 (1982), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1949; rpt. New York: Crest Books, 1965).

facts of his condition, rather than confiding it to braille:

Find Einhorn in a serious mood when his fatty, beaky, noble Bourbon face thoughtful, and he'd give you the low down on the mechanical age, and on strength and frailty, and piece it out with little digressions on the history of cripples - the dumbness of the Spartans, the fact that Oedipus was lame, that gods were often maimed, that Moses had faltering speech and Dmitri the Sorcerer a withered arm, Caesar and Mahomet epilepsy, Lord Nelson a pinned sleeve - but especially on the machine age and the kind of advantage that had to be taken of it; with me like a man-at-arms receiving a lecture from the learned signor who felt like passing out discourse. (p. 76)

Einhorn and Holberg bear patently different characteristics; their similarities arise from the authors' portrayal of them as people. The contents of Jack Holberg's braille sheets are neither symbolic nor metaphoric; they reveal an authorial sensitivity to the subject of blindness. In this respect it would be fair to say that Astley has here achieved a degree of anti-symbolism in her novel because she has, momentarily at least, portrayed a deformity without burdening it with meaning.

Nevertheless, Astley uses several registers of language that deliberately distort conventions, as distinct from a 'novel of confused values' (Sheehy, p. 106). The sling-shot elasticity of linguistic purpose could almost be termed 'ocker baroque',<sup>23</sup> a term applied by Jim Davidson to Jack Hibberd's play *A Stretch of the Imagination*,<sup>24</sup> which was staged the year before publication of *The Acolyte*. In Hibberd's monologue-play the character Monk O'Neill is plagued by physical disability. The play continually questions conventions through the twisting of language that stretches from the depths of the socially-unacceptable to euphemism and hyperbole. It is in the smashing of conventions through the twisting of language that this play resembles the Pauline utterances of the misfit Vesper; though one suspects that unlike Monk the existential-pragmatist, Vesper sees the soul as more than

<sup>23</sup> Jim Davidson, 'Interview: Jack Hibberd', *Meanjin*, 37 (1978), p. 445.

<sup>24</sup> Jack Hibberd, *A Stretch of the Imagination* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1973).

a pumpkin. In the climax of the novel Vesper has erected a sling-shot named 'Taurus'. It is the product of a human who is both mechanical (a civil engineer) and mythical - like Monk, a self-professed Cyclops (pp. 39; 52) performing a Cyclopan gesture of rock-hurling. He hurtles his deluge of rock-solid comment at Holberg's glass pleasure-dome: the iconoclast makes an unambiguous statement of intention. Vesper's frustration is unleashed at the *sound* of Holberg's ridiculing laughter of Hilda: 'It was the laugh that did it' (p. 155) says Vesper, whose 'eyes' are now opened in this interchange of knowledge and sight:

The water wipes back whole webs of illusion, washing off the last grey strings of my own blindness . . . . Blind, I kneel in the grass beside [Taurus's] incurious poise and stack my ammunition in a neat pile. What is it I want to do? Make a gesture? Fling one last comment?' (p. 155)

The Taurus sling-shot is a material interpretation of Vesper's earlier observation that 'Words are only words. The thinness of the mouth that utters them is the shot in the sling' (p. 25). Vesper's triumph is the shattering of Holberg's use of conventions to enslave others. Vesper notes: 'I understood at last that he was proud of his scar, flaunted it like the jealous apparatus of his success' (p. 117). At the sound of Holberg's distress Vesper gains intense satisfaction: 'Holberg [is] crying out, cracking for the first time in all the years I have known him, "I wish I could see! Oh my God! I wish I could see!" ' (p. 157). Vesper's triumph comes in forcing Holberg to acknowledge a lack. Holberg finally acknowledges openly the value of what Vesper has: sight.

Further, Vesper's satisfaction is gained from Holberg's momentary un-authenticating of the self. Holberg had been forced out into the world by Sadie, and has necessarily experienced a world unlike the world of 'normals'. Vesper's own sense of limited authenticity is revealed in his conversation with

his parents, when he tells them that 'having been moulded into what I am, a colourless mechanic, I feel the least I can do is make you two happy. I feel that's all I'm expected to do. *I don't come into it*' (p. 16; Astley's italics). The play of 'I' and 'eye' is Vesper's statement of the perceived inauthenticity of his self, and his sight.

In their separate roles, both men could be described as Monk has been described by the critic Charles Kemp, as a *homo duplex*: '*Homo duplex* points to a cleft between society's roles and the individual's private scenario. It thus raises the question of authenticity'. Kemp links the dilemma of the *homo duplex* and the dilemma of the artist: 'the contemporary creator lives the paradox of *homo duplex*: the demand to be a unique individual unlike the rest of the world needs to be authentically communicated to others.'<sup>25</sup> Kemp's term is different to that used in this study, which has discussed the deformed-being and the artist in terms of a split protagonist; but by the point he is making, Kemp is expressing a paradox common to the deformed individual and the creator, except that the deformed individual is already perceived by others as a 'unique individual'. Their difficulty lies in bearing the socio-cultural fictions of the deformity that is projected on them, and then in *becoming* by living beyond the fictions.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Kemp, 'A Theme in Jack Hibberd's Plays', *Contemporary Australian Drama*, ed. P. Holloway (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), p. 260.

## Chapter Eight

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### Hester Harper

Jolley takes advantage of the use of 'pity' to alter the reader's location of antagonist and protagonist in *The Well*.<sup>1</sup> When we pity someone we place that person in a position of inequality, since the person must first be recognised as weak and unfortunate in some way. Because Hester Harper is drawn as a social misfit in the early pages of the novel, we are invited to pity an elderly woman, who (we learn later) wears a caliper. Before we learn about her disability we are introduced to Hester in terms of her age, gender, and social inadequacies. At a hotel celebration with her ward, Katherine, Hester is an 'unwilling guest'; she is there because she is 'unable to refuse Kathy anything'; she has 'endured a long evening bearing at least two insults'; we are told that 'she also suffered during the evening's long drawn-out entertainment a renewal of the realization of her own changed status brought about by recent events' (p. 1; my italics). Her personal suffering is accented by her seeming physical frailty: she has 'bony knees' (p. 1) and 'thin shoulders' (p. 2). This portrait of an aged person is made more pitiful by contrast with the exuberant youthfulness of Kathy. Hester is rendered non-threatening, which is essential if we are to feel pity. The presentation of Hester's unfortunate circumstances before the facts of her physical disability are revealed disarms any initial negative response, so that when we learn of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jolley, *The Well* (Ringwood: Viking, 1986). All subsequent references are to this edition.

Hester's disability it seems only to add to and confirm the former response of pity, not fear.

In fact, she reaches almost courageous proportions: we learn that 'in spite of a lame leg . . . and in spite of her own advancing years' (p. 7) Hester chose to battle on and run the family property. The death of Hester's father has re-created Hester in the image of a burdened, living *memento mori* 'following her father's ways and wearing all the keys on a gold chain around her neck'. Her situation seems to render her bereft of aesthetically life-sustaining purpose; this is made further pathetic in the description of her 'rather flat breasts' (p. 7). Her apparently thwarted maternity is compensated for once 'Miss Harper had impulsively taken, partly out of pity and partly out of fancy, a young girl, an orphan to live at the farm' (p. 7). Kindness for one who seems even less fortunate than herself contributes to the picture of the non-threatening Hester.

Furthermore Hester is the victim of patron-lineage expectations: she feels she has lived with the implicit rejection of her father who had hoped 'for a son, a healthy capable boy' (p. 150). Not only is Hester not a male but, as defined by a patron discourse, she is a travesty of a female. Hester feels that because of her father lived with 'shame and disappointment' (p. 150). As one critic notes: 'the tragedy of Jolley's women . . . is their inability to escape the crippling legacies of the symbolic order'.<sup>2</sup> Kirkby has located one of Jolley's metaphors of deformity: she has also observed that Jolley's women are 'inevitably crippled in ways inextricably linked to their female sexuality' (Kirkby, p. 46). Thus, Hester's crippling appears to be symbolically related to her place as a female within a patriarchal culture. As we saw with Rhoda

<sup>2</sup> Joan Kirkby, 'The Call of the Mother in the Fiction of Elizabeth Jolley', *SPAN*, No. 26 (April 1988), p. 54.

Courtney, the hunchbacked dwarf in *The Vivisector*, there were no potential sexual mates; though this did not prevent Rhoda from experiencing sexual longing. She tells Duffield candidly: 'I was only ever interested in men. Not their minds - their minds are mostly putrid - but their bodies' (p. 550). Disabled women are presumed to be socially and sexually unsatisfactory partners; crippledom devalues them in the eyes of the male. In literature the possibilities of a deformed female achieving a lasting romantic other-sex relationship is slim. In *Such is Life*, Ida is lame and she has a mutilated left hand; Tom Collins considers her to be 'the ugliest white girl I ever saw',<sup>3</sup> though he fleetingly entertains the notion of marriage to Ida:

'For myself, I often felt an impulse to marry the poor mortal; partly from compassion; partly from the idea that such an action would redound largely to my honour; and partly from the impression that such an unattractive woman would idolise a fellow like me'. (p. 212).

Although the hunchback Gina Haxby (*Haxby's Circus*)<sup>4</sup> is pursued by two men, Mart Bergen and the circus dwarf, Rocco, Gina considers the dwarf too abnormal, embarrassingly so; and yet underlying her refusal of the 'normal' Bergen is the sentiment that it would be an ignoble act to burden him with a faulty product. Gina's denial of a lasting romance with a normal is in keeping with the observation that in literature 'frequently, the man feels he will be diminished in the eyes of others if he can only acquire a substandard partner' (Kent, p. 56). Although it is her back that is deformed by the riding accident, Gina gives her whole self over to her deformity:

Some of the men on the Star-of-Eve, who had seen Gina ride, remembering the beautiful girl she used to be, would scarcely believe the sombre, heavy woman who was always stooping over a wash tub, or grubbing about in Bergen's backyard, was the same girl. (p. 145)

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Furphy, 'Such is Life', in *The Portable Josephy Furphy*, ed. and introd. John Barnes (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981), p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Haxby's Circus* (1930; rpt. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973).

The sense imparted is that a female who is impaired must forgo any romantic notions that include a male as the prize: 'No man would want to marry Gina, poor girl' (p. 158), says Mart's mother, a sentiment reinforced by Gina's actions. The conclusion that female crippledness precludes sexual inclusion is dependent on the concept of social 'values': the body of the deformed female is worthless; no male suitor would truly wish to be encumbered by it unless, perhaps, value is re-instated in the form of financial incentives. This is demonstrated, for instance, in Lion Feuchtwanger's *The Ugly Duchess* (1923)<sup>5</sup> in which Margarete 'Maultasch', Princess of Carinthia and Tyrol, who though she is no beauty, marries the handsome but weak Johann of Bohemia: 'her thick-set body with its short limbs supported a massive misshapen head. . . .below the small flat nose an ape-like mouth thrust forward its enormous jaws and pendulous underlip' (p. 15). There is no mistaking the motive behind the match, as one of Johann's countrymen remarks: 'Poor boy! . . . he has to pay a bitter price for his lands' (p. 22).

The urge for topographical ownership is recognised as greater than disgust for the inadequate female topography, since land is an actual source of power which compensates for the loss of power implicit when acquiring a 'substandard partner'. In *The Well* Mr Bird manages Hester's affairs, financial and romantic: Hester is made aware of 'the awful fact that a man, if one should come, would not want her in her ugliness for herself but want her only as a means to the possession of her land' (p. 53). The seemingly innocent attempt to prevent the exploitation of an aged and crippled woman effectively denies her any potential male relationship; had she had a 'normal' body, it would presumably have been acceptable for it to have been

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<sup>5</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *The Ugly Duchess*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (1923; rpt. London: Hutchinson Library Services, 1972).



appropriated by a male, along with her property. Her crippled body, however, remains *her* property: in effect in a traditionally male society two means of achieving power (possession of the land and possession of the female body) are reclaimed by Hester. The land attains a personal, parallel sexual status: Hester muses that 'she loved her land but recently had been forced to realize that the years of drought had now become several years' (p. 45); unlike her childhood memories of 'very many wet winters. A great deal more rain' (p. 140). Mr Bird tells Hester: 'Your slopes . . . don't seem to conserve moisture as they once did' (p. 55); and he tells her 'your stubble's thin' (p. 55). Hester later 'forgave Mr Bird his insult about her stubble' (p. 56). In the politics of gender ownership of the land can be seen to be a male activity, with productivity of the land as female; female ownership without productivity flies in the face of social order; it is an escape from male and female constraints. But now that she is aging, and post-menopausal, and she no longer needs to 'fear' suitors, the land like her body is decreasing in value. Hester sells what land she cannot use productively to the fertile male-female couple, the Bordens, people she suspects as having 'only one idea in their heads and that was to make couples of people and to follow the coupling with reproducing' (p. 119). In selling off the land Hester has also implicitly accepted the notion of living man-less; she has returned the land to the accepted male-female order of ownership-productivity, though she does muse over the effect on Katherine's marriage prospects:

The trouble with Kathy's prince would be that, now Hester had no land, a suitor would not come galloping from his father's rolling paddocks, only the unemployed son of a small farmer would come forward. Hester, almost moaning aloud, said over and over to herself she did not want a husband for Kathy. She was sure too when Kathy thought about it in her sensible way, she would not want to . . . (p. 119)

Hester appears to voice a concern for Katherine's future, but if we listen carefully she is uttering the age-old parental threat which is to stand in the way of youth's sexual maturity and independence.

In her essay 'Disabled Women: Portraits in Fiction and Drama'<sup>6</sup>, Deborah Kent notes that 'disabled women may have particular difficulties making friends. Friendships with women peers are strikingly absent from the lives of many of the disabled women in literature' (Kent, p. 49). No such peer friendship exists for Hester. But she is monied, and acquires, from a shop, the fifteen-year-old orphan, Katherine. In language that is sexual and exploitative, we are told that 'during the evening Hester wanted to enjoy her new acquisition' (p. 10). Landless, aged, and crippled, excluded - voluntarily or otherwise - from a relationship with a male, she places herself in a relationship with a young girl who herself later appears to exploit the old woman.

The archetypal association of young girls with crippled women can be found in many fairytales where the old women seem to feast upon the youthfulness of the child. Lame since birth, Hester walks with a stick and wears a black orthopaedic boot and a caliper. As was noted in the chapter on *Jonah*, the foot is the archetypal location of desire in fairytale and folktale. Hester's foot is enclosed and encased: 'desire' is under constraint. This, coupled with the image of the well - its depth, its darkness, and its dampness - suggest subterranean sexual longing and constraint,<sup>7</sup> and in which the post-menopausal, single, childless, and parentless, Hester's 'bathos' is her dread of 'the hovering loneliness' (p. 45). The mythic and psychological

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Kent, 'Disabled Women: Portraits in Fiction and Drama', *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) associates the image with sex, in an open treatment of lesbianism.

connotations of the 'well' have been noted: the well was symbolic of an underground womb; the Celts threw articles into the well as offerings to the great mother; and the well was a secret entrance into the Earth's body (Kirkby, p. 63). Kirkby adds that 'the novel focusses on the maternal blackness, here symbolized broodingly by the well into which the couple throw the body of a man' (p. 61).

The novel is filled with dark secrets; the well is itself the keeper of a dark secret, literally and psychologically, while its presence lends an insistent eeriness to the narrative. As we have seen, the well carries with it significant meaning; and deformity is a convenient, ready-made, readily believable vehicle for themes such as female sexual repression and rejection, evident in characters (as pointed out by Kent) such as the lame Laura Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and the lame Gertie McDowell in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). These themes, when coupled with violence (potential-homicide, potential-murder) are an important part of the novel. But it is that which is less obvious, is unspoken, suppressed, that lends this novel its power. Part of the power arises from its capacity to depict the crippled, unthreatening 'real' Hester as pitiful, and then gradually transform that pity into fear. Hester becomes the archetypal cripple, associated with sexual repression and death; she becomes the vehicle through which unnamed terrors are subconsciously made present.

First let us look at some of the reasons to doubt the portrayal of Hester as pitiful. As previously noted, Hester's disability is introduced to the reader after her social estrangement and decrepitude have been established: she is placed within the surroundings of a lively and youthful party; we are invited to experience Hester's visions of loneliness, and crippledom, through the

screen of 'her usual honesty' (p. 45; and p. 116). Memories from the past and observations of the present provide a revelatory confessional and seemingly sympathetic picture of Hester. But the roles that she plays (boss; surrogate parent; child) betray her: she is not the sympathetic creature she appears to be. In her role as boss and land-owner her attitude towards a young mother is self-absorbed and dismissive. She recalls that: 'not understanding nor caring about the young mother's need, Hester had merely, from her lofty place on the verandah, dismissed the visitor' (p. 29). In her questionable role as surrogate parent, her attitude towards Katherine is partially revealed; as Hester plays her piano she is similarly self-absorbed: 'it did not occur to her to question whether the girl really enjoyed the performance or whether she simply pretended to while old Mr Harper dozed and Mr Bird sat politely by the fire' (pp. 10-11). Later Katherine is to blurt out: 'I hate your music too. More than anything I hate that' (p. 138). In her role as daughter, Hester's behaviour towards her father is such that: 'latterly, before he died, she was always escaping from him as he became more of an invalid and an increasingly tiresome bore' (p. 46). Her present actions are such that the reader feels compelled to excuse them in the light of a secondary narrative that reveals a haunting past, as for instance, the circumstances surrounding her desertion of her father's lover, the governess, Hilde Herzfeld, 'the blood-stained woman who was her dearest friend', when instead of going for help Hester 'limped back to her room' (p. 122). The past re-informs and plagues her present circumstances. Finally, Hester's capacity for insensitivity is demonstrated at the breakfast-table in the old stone cottage to which she and Katherine move after the sale of the land:

One morning while they were eating an early breakfast Hester, suddenly disturbed by the too close crowing of their most handsome rooster, tilted her chair back and, putting an arm round the edge of the

flywire door, caught the bird by the neck and, with a twist of her strong fingers, she broke his neck.

'Oh Miss Harper, dear,' Katherine began.

'Hang him up in the shed, Katherine,' Hester said going on with her meal. (p. 50)

The extract tells us something about the pragmatism of Hester; but it also warns us of an insensitivity towards Katherine's needs since it is she who is ordered to hang the 'cock'. The male - the cock - is a disposable nuisance in their women's world. As Hester admits to herself: 'the idea of Kathy bearing a child could not be thought about and the idea of some man, that man, touching or handling her perfectly made and childlike body was repulsive' (pp. 150-151).

Hester excludes all males from her dialogue with life: she wishes to keep Katherine's 'perfectly made' body away from the male, just as her own, imperfectly-made body has been excluded from male ownership. The rumblings of mother-daughter jealousy can also be heard: Hester has created a tower in which to isolate and imprison Katherine, her Rapunzel. The tower is an inverse image of the well in which a male intruder is disposed of following an accident: on the way home from a party Katherine hits something with the roo-bar of the truck: significantly, Katherine never *sees* what she has hit with such force: it remains a psychological presence, unseen, unknown, and uncertain. Hester gets out of the truck to tell Katherine what they have encountered. The woman with the 'bony knees' (p. 1) and 'thin shoulders' (p. 2) climbs out of the truck 'leaning heavily on the stick' (p. 5; and variously p. 37; p. 145).

The image of a *thin* woman leaning *heavily* on a stick creates an uneasy ambivalence. That ambivalence can be located in our perceptions, as adult readers, of Hester at the party, which are now confronted by childhood

preconceptions, for *here* is the archetypical witch who leans upon a crutch. I suggest Hester and her stick are already re-creating an image buried in the childhood subconscious - an image of hags in fairytales. The name Hester bears a resemblance to at least two words which are pertinent to this discussion: the German word *hexe*, meaning a hag or witch; and the Greek word *hystera*, meaning womb. Because images such as those of the lame child who is motherless, and friendless, and so on, evoke pity in us, we have been deflected from venting the subconscious directly. Memories of Hester's lonely childhood are intersected with more deadly, adult circumstances. The fusing and layering of dimensions in the adult present, which is by necessity built upon a childhood past, provide a narrative structure that reveals the conscious level of events, to be informed and re-interpreted by the subconscious, which is brought into play through the use of fairytales.

Helen Daniel makes a general note that fairytale and myth have been 'brushed lightly together'.<sup>8</sup> Daniel concentrates on the notion of fantasy as being fairytale-like, rather than locating actual fairytales within the novel. She rightly suggests that: 'the movement to and fro between the reality and the fantasy, the fairy-tale and the horror, is constant, an opening and closing of contestant worlds' (p. 295). I would add further that *The Well* relies less on moving between fairytale and horror, and rather more on the building upon specific fairytales in order to enhance the horror; fairytales thus provide a world that is less 'contestant' than integral; Hester acknowledges her part in the integrating process:

The fantasy created over the years contained in its invention all that was romantic and beautiful: the fairy-tale lovers and the safe dangers of cosily imagined evil lodged in some distant place. There was the idea of a world of caverns lined with jewels and perhaps the possibilities of magic practices which made wishes come true. There were the sounds

<sup>8</sup> Helen Daniel, *Liars: Australian New Novelists* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988), p. 293.

too of the rushing wind, the dripping of precious water and the unintelligible murmurings of voices, which could be human, in the depths of the well. (p. 144)

The fairytales of childhood fascinate by enunciating our deepest terrors in conjunction with an inner, ambivalent, unarticulated attraction. Whereas works are openly referred to, such as *Silas Marner* and *Robinson Crusoe*, their open disclosure invites investigation of allusions and textual comparisons: nothing is hidden from us; therefore we have nothing to fear. One of the children's tales openly referred to on the first page, is *Peter Pan* (1904, published 1911), by reference to Katherine's 'Peter Pan' collar. J. M. Barrie's tale is widely known for its message about the pitfalls of stunted maturity; there is nothing particularly scary about that, and it is consistent with one of the thematic preoccupations of the novel. However, one of the tales operating on a subconscious level in the novel is 'Little Red Riding Hood' (1697); though we are more familiar with the ending of the Brothers Grimm version, which bears the title 'Little Red Cap' (1812), in which the child wore a little red cap given her by her grandmother.<sup>9</sup> Hester recalls of herself that 'in those far off days she wore a woollen hat knitted by her grandmother' (p. 46). That same hat - a red woollen hat - is now used to hide Hester's money.

The change in title from 'hood' to 'cap' is of etymological significance to Jolley's narrative. The presumption is that 'cap' has historically developed from its meaning of a woman's 'hood' (OED). The sexual allusion implicit in 'woman's-hood' becomes a factual allusion in reference to the Dutch Cap, a contraceptive device covering the neck of the womb. The final interpretation of 'cap' for our purposes is in reference to 'cap-money'. Hester stores her

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<sup>9</sup> Grimm Brothers, 'Little Red Cap', in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, trans. Margaret Hunt, introd. Frances Clarke Sayers (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1968), p. 215.

money (the proceeds from her father's farm) in her red woollen cap knitted by her grandmother. We might literally call this 'cap-money', though the term originally referred to money that was gathered from the huntsman at the death of the fox (OED). Readers of Jolley are familiar with the 'father as fox' as a recurring motif in her work, particularly in *Foxybaby* (1985); and it is one which is repeated in this novel, with added sexual significance since Hester recalls her father telling her stories 'in a deep voice about the great red fox and brother wolf' (p. 141).

In the Perrault version ('Little Red Riding Hood') the combination of orality, the sexual, and the bestial is implicit: the young girl accepts the wolf's offer to 'come into bed with me'. When she does, she is gobbled up.<sup>10</sup> The wolf's victory through oral gratification differs from 'Little Red Cap', in which rescue is promised when the huntsman opens the belly of the wolf and sees 'the little red cap shining' (Grimms, pp. 220-221). Bettelheim observes that: 'all through "Little Red Cap," in the title as in the girl's name, the emphasis is on the color red, which she openly wears. Red is the color symbolizing violent emotions, very much including sexual ones'.<sup>11</sup> Violence is associated with sex in this quasi-Caesarean re-enactment of the huntsman opening the belly of the wolf. The image of blood and birth coalesces in two images which involve Hester, but in which (precisely because she is a child) she fails to re-enact rescue. One image is that of the blood-stained Hilde, when Hester 'avoided Hilde's terrible pain and loneliness' and 'limped back to her own room, instead of going to [her father's] room or her grandmother's' (p. 122). The second, more direct manifestation of ineffectual rescue (and frustrated birth) occurs when Hester

<sup>10</sup> Charles Perrault, 'Little Red Riding Hood' in *Perrault's Classic French Fairy Tales*, trans. copyright Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1967 (New York: Meredith Press, 1967), pp. 33-37.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 173.



is playing with her doll:

... once when Hester put her doll, brought on purpose to have an outing in Mr Bird's pram, into the pram it had slipped down into the deep well [*sic*] of the pram in a most awkward way. Hester tried to rescue the doll but it was wedged somehow. She poked at the small round head of the doll marking and scratching, without meaning to, the sleek shining paint which the doll had for hair . . . . Neither her father nor Mr Bird noticed the emptiness in Hester's arms when it was time to leave. (p. 163)

Unlike Hester, Katherine persistently attempts to enact the rescue of the man down the well, but a rescue is constantly inhibited by Hester. The theme of non-rescue, or no escape, has been noted by A. P. Riemer, who states that:

Being a "displaced person" becomes a complex metaphor throughout Mrs Jolley's work. Most of her major characters are to a greater or lesser extent isolated, perplexed, trapped within a society or an institution which seems a temporary residence or imprisonment, but from which there is no escape.<sup>12</sup>

The theme of non-escape through non-rescue defies the traditional fairytale ending, and in doing so it provides an unease through disjunction, for although echoing familiar utterances the source, or well-spring, of the narrative is not immediately clear. The incident with the doll (which is quite obviously an image of frustrated birth) is magnified into the central drama of the man's head in the well, which can also be seen as a metaphor locating Jolley's intertextualisation of the fairytale:

. . . she was sure she saw a hand grasping the lowest metal rung, the one which was set in the wall of the well at a greater distance below the other rungs. She thought as the water slapped crazily against the stonework that she saw too a man's head which, because of being drenched, was small, sleeked and rounded.

It is difficult to see anything which is partly and, at times, wholly submerged. (p. 148)

Two other tales which contribute to the 'submerged' terror through

<sup>12</sup> A. P. Riemer, 'Displaced Persons: Some Preoccupations in Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction', *Westerly*, No. 2 (June 1986), p. 65.

intertextualising are 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'Rapunzel'. Abandonment and cannibalism are explored in the story of 'Hansel and Gretel', who are left by their step-mother because she cannot afford to feed them, and who fall into the hands of a cannibalistic witch who uses her sweet house to bait children. Hester has housed and fed the orphan Katherine but like the old woman 'leaning on a crutch'<sup>13</sup> in 'Hansel and Gretel', her hospitality has a cost including the doing of all domestic chores; at one point in *The Well* Hester rebukes Katherine:

'No kettle on,' she said, 'no baking done, the stove's black, no fire, nothing at all prepared for our meal. Where's the spinach I told you to wash, eh? What's happened to the cold mutton? What have you been doing Miss?' Hester only used the word 'Miss' when she was annoyed. 'Remember,' she said raising her voice from where she stood leaning on the door post, 'we have urgent work to get done this evening'. (pp. 111-112)

The 'urgent work' is the lowering of Katherine into the well to retrieve stolen money from the dead man's body. Katherine's refusal to go down the well is rewarded with the threat of abandonment and betrayal: Hester threatens to send her to 'the orphanage or prison' (p. 88). Hester is locating a primary source of fear in Katherine, but by doing so reveals her own anxieties. Bettelheim has observed that:

there is no greater threat in life than that we will be deserted, left all alone. Psychoanalysis has named this - man's greatest fear - separation anxiety; and the younger we are, the more excruciating is our anxiety when we feel deserted, for the young child actually perishes when not adequately protected and taken care of. (p. 145)

In articulating her fear of loneliness, Hester articulates the ultimate childhood separation anxiety - the death of her mother - in admitting her fear of 'the hovering loneliness' (p. 45); her fear of losing Katherine is implicit in the

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<sup>13</sup> 'Hansel and Gretel' in *Favourite Fairy Tales Told in Germany*, retold from the Brothers Grimm by Virginia Haviland (1959; rpt. London: The Bodley Head, 1969), p. 63.

song-titles in the cassette she buys her: "I can't let you go" and "Never Never Say Goodbye to me" and "Hold me Just a little longer" ' (p. 105). With her land sold, all Hester has of value to others is money, and that seems to be in danger from a conniving Katherine. Yet Katherine's very independence appears threatened. In 'Hansel and Gretel' the child who is listening to the story is told that 'although the old woman seemed to be so friendly, she was really a wicked old witch';<sup>14</sup> in Jolley's tale for adults it is the *orphan* who is implicated as antagonist. By inviting us to share the 'witch's' sympathetic background as a crippled and isolated child, Jolley creates a converse situation in which the reader's terror rises up from the inability to locate the source of evil - unlike Katherine, who tells Hester: 'I do know what's good and what's not good - I know a bad thing. Miss Harper I know when a person's bad' (p. 138). This adds to the reader's sense of displacement and terror, because Jolley has blurred familiar symbolic childhood associations.

Part of fairytale's attraction is that beautiful and rich people populate large and splendid places; which frequently gives rise to the mistaken notion that fairytales are merely pleasant and childlike. Hester muses that 'in ordinary circumstances there was a fairy-tale enchantment about the idea of secret streams and caves beneath the ordinary world of wheat paddocks, roads and towns' (p. 131). But one doesn't have to dig too deep to disturb the subterranean: the co-presence of disability and evil in fairytales is legion, and significant, as when we carelessly speak of something or someone who is as 'ugly as sin'. The Brothers Grimm's tale 'Maid Maleen' tells of the false bride 'whose face was as ugly as her heart was wicked';<sup>15</sup> and there is the bad-tempered, ungrateful, wicked dwarf in 'Snow White and Rose Red'. In the English folktale 'The Three Heads of the Well' the queen is hump-backed;

<sup>14</sup> 'Hansel and Gretel' in *Favourite Fairy Tales Told in Germany*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. 237.

her daughter is club-footed, and both are envious and ill-natured.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover:

Rumpelstiltskin is deformed, the Wicked witch of the West in the Land of Oz wears an eyepatch, the witch in Hansel and Gretel 'leans upon a crutch,' and the witch who gives Snow White the poisoned apple must first change from a beautiful queen to a 'hunchbacked,' wart-nosed old lady to accomplish an evil deed.<sup>17</sup>

'Rapunzel' is a tale of sexual repression and release: a young girl is given to a witch by her mother in exchange for the ransom after which Rapunzel is named. She is best known for her long rope of hair that she lowers from the tower in order that her prince can climb up. Hester has a dream in which it is she who appears to be Rapunzel, with Katherine in the role of witch: 'frightened [Hester] put both hands up and felt the smooth ropes of hair to be tight and rigid. She knew at once they were wound, in and out, round the struts of the chair back'; she is 'terrified by the knowledge of silent and sinister action' (p. 147) in much the same way as the reader is silently worked upon. Rapunzel's lowered hair allowed her to know her prince; and clearly there are analogies to be drawn between the 'smooth ropes' of Hester's hair and the rope purchased at Grossman's store: 'the rope suggesting rescue' (p. 151). Hester might once have been able to place herself in the role of Rapunzel; but (as it is made known in the tale of Peter Pan) age dictates a change in roles.

In 'Little Red Cap', 'Hansel and Gretel', and 'Rapunzel' the mother has failed to nourish and protect her female offspring; the fairytales therefore share a narrative consistent with Hester's own childhood experience. Hester

<sup>16</sup> 'The Three Heads of the Well', retold by James Orchard Halliwell, in *Northern Lights: Legends, Sagas and Folk-tales*, ed. Kevin Crossley-Holland (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Margolis and Arthur Shapiro, 'Countering Negative Images of Disability in Classical Literature', *English Journal*, 76 (March 1987), 21.

has grown from 'the petted, nimble and courageous little crippled girl' (p. 150) into the selfish crippled witch. The three fairytales provide widely familiar material that contributes to the level of terror in *The Well*. They juxtapose youthful females with aged women (two are witches), and all three stress a primitive orality in which the child is exchanged for food ('Rapunzel'); abandoned, then very nearly cannibalised ('Hansel and Gretel'); or eaten despite an offering of food ('Little Red Riding Hood'). Katherine, an archetypal orphan (we never learn her surname), is about to lose her job at Grossman's store. Mrs Grossman tells Hester 'Orphans eat you out of the house, you see' (p. 8). Hester (who 'did not regard herself as a mother or even as an aunt. She did not attempt to give any name to the relationship' (p. 14) ) takes Katherine home, where they frequently indulge in oral gratification - first at the primitive hunter-gatherer level:

Sometimes Hester sat with the poultry noticing in her mind which bird would be the best to knock off next for a good meal. With the shiny toe of her black orthopaedic boot she stroked a nearby cat and narrowed her eyes in the direction of an exceptionally greedy and plump white duck. (p. 38)

and then in civilised domesticity, after the duck's demise:

They spent hours preparing piquant orange and plum sauces for roast ducklings. Hester, coating the succulent servings with a remarkable glaze, felt that she was doing justice to the creatures she had reared. They made variations on salad dressings with thinly spliced avocado pears, crushed garlic and black olives. (p. 39)

At its most basic level, existence can be sustained through the gratification of two needs: sex and food. The fairytales already cited are concerned with one or the other, and sometimes both. Fiedler puts it neatly: 'in the fairy tale, bliss and misery are not equated with Christian Salvation and Damnation, Hell and Heaven - but with Getting Married and Being Eaten'.<sup>18</sup> The Getting Married

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<sup>18</sup> Leslie Fiedler, special introd. *Beyond the Looking Glass: Extraordinary Works of*

motif exists in *The Well* as a present and absent threat that is compensated for by indulgent feasts. The connection between the two motifs is made clearer on examining those fairytales in which the motif of Being Eaten predominates:

Such stories normally treat not the eating of noble enemies by their conquerors (as practised, for instance, by American Indians), or of the hero-father by his rival sons (as analysed by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*), but the very reverse of the latter: the eating of children by parent-surrogates, which is to say, the inhibition of the future by re-incorporation of what has already been separated from its past by the pangs of birth. One metaphorical name for this is "incest", one "cannibalism". In the world of myth, they become finally a single terror. (Fiedler, p. xiv)

In *The Well*, fairytales flow beneath the fictionalised 'real-world' incidents of the novel, providing a parallel sub-text of terror through the intersection of key motifs, which then expand, or spill over, into the adult fiction. 'Incest' and 'cannibalism', implying the devouring of one by another, loyalty notwithstanding, would appear to be topics reserved for the adult domain. But one of the fairytales that is re-interpreted in the light of childhood experiences and re-placed into an adult context, is 'Cat and Mouse in Partnership'. Though the tale is openly (though obliquely) referred to by Jolley and so would appear to have surfaced from its subterranean depths, it is not intact. It involves a significantly changed *personal* cast. The tale tells how a cat (its gender varies in the different versions of the tale) once met a mouse: 'she professed great love and friendship for her and said that they should keep house together'. The cat eats the vat of winter food, while pretending she has been to the christenings of kittens named Top Off, Half Gone, and All Gone. The cat finally devours the mouse, since 'verily, that is the way of the world'.<sup>19</sup> Hester thinks about:

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*Fairy Tale And Fantasy*, ed. and introd. Jonathan Cott (New York: The Stonehill Publishing, 1973), p. xiv.

<sup>19</sup> *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. 47.

the fox who called out at intervals, *'Top Off, Half Gone' and 'All Gone.'* There were times when Hester felt she was on the edge of a memory which was about to be revealed. And then suddenly there was no revelation, only a closing off of the memory. Why did the fox call out these strange names? Somewhere in her mind Hester remembered the fox was a mid-wife but this only added to the mystery of his shoutings. (pp. 141-142)

There is no fox in 'Cat and Mouse in Partnership', though the words uttered by the cat are identical to those recalled by Hester. A fox does appear in 'The Gingerbread Boy' which promises safety to the Gingerbread Boy but devours him. In one version the Gingerbread Boy's last words are: ' "Dear me! . . . I am a quarter gone!" The next minute he said, "Why, I am half gone!" The next minute he said, "My goodness gracious, I am three-quarters gone!" '20 The terror arises not from the fox's victory and the Gingerbread Boy's demise, but in the realisation that it *must* be so - gingerbread boys are intended for eating, which is also the conclusion of the Cat and Mouse since, as already quoted, 'verily, that is the way of the world'. Hester confuses fairytale with childhood half-remembrances of her father (the fox who 'was a mid-wife') and the blood-stained governess, Hilde Herzfeld. Both tales celebrate oral gratification, which implies the devouring and death of something; full genital heterosexual gratification is traditionally the death of virginity, with the possibility of aborting - a death-in life. The two can be bluntly summarised in the universal parental lie and biological fallacy that states 'there's a baby in mummy's tummy'. Hester's confusion of fairytale is a fulfilment of her father's observations that 'people often judged by what they feared or knew existed in themselves' (p. 116). The memory is, significantly, *closed off* just as is the well; as Hester tells Mr Borden: 'I'd like it closed over completely' (p. 153). Symbolically Hester is attempting to

<sup>20</sup> Sara Cone Bryant, 'The Gingerbread Boy', in Raymond Briggs, *The Fairy Tale Treasury* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1972), p. 11.

close over her childhood memories; but the adult is built upon the child; just as it follows that adult tales are built upon the myths and the fairytales of childhood. Memories can not be shut off, because all memories derive from something almost pre-historical, if we are to believe Gaston Bachelard:

Childhood is the well of being . . . The well is an archetype, one of the gravest images of the human soul. That black and distant water can mark a childhood. It has reflected an astonished face. Its mirror is not that of the fountain. A narcissus can take no pleasure there. Already in his image living beneath the earth, the child does not recognize himself. A mist is on the water; plants which are too green frame the mirror. A cold blast breathes in the depths. The face which comes back in this night of the earth is a face from another world. Now, if a memory of such reflections comes into a memory, isn't it the memory of a before-world? <sup>21</sup>

The answer to Bachelard's question is 'yes', in the context of Jolley's novel; and it is why I argue that integral worlds exist in Jolley's work rather than, as Daniel would have it, contestant worlds (Daniel, p. 295); Hester's memories are informed by a before-world. What is more, she continues the fairytale tradition by orally presenting the before-world to a young audience, feeding and expanding their own instinctive knowledge. The terror that *The Well* incites arises from its capacity to work on the reader through fairytale narratives that are already firmly fixed in the reader's subconscious, and which can never be entirely closed off. It is our own well of being; it is there for every author to tap into.

Jolley, the external author ('Jolley is meditating, 'hunched up' in this novel too<sup>22</sup>) is peering over Hester's shoulder as she reads the myth of Telephasse. We are told that 'she turned the pages with impatience to find the artist's audacious embellishment of the myth. Of course there were no

<sup>21</sup> Gaston Bachelard, 'The Poetics of Reverie', quoted in Jonathan Cott, introd. 'Notes on Fairy Faith and the Idea of Childhood', *Beyond the Looking Glass: Extraordinary Works of Fairy Tale & Fantasy*, p. xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Daniel, p. 291.



pictures. In her mind she had made them from the words' (p. 143). In keeping with her part as an instrument of the author's application of textual translation, Hester exists in the novel as the bogie-[wo]man in disguise. Mrs Borden threatens her children with Hester: 'She'll get one of you if you don't keep quiet! She'll get all of youses, that's what' (p. 173). Hester's presence creates a *disquiet*, through the device of the disability, which along with other motifs - the red hat; the 'hats of brilliant green or red and black felt [which] were like the hats fairytale huntsmen wore' (p. 71); the tap-tapping refrain, with the response 'not the wind' (p. 83) - all help to re-create the familiar archetypes of childhood terror. The most obvious link between subconscious childhood fictions, sexual taboos, and having 'gone through all the experiences' is Katherine's opening song in which the words attain an interesting sexual connotation given the content of the novel: 'Dinga Donga Bella Yair Yair / Pussa inna wella Yair Yair Yair' (p. 4).

Encouraged to go on by Mrs Borden and to scare them out of their wits, Hester begins her tale for her 'child audience', at the very moment that Jolley completes her tale for adults; though Hester protests: 'I really know nothing about children. I am not used to telling stories to children' (p. 175). We the adults take the listening place of the child and are told (several) re-shaped fairytales.<sup>23</sup> The re-shaping, an integral part of the process of folk fairytale, results from 'being told millions of times, by different adults to all kinds of other adults and children' (Bettleheim, p. 150). Hester is fulfilling the writer-character's advice that 'the story has a narrator who has gone through all the experiences in the novella and is relating them' (p. 157); which is a similar interpretation of folktale and fairytale to a process in which 'the telling of the

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<sup>23</sup> For instance the key Hester wears puts one in mind of 'Bluebeard', a tale analogous to the English tale 'Mr. Fox'. See Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 103.

story to a child, to be most effective, has to be an interpersonal event, shaped by those who participate in it' (Bettelheim, p. 151). As Bettelheim points out, 'ideally, the telling of a fairy story should be an interpersonal event into which adult and child enter as equal partners' (p. 152).

There are two points to consider here: first, the advice of the character in the novel, who is a writer, that 'the story has a narrator who has gone through all the experiences'; this is taken up by Hester the archetypal witch, relating a tale built upon her own 'real' experiences that are bound to the personal prototypes as projected through the fairytale. Secondly, Hester's tale has the directive that it be for children and 'scare 'em witless' (p. 175). Consider the job done, for the witch has stepped out of the familiar boundaries placed on her by the fairytale narrative with its 'safe dangers of cosily imagined evil' (p. 144) and its theme of rescue. Distinctions between Good and Evil are blurred, and rescue is not forthcoming. What has occurred is:

the wish that is revealed in tales which evoke pity for the handicapped (including not just *A Christmas Carol*, but such other childhood favourites climaxing in quasi-miraculous cures as *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden*), turns out to be disconcertingly similar to that which cues nightmare stories based on a fear of them; a wish that there were no handicapped, that they would all finally go away.<sup>24</sup>

Fairytales are here to stay, and with them the image of the crippled hag as threatening, particularly when the crippled hag narrates *her* side of the story through the screen of her 'usual honesty'. Fairytales are often directed at the pre-pubescent, and often express tabooed deep longings; when we are young and experience the cripple in traditional oral literature we are prepared,

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<sup>24</sup> Leslie Fiedler, 'Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts' in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*, Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled in collaboration with the United Nations, October 27, 1981, p. 15.

subconsciously and by the content of the literature, for the evil-incarnate to be conquered. As civilised adults we are encouraged early in the narrative of *The Well* to approach the crippled Hester with a degree of pity, if not tolerant acceptance. And we do; her situation seems to require pity as does her childhood background. But tolerant acceptance is learned; it is preceded by the primitive response of fear. As Fiedler observes, the handicapped cue us into nightmare stories in which we wish the handicapped would all go away: Hester reawakens dark longings. The reader is left with a dis-ease that is pessimistic precisely because it seems incurable: Hester the crippled hag can never retrieve her past in order to re-create herself, neither in fairytale nor in this tale, it seems.

## Chapter Nine

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### Arthur 'Art' Blackberry

Throughout the novels explored in this study we have seen how writers have exploited the mythos of 'dwarfism', beyond its obvious characteristic of size. Dwarfism carries with it many fictions, including that of an association with some Other such as a giant-figure, who is often a kindred spirit. As we saw, in *Swords and Crowns and Rings* Ruth Park's creative use of Jack Lang's name and his 'Big Fella' reputation demonstrates that such giantism does not have to be factual; the concept suffices, and perpetuates the stable bipolar image. In *The Year of Living Dangerously* the dwarf Billy Kwan locates the prototype of dwarf-giant relationships in the mythic figure of the ancient dwarf-figure Pelles, who was split into two. In James McQueen's novel *Hook's Mountain* (1982)<sup>1</sup> size as fact and as concept is in constant interplay through the split protagonists, Lachlan Hook and Arthur Blackberry, though neither character is strictly a giant or a dwarf. They are included in this study for two reasons: because the dwarf mythology is consciously drawn on in the portrayal of the crypto-dwarf, Arthur Blackberry; and because the crypto-dwarf-giantism is a consciously drawn device depicting characters on the margins of mental and physical normality.

McQueen's interest in folklore can be traced in at least two of his other works. The contemporary British folktale, 'The Stolen Corpse', which has

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<sup>1</sup> James McQueen, *Hook's Mountain* (1982, rpt; Ringwood: Penguin, 1989). All subsequent references are to this edition.

its origins as recently as 1963 and which is said to be fast becoming 'an international migratory legend',<sup>2</sup> seems to surface in his short story 'The Brown Paper Coffin' (1988).<sup>3</sup> In another of his short stories, 'The Sinner Eater' (1981),<sup>4</sup> the makings of the Arthur character can be discerned in the dwarf character who tells himself: 'I've been appointed by some strange genetic order [as] the duct for stangers' transgressions' (p. 116). As noted in an earlier chapter, in pagan times a dwarf was expected to take upon himself the evils which afflicted the community.<sup>5</sup> If we use Leonard Kriegel's categorisation of types, we find that the dwarf is used as a charity cripple by the townsfolk: they sin; they seek retribution through charity. The dwarf (the infrahuman) becomes their scapegoat. Through charity to him the 'sinning' townsfolk are cleansed and forgiven. The dwarf's final refusal to accept the charity of Evans, who has run over a dog, signals his refusal to continue in the role of the sin-eater, and signals the struggle of the human emerging from the symbolic cast imposed on him. The subject-matter, implicit in the title, indicates an acute awareness of many of the associations surrounding the supposed function of dwarfism. As a further example of McQueen's conscious use of myth and folklore, I give as example what could serve as a folklore blueprint for McQueen's novel:

From the East came strong invaders, economically and mechanically better equipped than the small natives. As these new people conquered and settled, the dominant features of their civilization become the much-hated incursions on the little people's original environment. Weaker in strength and numbers, they were forced to retreat into the swamps and islands, driven back by the clearing of their forests for the organized agricultural settlements of their invaders. Later came the passionately loathed church bells, as Christianity overcame the old religions. According to popular belief, the little men hated agriculture, the clearing

<sup>2</sup> Katharine M. Briggs, *A Sampler of British Folk-Tales* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> James McQueen, 'The Brown Paper Coffin', *Island*, No. 36 (Spring 1988), pp. 52-57.

<sup>4</sup> James McQueen, 'The Sin Eater' in *The Escape Machine* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981), pp. 114-122.

<sup>5</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 155.

of forests, and the ringing of church bells - anything, in fact, which disturbed the peace of their underground kingdoms.<sup>6</sup>

Arthur is an island-dwelling dwarf, placed in the environmental drama of logging disputes: he lives apart from the accepted notion of Christianity: he 'remembered that it was Sunday. He would go later and sit on the fence outside the church (why had he hidden himself for so long on Sundays, like some physical blasphemy?) and show himself, remind them all that they had perhaps certain unadmitted imperfections' (p. 7).

I claim that *Hook's Mountain* is a much more conscious project than commentators seem to have noticed, and that a reading of the novel which sees as optimistic the final militaristic last stand is a reading that fails to account for very specific indications in the text of a quite different point of view. Commentary on the novel includes that of the Tasmanian Green politician, Bob Brown, who, as quoted on the front cover of the 1989 Penguin printing of McQueen's novel, says it is 'a novel of stunning perception coming out of the controversy of logging Australia's forests', which suggests a novel targeted at a Greenie readership; but when we are dealing with a book in which trees are described anthropomorphically, and people are described as melting into or becoming like trees, this would be a limited point of view. D. R. Burns describes the plot as one we are perhaps meant to enjoy as a sort of a 'joke', and he wonders if the novel promotes a Clint Eastwood ethos of male-adventurism to assist readability<sup>7</sup>; similarly, Rory Barnes says 'McQueen has written one of those catharsis-through-gun-play novels'<sup>8</sup>, about war neurosis.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Human Link: Dwarfs', *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition* (1974; rpt. London: Octopus-Macdonald, 1988), pp. 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> D. R. Burns, 'Prick out of Plumb' *Australian Book Review*, No 44 (September 1982), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Rory Barnes, 'Hook's Mission on the Mountain', *The National Times* (June 13-19, 1982), p. 23.

Certainly, the issue of war and its effect on the individual is central to the novel. It is an issue that is part of a complex construction which highlights not, as Burns claims, a type of gun-happy goon (Burns, p. 24), but the power of war, which can be as insidious as an infectious disease, which is how it is portrayed in the novel. The gun-happy goon is an unhappy, out-of-control displaced person who is expected to live peaceably in a world that has taught him to live otherwise.

In general, war experience is open only to those with physically normal bodies. In *Hook's Mountain*, Lachlan Hook, the 61-year-old war veteran (who has the body of a 30-year-old) tries to 'isolate' himself (in keeping with the disease analogy) by moving to Myola, Tasmania, to live on a hill. Hook is paired with Arthur Blackberry, the physically abnormal being whose body condemns him to peace - 'condemns' him, because Blackberry is a dwarf who wishes he had been a soldier. Yet I question whether this novel is about the positive mateship between two military rejects - a crypto-dwarf and a forcibly-discharged war veteran - culminating in some sort of 'cleansing salving, last stand' as one critic has claimed (Barnes, p. 23). The ending, where the lone dwarf sitting on a hill is about to do battle with the monsters of machinery, lends itself to an element of dis-ease in this reader; has the novel created a situation in which the reader has been affected by the message? How? And what is that message?

There are four main points to be made to support this discussion of *Hook's Mountain*: the first is that *Hook's Mountain* is a highly conscious text. No novel in which a character named Blackberry, who is cut down as a result of his relationship with a Mr Hook, could be called merely a realist-adventure novel. We are told of the potential danger of their relationship: '[Arthur Blackberry] could see on the hill across the valley the figure of Hook

... slashing savagely at a blackberry hedge with great double-handed pendulum strokes of the slash hook (p. 31)'. We are also put in mind of *Peter Pan* - of the dwarf as perpetual child, confronted by the evil Captain Hook, himself part man, part prosthesis. It is a relationship that has been noted but not explored by Burns (Burns, p. 23).

Secondly, dwarfism is used metaphorically in the novel. As Shari Thurer has observed: 'physical deformity in literature and art is almost never unencumbered by the trappings of metaphor.'<sup>9</sup> The dwarf Arthur Blackberry is a man who can outwit men equipped with the latest weapons technology by throwing pinecones (p. 177) and stones (p. 199); he is a man concerned that the wallabies might get shot (p. 176). In this way the dwarf is used metaphorically to represent nature and non-violence.

Thirdly, there is a conscious use of dwarf mythology in the text; and the dwarf in mythology is often depicted as part of a whole, or as one part of a split-protagonist. The other part of the split-protagonist is frequently portrayed as a giant. This active dualism operates, for example, in *The Vivisector*, *Swords and Crowns and Rings*, and *The Year of Living Dangerously*; and is used in *Hook's Mountain* as the framework in which inter-relationships between the dwarf and the giant are built to support the major themes of the novel.

Fourthly, the dualistic interdependency between Hook and Blackberry amounts to, and is often described as, a series of cross-infections. For instance, when Hook balances a boiling kettle on the bare palm of his hand, with no apparent injury, we find that shortly after, 'A small blister of warmth broke in Arthur then' (p. 19). It is a subtle moment, easily missed; but one which attests to the very real physical effect Hook has on Arthur. The

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<sup>9</sup> Shari Thurer, Sc.D. 'Disability and Monstrosity: A Look at Literary Distortions of Handicapping Conditions', *Rehabilitation Literature*, 41, No. 1-2 (Jan-Feb 1980), p. 12.



contagion of war, the ultimate subverter of human value and the producer of subversive products, is transferred from Hook to the would-be-soldier Arthur Blackberry, and, possibly, to a certain type of reader-adventurer; resulting in what I am arguing is a less than optimistic outcome in the novel.

I take the point raised by Shari Thurer that 'nothing is more punitive than giving a physical handicap a meaning' (Thurer, p. 12); McQueen's concern is with the fictions primarily surrounding the archetypal dwarf, in which the dissolution of the dwarf symbolises the loss of myth to machinery. McQueen's thesis of the repetitiousness of the processes of life, in which violence and confrontation are a seemingly inescapable condition for the human male, is captured in the novel's epigraph, attributed to T.A.G. Hungerford: 'What was going to happen when it all stopped - if it ever did? Who was going to unlearn it for them?' The fictions surrounding the dwarf create a level of meaning beyond a straight narrative reading, though admittedly not beyond accusations of ableism, the term used to describe discrimination of the disabled by the able-bodied.<sup>10</sup>

Technically Arthur is not a dwarf since he stands 'Four-feet-eleven' (p. 24), which, as the dwarf Billy Kwan in *The Year of Living Dangerously* tells us, '[is] the lower limit of normal height in a man' (p. 94). Yet he straddles the line between the infrahuman and the human, since it is the mythos of dwarfism not normal height that is enforced: we are told that Arthur's hands are 'blunt'; his legs 'stubby'; and Ellen Carter (in Hook's brief other-sex encounter in the novel) sees Arthur at first as if 'some troll had invaded the house, as if some small magic man had materialized with the night' (p. 93).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Tuttle, *Encyclopedia of Feminism* (1986; rpt. London: Arrow, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Ellen's observation further suggests the mythographic twinning of Arthur and Hook, since in myth trolls were originally of giant stature. See *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition*, p. 56.

Attributes traditionally given to the dwarf in faery, and in folk-tales of various nationalities, as well as in much of Arthurian romance, are that the dwarf is highly intelligent<sup>12</sup>; strong (Guerber, p. 7); capable of making himself invisible (Guerber, p. 240); and is associated with precious metals and mining. Arthur's intelligence is substantiated: he was once 'the best student in the tiny school that still stood'; he is surrounded by books given to him by the valley people, who yet insist on 'perpetuating the myth of his illiteracy' although 'reading, he thought, was reading, and knowing was knowing, and he was aware, often enough, of the strange light trapped behind the dull bars of his heavy forehead' (p. 4).

Arthur is strong enough to pick up the unconscious Hook, carry him up a steep track, and lay him down, gently, on the sofa (p. 141); a type of invisibility is implied when he can steal sandwiches from the front seat of a police-car during a stake-out (p. 182), and when he returns home after the Hook killing, we are told: 'No one saw him go, no one saw him return' (p. 210). He is most invisible, though, in his positive relationship with the environment: 'the high bracken and prickly mimosa seemed to swallow him, parting as if by magic before his passage. He did not walk so much as drift; squat, silent, grey as the evening; almost invisible, almost inaudible, and completely at home' (p. 26).

The association of the dwarf with mining in myth becomes in *Hook's Mountain* a weekly foraging at the tip, by which Arthur supplements his income with finds such as 'seven brass light switches, a clump of twisted copper wire' (p. 15); the mythological determinant of the dwarf and metal forging is poetically suggested when 'light and fire moulds and remoulds his face' (p. 67), and is keenly expressed when Arthur remembers that: 'his

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<sup>12</sup> H. A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen* (1908; rpt. London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1948), p. 10.

much-tempered woodheap axe that a month ago had cracked when he had burned the last of many broken handles from its socket, dropped it cherry red into a bucket of water. He wondered about Hook's temper, and how many times it had been tried' (p. 32).

The dwarf-metal myth is summoned in language that is typical of McQueen's joint use of the literal and the figurative. As the above quotation indicates there is the suggestion that there is a 'crack' in Arthur's personality: it is a fatal flaw which proceeds from his abnormality, since it is precisely his dwarfism that has excluded him from military enlistment, and left him with only fantasies about soldiering; Hook (whose fortune was made, coincidentally, in the mining boom (p. 118) ), is Arthur's opportunity for wish-fulfilment. It is a fatal attraction for these two military rejects - for Hook too is a reject, having been once a valued service-man, but now discharged.

Their disparate likenesses are not coincidental, but integral to the device of the split protagonist. Arthur is presented as a physically abnormal product of nature; Lachlan Hook the physically, and inwardly, perfect product of the war machinery, in which war - the ultimate statement of subversion - produces a subversive product. Discharged from the army he continues minor acts of subversion by bucking the system: when building his house on his land on Blue Hill, Tasmania, he refuses to obtain a building permit, or a logging permit, or a fire permit. These petty but telling incidents prepare the way for the final violent anti-system climax of the man's life.

In her book *The Body in Pain* (1985) Elaine Scarry claims that war is an industry that produces: its product is injury, since 'injury is the thing every exhausting piece of strategy and every single weapon is designed to bring into being'.<sup>13</sup> The notion that war produces injury, or change (whether physical or immaterial) in an organism is one that lends itself to an analogy with

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<sup>13</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 73.

disease. Both have a shared vocabulary. Disease, like war, is a disturbance in the normal structure or function of an organism. The agents capable of causing disease are universal, and capable of attacking the body's natural defences at any time. Hook at 61 appears to be a man of 30 'and a bloody fit 30 at that' (p. 96); there is no obvious external evidence of physical injury. Yet a physical disruption has occurred since the man has been transformed by war into an efficient killing machine. His Lee Enfield .303 calibre rifle, is described as 'the rifle of two world wars, a mankiller, a welding of steel and wood and brass that fused inert elements into the heady and frightening promise of violence and death' (p. 7). The 'heady and frightening promise' is reflected in Hook whose 'hair was thick, steel-grey, curling a little round his ears; his face weathered the colour of old oiled wood' (p. 9.); and whose skin has a 'deep-grained patina' (p. 33).

Arthur, allied with the natural elements, is wary and fearful of the machine in the man: 'for in all the stranger's movements there had seemed a savage, almost a frantic, haste; a haste that sat oddly with the controlled grace of his movements. To Arthur it seemed a kind of perversity, as if a fine machine were running ungoverned and beyond safe limits' (p. 11). As was previously noted, the most feared diseases are not those that are fatal, but those that 'transform the body into something alienating'.<sup>14</sup> Hook is infected, and the man, like war, settles battles by producing injury. Significantly, the mythological synergy of the giant and the dwarf makes the dwarf of the piece the perfect receptacle for the contagion of Hook's disease, his war neurosis. Hook recognises that Arthur might have something to give him, when he questions Arthur about whether he is happy: "'Oh, yes, I suppose, sometimes. . . ." "Good", said Hook. "Maybe it's catching" ' (p.

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, 'AIDS and Its Metaphors', *The New York Review* (27 October, 1988), p. 89.

30). But Hook's contagion is overwhelming; it has found its perfect host. As Ellen tells Hook: 'You and Arthur, in some ways you're like the two sides of a coin. Because you're so much alike in so many ways. Almost as if you're both made of the same metal, just stamped differently' (p. 121); to which Hook replies: 'Arthur wanted to be a soldier, you know. Wishes he had been' (p. 121). When Arthur asks Hook about the war, the paternalistic image of the dwarf as child is made obvious:

Hook smiled to himself a little, and in the beginning answered Arthur as he might have answered an inquisitive child, as soldiers have always answered inquisitive children. . . . Hook finished sawing the architrave and looked up at the heavy earnest face that was creased, as a child's might be, in engrossed solemnity. (pp. 65-66)

In these two misfits we have the mythic pairing of giant and dwarf, or of might and midget, transformed into machine and myth. Standing a foot taller than Arthur (p. 13), Lachlan Hook's giantism is suggested: 'it was then that [Arthur] became aware for the first time that there might be something distinctive and special about the man. For it seemed to him almost as if the hill had suddenly been flattened and the stranger was walking on level ground' (p. 10). Ellen notices that '[Hook] walked quickly, long-paced, soft-footed, straight and seeming taller than he was' (p. 97). Size as fact and as concept, with the suggested connotations and denotations implicit in the words 'big' and 'small', is in constant play: 'You're a big man,' said Arthur. 'You know, you're so much bigger, really...but the trouble is that you're so much bigger that what happens in other people always seems smaller to you' (p. 143). The conscious use of height in the text is reflected in the protagonists' houses: whereas Arthur lives in the valley in a 'tiny low-roofed cottage', Hook lives on a hill; he needs height. Arthur notes that Hook's house when built '[would be] like a watch tower . . . it would be a house that

*commanded* isolation, a vantage point which no one might approach unseen' (p. 32; McQueen's italics). Apart from the watch-tower's being a suitable structure for a giant, it suggests that this man wants others under his gaze: he wishes to exert control. The detail that Hook builds his house facing the cold of the south because of 'that view' (p. 13) is one of the many ambiguous statements that appears to humanise Hook by making him seem aesthetically sensitive. However, when Hook learns of the timber clearing on Blue Hill his reaction is possessive: 'They can't clear the whole bloody hill . . . Christ, it's my front yard, my window, my fucking *world!*' (p. 35; McQueen's italics). Hook's need for the panoptic view is part of a power-fantasy tendency in his personality, in which he wants to control all that is within his range of sight. Hook's outside toilet has 'a window set in the wall, no curtain, no blind' (p. 84), again suggesting the moral superiority of the man who enjoys a view during his bowel movements; but this detail of the loo-with-a view is another example of Hook's need for perspective: it also reveals a man who while going through the motions wants to gaze at the upper limits. It is his attempt to deny, or at least divide the scatological from the eschatological; Hook says elsewhere:

The body. He had thought of it that way for as long as he could remember; almost as a separate entity, a thing to be used, pushed, driven. And he had believed for a very long time that he could make it do much more than seemed possible. As long as he never admitted it as part of the self. (p. 48)

We know that one of the reasons why Hook gives Arthur the job of emptying his dunny-can is that during the war Hook 'crawled into a Japanese shit-pit and had to lie there all night' (p. 14); but how can we avoid concluding that Hook thinks it is appropriate for a deformed person to do it? When Hook offers consolation for Arthur's dwarfness by proclaiming Arthur is merely a 'man with short legs' (p. 24), he illustrates that things can't be changed by

asking:

'Why isn't shit sky-blue?' said Hook suddenly.

'What?'

'Why isn't shit the colour of the sky?' (p. 24)

Hook's partial equation of dwarfism, or the abnormal body, with excrement is consistent with Hanoch Livneh's comment that one of the elements that connects the abnormal body of the fictional character with the abnormal body of the character in real life 'must be their subordination into an infrahuman status'; in which the 'distinct line that we so vehemently adhere to between human existence and animal existence is suddenly rendered inappropriate'.<sup>15</sup> Arthur is described as doggy-like (pp. 37; 157; 182), and drizzle 'fur[s] his thick eyebrows' (p. 16).<sup>16</sup> Livneh, a doctor of rehabilitation counselling, concludes that the existence of the so-called infrahuman serves as a reminder of 'the duality of human existence, the duality of life and death, human and nonhuman' (Livneh, p. 282). The deformed are reminders of this duality not only in fiction but, according to Livneh's observations, also in life. If, as Shari Thurer suspects of literature in general, 'the metaphoric use of disability is so entrenched that it is not noticed' (Thurer, p. 12), and yet, if as I have shown, McQueen is consciously exploiting the metaphor, then what we have here is disability as a consciously wrought device that capitalises on the reader's subconscious prejudices, and one which provides a powerful subversive element at work in the novel.

We are told that, technically, Arthur is physically normal; but nevertheless we are led to see Hook's attempts to treat Arthur as an 'equal' to be a positive gesture, since one ableistic assumption is that a dwarf would

<sup>15</sup> Hanoch Livneh, 'Disability and Monstrosity: Further Comments', *Rehabilitation Literature*, 41, No. 11-12 (Nov-Dec 1980), p. 281.

<sup>16</sup> The Arthur Blackberry character is based on an actual person, who is also described in animal terms by McQueen as a 'tiny creased doggy man'. See James McQueen, 'Hook's Country', *Overland*, No. 98 (1985), p. 35.

rather be a giant. Hook offers the dwarf a job, rides from the garbage tip, food, friendship, and even a new name; these incidents act to humanise Hook in the mind of the reader, and seem to indicate that the Hook-Blackberry relationship is a positive one. But on Arthur's first sighting of Hook, Arthur cannot work and 'neglected his cooking' (p. 11); Hook is interfering with the small contrivances - working and eating - by which we all live. Further, Hook's very first contact with the dwarf creates a disturbance: Hook re-names Artie 'Arthur', because as he tells the dwarf, 'Artie's no name for a man' (p. 14). On the one hand, this is Hook's way of asserting control by turning what he does not understand, the infrahuman, into what can be dealt with, the man. Hook's re-naming of the dwarf has a powerful effect that is made enormous by its insidiousness in the guise of equality:

Arthur felt a small wave of shock run through him. It was less at the obvious impropriety of calling Hook by his first name than at the sudden transformation of his own. . . . For a small and magic moment it seemed to him that he stood as tall as Hook, that his thick stumps of legs had stretched themselves and raised him to some sort of equality. He felt notably confused. (p. 14)

This could be taken as an example of the magic of Hook: with a word he is able to transform a midget into a man. Hook acknowledges the 'magic of names', saying: 'it's the magic that *changes animals into men*, and men into something just a little bit different, and hills into mountains' (p. 157; my italics). Again there is the underlying assumption that the dwarf is infrahuman; and that a dwarf would rather be a 'man'.

Part of the magic of names is that naming is a form of possessing. In *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Cookie notes that 'Kwan used [Guy's] name frequently, as though to establish possession'.<sup>17</sup> Hook re-names Arthur; Arthur, on the other hand, is uncomfortable about naming, as if to

<sup>17</sup> C. J. Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978; rpt. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1979), p. 16.



disdain possession:

he was unable to call Hook by any name . . . .

Puzzled at his own unease, he scowled at the sky. He felt himself moving into some strange new alignment with an outsider, and it unsettled him. (p. 29)

Arthur's unwillingness, his unease about this new alignment, is voiced throughout the novel: 'There was something in Hook - a strange directness, a violent bluntness of purpose - that struck coldly at Arthur's core; but again he deferred thinking about it' (p. 29). Arthur's unease - or perhaps to use an appropriate metaphor here, his dis-ease - about Hook is subsumed in the text by the overpowering image of Hook. Yet as Koch notes in a sensitive review of the book, part of the power of McQueen's writing is that 'we are compelled to care about [Hook] to the end'.<sup>18</sup>

So why do we appear to lean towards a preference for the in-human rather than the so-called inhuman in this novel? For in fact two types of abnormal bodies are represented in the text: the dwarf, whose abnormality is a product of nature, and the giant, who, machine-like, is a product of war's corrupting influence. We noted earlier that Susan Sontag has stated that the most feared diseases are not those that are fatal, but those that 'transform the body into something alienating' (Sontag, p. 89). When Hook holds the rifle in his hands, it seems to Ellen '[that] it was no longer Hook standing there . . . but a new and deadly kind of unity, a melding of man and metal' (p. 123). Even Hook's penis is presumed to have shrapnel in it from a war injury (p. 109). Obviously, Hook's association with metal is of a more deadly and threatening purpose than Arthur's. And by now, we can read 'Blackberry' as 'dwarf mythology': Blackberry is connected with the natural environment, not only through name, but through the dwarf myth. He experiences a natural

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<sup>18</sup> C. J. Koch, 'Last Year's Warrior', *Quadrant*, 27, No. 3 (March 1983), p. 86.

fear of the machine in Hook: 'To Arthur it seemed a kind of perversity, as if a fine machine were running ungoverned and beyond safe limits' (p. 11).

Hook's final stand on Blue Hill has little to do with the welfare of the trees: we are told 'he had been seeing the hill, right from the start, not as a hill, *but as a position to be defended*' (p. 149; McQueen's italics). Blue Hill provides a backdrop for the conflict set up by the text, between nature and technology: it is where men are felled (p. 209), and Hook is cut down. Hook, who has carried his 'desperation and a kind of anger' (p. 156) just as, he says, a 'hunchback carries his hump' (p. 156), selects his executioner, controls the means of death, the place, and the time. Hook's so-called defence of Blue Hill results in a second occurrence of re-naming and possessing and transforming nature: Blue Hill is transformed into Hook's Mountain, Hook's own private war memorial; in addition its size is lexically and figuratively elevated, and the hill becomes a mountain.

The mythological determinants of the giant and the dwarf make the dwarf in this novel the perfect recipient for the contagion of Hook's disease. With Hook dead at Arthur's feet on the hill-top, we are told that 'some of the odd light that he had seen so often, for so long, behind Hook's eyes had entered into his own head, lay like a cold mirror of polished steel behind his eyes' (p. 203); on his way down the mountain, Arthur struggles with his new emergent self, thinking: 'I don't even move the same way any more . . . now I'm moving the way *he* did . . . in a kind of slow and terrible dance'; concluding, uncertainly that he is not Hook (p. 204), though later Arthur is described as trying out 'his new spirit' (p. 207) and 'feeling the stiffening of a new metal in himself' (p. 210).

In Arthur's mimicry of Hook's last stand, we assume that in some perverse way Arthur is now no longer infrahuman, but a man (a hill becoming

a mountain?) because he has taken some heroic stance. The end of the novel shows Arthur back up the mountain with Hook's rifle, and moving into a position where he can confront the 'yellow machines that stood a hundred yards away'. The final sentence reads 'a small man on a small hill, afraid at last only of the small things, and not of the day' (p. 214). On the face of it there is the implication that a little man has been inspired to greater things. At the same time the sentence expresses the denial of life and the denial of Arthur's self as a dwarf, since after all, the small things in life are the things we contrive in order to make living possible: working; eating; and so on. And the dwarf who is no longer afraid of the day is no longer a dwarf. If Arthur is a metaphor for nature and non-violence, as I suggested earlier, then the final sentence implies that living and being have been transformed into death and violence. It has been suggested that Hook's gift is 'a gun, a mountain, and a message'.<sup>19</sup> Arthur's first gift to Hook is appropriately bread the symbol of life; Hook's gift of equality has been achieved in a bleak manner, since death is the great equaliser.

But, arguably, part of the ambiguity of the ending has to do with our own readerly prejudices against the deformed person. We have been swayed by the power of the giant, Hook, and a call to action is frequently more compelling than quietism. The final dissolution of the dwarf is a dissolution of all that he has stood for: nature and non-violence have been corrupted. If we feel that Arthur Blackberry's act is a positive one, we are victim to the same fascination with power and destruction as Hook. We have committed the material heresy of applauding the corruption of a non-violent being. And 'heresy' is the right word: Arthur is described by Hook as being 'like a priest, almost' (p. 128); he listens to Hook's confessions; Hook questions himself 'why the hell this sudden concern with honesty?' (p. 66); and Arthur

<sup>19</sup> Anonymously, on the back cover of *Hook's Mountain* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1983).

administers a form of last rites on the hill-top. The narration of the novel opens at the point of its ending in spring 1981, an opening rife with hints of inverted values: the season promises renewal, but there is no Christian festival of Easter during the southern spring: instead there is only the worship of self-destruction by an uncertain apostle. It is Sunday, and Arthur sits reciting what is called the 'rough litany' (p. 6) of his life; he removes Hook's gun from its secret place; we are told that he kneels down with the gun in front of the fire (p. 7), and that 'he had performed the *ritual* for - he thought - nearly thirty weeks. Yet he seemed no easier with the familiar *service*' (p. 7; my italics). To the very last, there is hesitation in the actions and thoughts of the dwarf. Yet it has been my observation that readers are deaf to Arthur's warnings, and tend to ride with the violence, mis-evaluating Hook and even registering approval, as one critic did, as Hook 'outclasses' the Special Weapon's Group (Barnes, p. 23); another admits to being 'drawn steadily into Hook's private zone of passion, stoicism and pain' (Koch, p. 85).

Perhaps such a response can be accounted for in terms of McQueen's having combined an adventure-narrative (in which Hook and the non-human carry the action) with a highly referential and specific text that incorporates and capitalises on the implicit metaphors of deformity. McQueen takes the risk: this text shows a skewed patriarchy, one which destroys its progenitors, and is fatally able to corrupt those who seek to live by other values. But it is grievous to mistake the creative cunning of a shrewd writer who hints at the coming conflict in the opening sentence in the description of the 'river of the bitumen' (p. 1). Perhaps what has happened is that if the text is read for its adventure narrative only, the reader runs the risk of being taken along the same pathway that Hook takes Arthur: that is, the reader is infected with inverted values: we have become just as much a target as the people and the

pinces within *Hook's Mountain*.

This said, it should be noted that though McQueen has stated that *Hook's Mountain* is an 'antiwar book', he adds that it has 'a positive rather than a negative theme', based on the fact that 'Arthur has learned to commit himself. . . .It's not enough to live passively'.<sup>20</sup> And here is the dilemma, for the metaphor has subsumed the character: the dwarf as a metaphor for nature and non-violence succumbs to machinery and violence, though not without a fight; but tied to this is the fact that his heroism is dependent on mimicry of a man who lost control and sight of his primary reason for fighting. On the level of characterisation we must ask why it appears to be better to be a crazy 'man' than a peaceable dwarf.

Perhaps the answer, sinister and unspoken, has everything to do with the ambiguity between primitive wants and civilised expectations; and it is this ambiguity that has given rise to the circuitous attempts to affix a 'positive' or a 'negative' label to the ending of the novel - one which carries a message that clouds interpretation. It derives from the subterranean wish divined by Fiedler in reference to the handicapped everywhere: 'a wish that there were no handicapped, that they would all finally go away'.<sup>21</sup> In the light of Fiedler's comment, Arthur has effectively been got out of the way. The death of a handicapped, disabled, or deformed person is traditionally felt to be a God-sent release from their (read: our) sufferings. Arthur is doing something heroic that raises him to the level of a 'man': the fact that he is a dwarf makes him an apt and willing sacrificial victim elevating himself and relieving us of a troublesome anomaly. Could eugenics then be interpreted as the other end of

<sup>20</sup> C. A. Cranston, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: An Interview with James McQueen', *Island*, No. 45 (Spring 1990), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Leslie Fiedler, 'Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts', in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*. Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled, in collaboration with the United Nations, October 27, 1981, p. 15.

the scale which articulates Fiedler's wish through the muffled mask of science? The possibility is discussed in the next and last chapter of this study.



20/29 Baby Emanuel, aged 12 mths, Hydrocephalic Case P. Thompson '85

Pauline Thompson, 'Baby Emanuel, Aged 12 Months,  
Hydrocephalic Case, 1985'  
At Mother Aubert's Home of Compassion, Wellington.  
By Kind Permission of the artist.

## Chapter Ten

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### Eugenics: A Literary Examination

In Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher* (1934)<sup>1</sup> Linda Hamlin recalls that at age twelve she had curled up in an armchair and picked up one of her uncle's books on hereditary insanity:

Quite alone she ploughed through books which might make a normal adult shudder. The illustrations even more than the letterpress stood out in her brain like fiery pictures long after she had gone to bed at night. She saw the great lolling heads of hydrocephalic babies, the vacant hideous face of the cretin, with its wrinkled skin, open mouth and protruding tongue; a whole gallery of monstrosities, loathsome parodies of humanity. (p. 37)

Paul Hamlin is the hunchbacked uncle who encourages Linda's descent into madness. He fosters abnormality and irrationality; he savours the defective gene of insanity; he charts it on a family tree 'with the names of the "afflicted" in red ink, appearing like plague-spots here and there' (p. 35); he nurtures it in Linda. She is Hamlin's scientific creation: 'he built her brain, her intellect, purely and simply for the increased pleasure he knew he'd get out of its ultimate destruction' (p. 52). Worse than Frankenstein, he dedicates his whole life to creating a monster - in order, one suspects, to validate his father's book on Eugenics which is 'practically a classic' (p. 46). Dark's characterisation of the hunchbacked Hamlin borders on the melodramatic; he is an irretrievable deformity-as-evil conjunction. He twists the traditional distorted-mind, distorted-body, equation: as he says to Linda's mother-in-law, Mrs. Hendon: 'Look at me. Whatever abnormality may have been in my blood, it has concentrated in my body - not my brain' (p. 70). The reader is

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Dark, *Prelude to Christopher* (1934; rpt. Adelaide: Rigby, 1961).



too conditioned to believe this, and indeed Hamlin's sophistry is undermined by cliché - unsurprisingly he turns out to be the biggest monster in the book. In the reader's mind Paul Hamlin's existence functions as a very good case for eugenics.

Eugenics is the claimed 'science' that deals with the improvement of hereditary qualities of breed in plant or animal. Nigel Hendon in *Prelude to Christopher* rationalises its application to humans:

the marvels of efficiency that humanity had perfected, the breeding of animals, the standardisation of machinery, the cataloguing of libraries, the miraculous precision of science. All in order, all beautifully in order, except itself! There it seethed and crawled over the whole face of the globe, like - (he had laughed shortly, flicking a withered flower near his hand) like this pest that was devastating all the orchards and gardens of the State - like thrip! A man who bred his sheep with infinite care would marry a tuberculous wife and rear an infected family; a man who grew his fruit trees undeviatingly true to type would beget a brood of half-caste children (p. 26).

His analogy is clear: the deformed are pestilent and should be scientifically wiped out. The text deals with the mental processes of its various characters and the revelation that Hendon had once established an eugenic colony. The word eugenics was first applied to scientific selection by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), an early theoretician of Malthusian scientific racism and founder of its eugenic offshoot. In 1891, Galton pressed for selective sterilisation. He lived to see his views put into practice when, in 1907, the state of Indiana in the USA, passed the world's first compulsory sterilisation law, reintroduced in 1927.<sup>2</sup> Prior to that a Mr Harry Sharp had taken the law into his own hands; in 1899 he proceeded to sterilise (by vasectomy) the inmates at the Indiana State Reformatory.<sup>3</sup> He reasoned that society should

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<sup>2</sup> Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Indiana was again to be the focus of such attention in 1982 when staff at Bloomington Hospital were ordered to allow a Downs syndrome baby with a deformed esophagus to die of starvation and dehydration. See Nat Hentoff, 'The Awful Privacy of Baby Doe', in *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 161-175.

cease: 'permitting idiots, imbeciles and degenerate criminals to continue the pollution of the race [*sic*] simply because certain religionists teach that "marriages are made in heaven" and that the "function of procreation is divine"' (Chase, p. 125). (Chase's comment 'race [*sic*]' is thus cited because he is exploring the use of eugenics as a racist movement.) Hendon does not resort to sterilisation of his eugenically unfit wife, Linda, but he does refuse her children. And in doing so he comes to recognise the overwhelming emotional cost to her, as her body asserting its primacy 'cried out for a saving maternity' (p. 102). Hendon begins to question his ideology in the light of an individual's fundamental right to procreate.

This last chapter of this study makes no pretence of scientific or wide historical knowledge of eugenics, just as in the preceding chapters on deformity there was no attempted medical diagnoses of particular physical abnormalities. Rather, it primarily explores Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940)<sup>4</sup> as a literary source of eugenic history, and examines the position stated by the unsuppressible Sam Pollit. By the time Stead arrived in the USA in 1937, thirty states had passed 'The Model Eugenical Sterilization Law' drawn up by Henry H. Laughlin. The Law provided for the sterilisation of so-called carriers of feeble-mindedness and criminality; those whose disabilities were a result of genetic, non-genetic, or microbial interference, and whose handicaps prevented the afflicted from being self-supporting (Chase, p. 16).<sup>5</sup> It is this law Sam Pollit refers to as he proposes 'clearing the way for a eugenic race.' He tells his children: 'I am glad to say that some of our states have already passed laws which seem to

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<sup>4</sup> Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*, introd. Randall Jarrell (1940; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> The German Sterilization Act that went into effect on January 1, 1934 was derived quite explicitly from Laughlin's Model Law. See: The Committee of the American Neurological Association for the Investigation of Eugenical Sterilization, *Eugenical Sterilization* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1936), p. 22.

point to a really scientific view of these things, in the near future' (p. 164).

*The Man Who Loved Children* is a novel about many things, but there is overwhelming agreement that it is primarily a novel about 'the family', Stead's in particular. The novel describes an instance of a highly destructive environment which is idealistically cherished for its safety. Juxtaposed with the insidious distortion of the inner human being is Sam Pollit's overt eugenic cant, with its premise that distortion is a scientifically preventable *physical* manifestation. What has emerged so far in this study is that the persons who are deformed have been portrayed as autonomous individuals existing for the most part outside the confines of the family. For instance, very little is given about Billy Kwan's childhood, though we do learn that his father is still living. Jack Rowley is left to his Aunt Sadie to raise; Jonah is totally excluded from the family, his parents having rid themselves of his 'unwelcome presence' (p. 31); Jackie Hanna and Richard Miller lose their biological fathers while young; similarly, Hester Harper loses her mother; finally, at the age of fourteen Arthur Blackberry loses both his parents. Rhoda Courtney would appear to be the exception, apparently enjoying the traditional father-mother family unit, but it must be concluded that she too, is felt to be inadequate: another child, healthy and male, is purchased.

From the above it appears that to portray deformed persons living within the context of a fictional 'happy family' is to part from convention. Parents absent themselves from their physically abnormal offspring: either by abandonment, as in Jonah's case; or by dying from disappointment, like Jackie's father, Walter Hanna, who in a gender-reversal of the post-partum drama 'died when Jackie was five, never having really recovered from the birth of his own child' (*Swords and Crowns and Rings*, p. 8). The fear of giving birth to a 'monstrosity' is capitalised on in *Prelude to Christopher*, the

title of which arises from out of the baby-fantasies of the eugenically-fit nurse, Kay, who has her cap set on Nigel Hendon, the man 'whose whole creed was normality and the rational ordering of an irrational world' (p. 49). Hendon unwittingly marries the genetically unfit Linda Hamlin; and because he refuses to 'break [his] own rule' (p. 92) they are childless.

Linda's disfunction is neither visible nor verifiable, therefore the fundamental method of mate-selection as practised by the Utopians would have been of little use to Hendon. In Thomas More's fictive *Utopia* (1516), prospective marriage couples are presented to each other naked for scrutiny. The reason, Hythloday explains, is that 'there may be some such deformity covered with the clothes as may totally alienate a man from his wife when it is too late to part with her'.<sup>6</sup> Hendon's Utopia is his eugenic colony based on the ideal of 'Hy-Brazil, the lost Eden, the island of the blessed' (p. 22). Best known of the actual Australian experiments in realising Utopia is William Lane's experiment in 1893, when he left Australia to reinvented it - with modifications - as the 'New Australia'. Mary Gilmore, poet and journalist was for a time a member of the community that settled in Paraguay. In 'The Utopian Ideal'<sup>7</sup> and 'Dreams, Visions, Utopias',<sup>8</sup> T. Inglis Moore and Van Ikin explore the wider Australian retextualisation of Utopia; for our purposes it is enough to see that the *caveat emptor* of More's Utopian marriage ceremony is an expression of primal 'self'-preservation, since the family is the fundamental institution for the propagation of one's own kind. It is the primal unit of self-replication and self-colonisation, based on a traditionally paternalistic and ageist hierarchy. The child becomes a kind of

<sup>6</sup> Thomas More, 'Utopia', in *More's 'Utopia' and Its Critics*, ed. Ligeia Gallagher (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1964), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> T. Inglis Moore, 'The Great Australian Dream: The Utopian Ideal' in *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), pp. 274-280.

<sup>8</sup> Van Ikin, 'Dreams, Visions, Utopias' in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, gen. ed., Laurie Hargrehan (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988), pp. 253-266.

physical extended ego, representing the possibilities of continuation and betterment of the self. For the average and 'normal' would-be parent the fear of deformity is made real during the nine months preceding birth. The pregnant woman undergoes metamorphosis; her body changes as the fetus, an unseen and uncertain entity, grows. Rejection is the first response to the terror of seeing one's self replicated as imperfect: the deformed child is re-cast as an intruder who has nothing really to do with one's self; to the Celts they were changelings who were then offered back to their 'real' fairy parents on the end of a shovel stuck into a fire.<sup>9</sup> Rejection is the acknowledgement that something is discontinuous with the self; the inability to immediately accept the deformed child as 'offspring' stems from the feeling that the child reflects the parent. At least, that is Nigel Hendon's view:

What was he, after all? A mysterious blending of his father and his mother; he could see so plainly what each had given him. All the brilliance, the reasoning-power, the bitterness, scepticism, wit and humour of him were not his own, but his father's and his father's father's - back and back he looked at a shadowy line of ancestors, unrelenting and uncaring. . . . It had been good - by accident. (p. 17)

Nigel wants to turn the 'good - by accident' into a scientific certitude by mate-selecting and by consciously projecting the desirable elements of himself onto his child. He wishes to avoid the horror that arises from out of precisely his mode of thinking, in which the child is not autonomous but representative. From this comes the self-made torment in which the deformed child is analogous to a converse Dorian Gray portrait, charting private imperfections for public display. The unspoken uncertainty that some secret self will emerge unannounced is articulated by Pär Lagerkvist's dwarf: 'we allow ourselves to be born of strangers, anywhere, in secret, among the poorest and most wretched, so that our race should not die out' (*The Dwarf*, p. 15).<sup>10</sup> Nigel

<sup>9</sup> Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> But as the existence of the dwarf Rhoda Courtney demonstrates, deformity is not necessarily limited by economic circumstance.

Hendon attempts to eliminate the threat of the intruder by establishing an eugenic colony 'where no one might come who had not been passed by himself and Pen as mentally and physically sound' (Dark, p. 49). His plans for his own eugenically perfect family are thwarted by the evil machinations of the hunchback, Paul Hamlin, who has created Linda as a teetering lunatic wedged between scientific rationality and the call to motherhood - the 'everlasting tyranny of her sex' (p. 14) - that Hendon recognises as the lot of every woman. Linda's madness is thrust on her by a sane world insisting on perfection; she is effectively put out of the way so that the (much) younger and (more) physically able Kay can stand in line as the candidate for perfect propagation. Kay provides the possibilities for a neatened conclusion in a drama based on the 'two most powerful urges of humanity - self-preservation and the reproduction of one's kind' (p. 104).

Dark dedicates the novel to her doctor husband, Eric Payten Dark. He in turn dedicated his book *Medicine and the Social Order* (1942) to Eleanor. As Eleanor has commented: 'You don't get any picture unless you have all the pieces. For example, the relation between my novels and Eric's *Medicine and the Social Order* is very clear'.<sup>11</sup> Eric Dark's publication is faintly idealistic, gently persuading the reader to consider the doctor as a curative power for social ills, among them crime and war. He urges that the total man - physical, mental and moral - be considered, for a man 'cannot be healthy in any true sense of the word unless he is *all* healthy' (E. P. Dark's italics).<sup>12</sup> Dark presents a modified and scientific interpretation of *persona*-judging; although it is perhaps asking too much of any one to be sufficient in all the areas of the total 'man'. Certainly in Eleanor's novel Linda Hendon goes from bad to worse until she is physically maimed, mentally unfit, and

<sup>11</sup> A. Grove Day, *Eleanor Dark* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1976), p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> E. P. Dark, *Medicine and the Social Order* (Sydney: Booth, 1942) p. 38.

spiritually corrupted. For instance, the nurse Kay sees her as 'an affected devil' (p. 143); Mrs Hendon remarks: 'You thought of her and she was there. Like the devil' (p. 155). All the interrelated elements of the 'total man' - physical, mental, and moral - are presented as present and distorted in Linda, who is therefore emblematic of total disruption.

Given the period in which these two novels are written it is perhaps not surprising that Dark and Stead (born within a year of each other; losing their mothers early; and more cogently, both introduced to science through a patriarchal relationship) would be familiar with the works of Aldous Huxley. Throughout Dark's text there are echoes of *Antic Hay* (1923),<sup>13</sup> which treats topics such as experimental biology, disease, madness, and attempted suicide. And, more overtly, Sam echoes *Brave New World* (1932)<sup>14</sup> in his speeches.

And indeed, Hendon's wish to procreate - perfectly - is echoed in the wishes of Sam Pollit, the man who loved (to have) children. He is similarly an eugenicist, atheistic, and egotistical, saying of Little Sam 'I understand him because he is myself' (Stead, p. 491). Sam's eugenic beliefs were concomitant with his belonging to a period that is sometimes termed 'The Age of Evolutionism'.<sup>15</sup> It was a time when Stead as a girl was interested in Spencer, Darwin, Huxley;<sup>16</sup> an age that looked to eugenics as a means of achieving a 'perfect' society by removing physically imperfect beings through scientific control. Stead's polemical approach to eugenics and eugenics in the novel subtly accentuates the tension of ideals between Sam Pollit and his daughter Louisa. Sam is the central figure in both ideologies. On the one

<sup>13</sup> Day, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Country Life Press, 1932).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Gibbons, *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel: Studies in English Literary Criticism and Ideals 1880-1920* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1973), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Intro.*, p. 35.

hand he advocates eugenics as a means of prevention of the physically deformed, epitomised (along with all its prejudices) by the self-reliant Popeye Banks, who has an exophthalmic goitre and a limp. But when Sam *talks* about eugenics, he defuses its impact: the ideology is dismembered and shown as ridiculous through the comments of the children. Then there is Louisa, living proof of the crippling effect of a negative environment potentially influenced by the patri-ageist-hierarchy of Father Sam, 'household czar by divine right' (p. 71).

The basic tenets of euthenics (a science dealing with improving human development by improvement of living conditions) reverberate softly and insistently alongside the open eugenic cant of Sam. Stead convincingly makes her case that monsters can create monstrosities within the framework of that pre-emptory fiction, the family. She balances the euthenic force, an accepted and inescapable force that arguably shapes all human-beings, with another, innately cruel in its dictates, aimed by Sam at Popeye Banks. Where Sam advocates the de-creation of deformed beings such as Popeye Banks, he actively and legally creates humans capable of monstrous actions (suicides, would-be suicides, suicide-assisters), and cripples their spirits.

Popeye Banks has an enlarged eye and a limp; he is a teenager; and works as a temporary mail-carrier. His existence is anathema to Sam Pollit. He is the spark that prompts Sam to reiterate vehemently the opinions expressed in the subchapters 'Monoman and the misfits' (Ch. 2; p. 81), and 'Meridian of murder' (Ch. 4; p. 159). Pollit's twentieth-century attitude towards the physically abnormal is shown to be little different from the attitude expressed by apocalyptic writers who 'could not convey the presence of evil except as an aberration of the physical world'.<sup>17</sup> Although Thurlow

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<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Thurlow, *Biblical Myths and Mysteries* (London: Octopus Books, 1974), p. 70.



does not name specific apocalyptic writers, if we understand that at its most basic and most general level apocalyptic literature prophesies or reveals, then we can recognise the traditional aesthetic use of the deformed body as the portent of the deformed spirit: as does the 'scientific' Sam, who 'was not only revolted by deformity and plainness but actually saw essential evil in it' (p. 383).

Through the combination of words such as 'eugenics' and 'sin' what surfaces is two methods of interpreting deformity: science and religion. In 1916 Charles B. Davenport, the director of the Eugenics Record Office in the USA, attempted openly an assimilation of science and religion with his topic 'Eugenics as Religion' (Chase, p. 161). The question whether God creates was not at issue. At issue was the *right* of creation. Where theologians held that God created all humans, eugenics offered the 'scientific' means to chose *which* humans would be created.

Sam is a figure of this age. His outlook on the human race is a confusion of science and religion. He preaches science, and prepares his proselyte, Louisa, for a 'holy life of science' (p. 340). Sam the scientist revokes God and in turn attempts to mould God the Father in his own image. The repetition of Sam's desire to be an autocrat, to 'taste supreme power' (p. 54) reveals the delusion of a man who, Saul Pilgrim recognises, has a 'glorious, messianic belief in himself' (p. 324). Sam would add that 'eventually the religion of all men will be one and the same . . . based on science' (p. 84). In his daily dealings he transposes science and religion. Where religion places faith in baptism, communion, unction, and resurrection, Sam places it in 'scientific' knowledge. The Pollits' soapbox truck he 'baptize[s] *Leucosoma*' (p. 83), the term for a white body soma, with no germ cells. In a combination of Extreme Unction and pagan ritual,

Sam surpasses himself: in an overtly Dionysian act, he dismembers a creature of beauty and reduces life to practical quantities of oil in neatly-labelled bottles; but not before he has anointed Little-Sam and cast out 'sullenness and morbidity' (p. 491). Real resurrection will come through science. Fisherman Sam will rise through his chosen medium - mass-communication; and he has 'always said that a second Christ could arise with the radio, speaking to all mankind' (p. 371). Thus Sam too, would rise again:

He had always said that though, no doubt, Jesus Christ never existed, the idea of 'second coming' was a touching illustration of mankind's wish for uplift and regeneration; and that if a real saviour ever came, he would come over the radio. Perhaps, he, Samuel Clemens Pollit, was a forerunner of the truly great man. (p. 516) *the*

Even now Sam rules his little pollit-bureau from Tohoga House, 'the Garden of Eden' (p. 82) in that seat of democracy, Washington D.C., where 'Washington is heaven' and 'the new Jerusalem'; Hell is realised in Baltimore. Washington may represent the new Jerusalem, but the new Bethlehem (with its association of 'Bedlam' foreshadowing events) is a Bethlehem of industrialisation: 'Under the eternal belching black organ pipes of Bethlehem Steel was the vile lake that covered an agony of fire, a lake that hid something like Grendel, or the pained bowels of an Aetna, or the cancer of a Prometheus' (p. 388).

But for the Christ-like yet scientific Sam his children are not only his ties to immortality, but are living proof of 'the infernal tie, the bond of carnality' (p. 482). Louisa, the emergent adolescent, accentuates the conflict. Stead portrays this in the scene in which Louisa lingers in her father's room where: 'On her father's open roll-top desk was a book on parthenogenesis [sic], a fertile and beautiful book of metaphysics, as it seemed to Louie, a lens on Life and its transparent secrets' (p. 214). Parthenogenesis, the ability to reproduce without union of sexual elements, occurs in some lower animal

species. Paradoxically, the concept of virgin birth is an accepted proof of the power of God in many religions. Underlying parthenogenesis metaphysically - perfect bodies immaculately conceived - is the concept of perfection derived from purity. From this type of thinking it is not hard to see how the associations of deformity with perceived 'impurity', whether of racial, bestial, or sinful origins, could be deduced.

But though Sam 'pretends to be a pure spirit working for the betterment of mankind, he is actually a monster of egotism'.<sup>18</sup> Sam represents, in the present study, one who would set himself up as supreme in his judgement of the deformed: he talks of permitted murder and shows no remorse. Confronted with those like Popeye Banks, Sam wonders why 'boys like him aren't sent to a lethal chamber or just nipped in the bud at birth' (p. 430). Sam's vehemence against the deformed arises out of the traditional interpretation of physical defectiveness as evil manifested:

Popeye Banks was a revolting being of seventeen years old, with an exophthalmic goiter excruciating to see. Generally he wore eyeshades, but sometimes he did not. Sam declared he was feeble-minded as well, and gosh only knew what else he did and had! He probably stole and spied: he certainly leered and limped. Like many a handsome body, Sam was not only revolted by deformity and plainness but actually saw essential evil in it: and essential evil, most particularly, was what robbed him, Sam Pollit. (p. 383)

Sam is expressing essential fear. His conclusions, damaging and yet so totally dependent on his eugenic prejudices, are not unlike many that are expressed less self-consciously in works of fiction that rely on 'deformity' as a negative stereotype. This so-called enlightened man is articulating the primitive response towards the disabled, and wishing them away. By associating fault with disability, the deformed are made to wear public-nuisance tags; once translated into a 'social problem' they can be dealt with, legally. For Sam

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<sup>18</sup> Mary McCarthy, 'Framing Father', in *New Republic* No. 13 (January 1941), p. 61.

with his 'handsome body' goodness and evil manifest themselves physically; beauty is not skin-deep: it is the reflection of a pure soul; therefore the opposite is true. Henny is described as 'disfigured, burdened with shameful secrets' (p. 119); but while Sam may appear physically beautiful and therefore fit material for propagation of the world, his defects are unseen, hidden, devious. As one commentator writes: 'He believes in the perfectibility of man and all the humanist virtues, but his limitations as a human being are crippling'.<sup>19</sup> Though physically perfect, he is not the perfect man. He fails as a humanist, as a father, and as a scientist. He is the man who in his attempt to understand mankind can only do so through his work with the Anthropological Mission in the Pacific, not through his family life. This is the man who in his effort to understand must read books to provide a 'lens on life and its transparent secrets'; this is the man who boils flesh off carcasses in an effort to understand the articulation of the skeleton, but 'does not understand women or children. He is such a good young man, he is too good to understand people at all' (p. 520).

His sense of human worth is represented not in Malthusian terms of economics, but through his concept of evil and goodness, expressed in those he dislikes and those he admires - Roosevelt, Darwin, Aldous Huxley. Sam's expression of admiration for the 'goodness' of Theodore Roosevelt invites us to familiarise ourselves with someone Sam identifies with. Theodore's 'goodness' extended to his belief in separating 'unworthy types' from 'worthy types;' as an adherent of the doctrine of eugenics and racial superiority, he was one of the 'experts' consulted by the American Breeder's Association's Eugenic Section (Chase, p. 127). As reported by Chase, in its 1914 'Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population',

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<sup>19</sup> R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead* (1969; rpt. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 97.

Roosevelt wrote, in part:

it is obvious that if in the future racial qualities are to be improved, the improving must be wrought mainly by favoring the fecundity of the worthy types and frowning on the fecundity of unworthy types. At present, we do just the reverse. There is no check to the fecundity of those who are subnormal, both intellectually and morally. (Chase, p. 127)

The assertion of power and strength belonging to the strong-willed and strong-minded 'worthy types' is reiterated in the extract from Theodore Roosevelt's *The Strenuous Life* that Louisa quotes for Sam (p. 78); and the quotation is immediately preceded by one by David Starr-Jordan, the American vice-president of the First International Congress of Eugenics, in 1912. Both Roosevelt and Starr-Jordan believed in the capacity of man to weed out the 'unworthy.'

Sam also admires Darwin; and for some people, Darwinism was the junction between religion and science: physically humans were the highest product of biological evolution; spiritually, they were only less than the angels. Anxious to widen the evolutionary gap between our beginnings and our present, Davenport stated: 'If we are to build up in America a society worthy of the species man then we must take such steps as will prevent the increase or even the perpetuation of animalistic strains' ('Eugenics as Religion', quoted in Chase, p. 160). Possibly nowhere else in the works included in this study has the association of deformity with 'animalistic strains' been so blatantly assumed. With the suppression of 'animalistic strains' it is not difficult to foresee the fate Davenport would prescribe for Grace Daniel, The Mule-Faced Woman; Lionel the Lion-Faced Man; Jo-Jo the Dog-faced Boy; the Alligator Boy; or John Merrick, The Elephant Man. On the other hand, evolutionary 'truth' lent scientific credibility to the doctrine of immanence: God permeated all things; though for others, Darwinism meant

total denial of one or the other. A little over a century after Malthus published *An Essay*, the effects of such disjunction were no more thoroughly treated than in Aldous Huxley's satirical novel *Brave New World* echoes of which resound in Sam's eugenics speeches (pp. 86; 115; and 380). Huxley's dystopia exists within the utopian fallacy of the family as it is lived by the Pollits. In Huxley's novel, science processes the workers as 'socialized human beings'. It is an attractive concept for Sam, this replacing of the mysteries of life with the certainties of formula. Sam fails to see that the characterisation of Bernard Marx in *Brave New World*, himself 'abnormal,' makes his doctrines questionable. In her characterisation of the 'normal' Sam, espousing eugenic satire as cant, Stead has provided dramatic insight into an ugliness that only pretends to beauty, for Sam's ideal state would be one in which:

'We haven't the freaks and neuroses of the Dark Ages. We were born according to formula: we are not a hazardous aggregation of mean genes. We approximate a mean, the mean of our intellectual class. When we are born, we are studied, and deviations, if noxious to the species, are suppressed. . . .' (p.115)

Achieving a super-fit race would require the elimination of heterozygotes (those having genes in the chromosome pair which are different). The principle is unworkable, as most heterozygotes are healthy individuals, and thus 'defects' are difficult to detect.<sup>20</sup> The inadvisability of attempting to breed a super-fit race is further compounded by the fact that in nature we are almost all heterozygotes, the offspring of a cross between two parents whose genes in one or more of the chromosome pairs differ in one or more characteristics. What that means is:

that most of us are heterozygotes for three to eight of the defective genes, and each of us is almost certain to carry at least one (Jones and

<sup>20</sup> M. A. Santos, *Genetics and Man's Future* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1981).

Bodmer 1974). Thus if heterozygotes were forbidden to reproduce very few of us would be left to populate the world. (Santos, p. 48)

The statement suggests we all have the potential to produce deviations 'noxious to the species;' hence the fear that the emergent secret self as expressed by Largerkvist's dwarf is a possibility. (The 1981 census estimated that 13.2 percent of the Australian population is disabled.)<sup>21</sup> Sam could not have known that he too, was a biological uncertainty, since it was not until four years after *The Man Who Loved Children* was published that deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) was identified as the primary material of heredity. This accounts for Sam's theory of 'permitted murder' (in the Chapter: 'The meridian of murder') rather than gene manipulation to achieve his ideal state of 'Monoman'. Yet scientist Sam is confident in his role as creator. According to his figures, one-tenth of the population would be suitable progenitors of a world created by, and run according to, Sam's system: 'Monoman would only be the condition of the world after we had weeded out the misfits and degenerates. . . . This would be done by means of the lethal chamber and people might even ask for the painless death, or *euthanasia*, of their own accord' (p. 85; Stead's italics). Should these misfits not be eager for voluntary annihilation in favour of a physically perfect world, then Sam proposes (in the language of a political divinity, or divine politician: it is not clear which) that extermination be carried out with all due scientific efficacy:

'If I were autocrat of all nations,' with 'supreme power, the lives of all, the life of the world in my hands,' he told them what he would do. For example, he might arrange the killing off of nine-tenths of mankind in order to make room for the fit. 'This would be done by gas attacks on people living ignorant of their fate in selected areas, a type of eugenic concentration-camp; they would never know, but be hurled painlessly into eternity, or they would pass into the lethal chamber of time and never feel a pang.'

<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Handicapped Persons in Australian, 1981*. (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1982), p. 1.

"But you would keep yourself alive,' said Louie unpleasantly. (p. 380)

And here Louie exposes a moral dilemma: Who would decide the standard of selection? Who would do the selecting? At the time of the novel's setting, eugenics did not take issue with the notion that God created all humans; it made the assumption that science now offered the means to chose *which* humans would be created. As John Passmore says in his comprehensive study *The Perfectibility of Man* (1970), 'It is one thing to say that the mechanisms for perfecting men are now at our disposal; it is quite another thing to say that they will in fact be used in order to perfect men'.<sup>22</sup> Stead's novel is set in a time when those who saw eugenics as an expedient means for human perfection were beginning to question its price in the light of Hitler's Germany. Les Murray's poem 'Dog Fox Field' is a powerful if bleak reminder of one of Hitler's 'solutions' to the 'problem'. (The poem is reproduced in full at the end of this chapter, p. 269.) It is a startling poem because it captures the evil humans are capable of in their endeavour to rid themselves of a *perceived* evil. As Largerkvist's dwarf tells us: 'I have noticed that sometimes I frighten people; what they really fear is themselves. They think it is I who scare them but it is the dwarf within them, the ape-faced manlike being who sticks up its head from the depths of their souls' (pp. 29-30). Dwarfs, along with Jews and Gypsies were 'favorite targets' of Hitler's liquidation scheme (Fiedler, p. 255). From 1921 to 1924, Christina Stead worked as a demonstrator in Experimental Psychological Testing at Sydney Teachers' College. Stead tells how 'they put me on to what I was really more suited for, variant children, feeble-minded' [sic].<sup>23</sup> She recognised 'they call it something else'; but persisted that 'it's the same thing'. In the abnormal, Stead recognises a state of being with which she was uncomfortable: a

<sup>22</sup> John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1970), p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982), p. 188.



'problem' she could not solve. She 'just walked out', saying that others 'devote their lives to these children and very noble of them. But I couldn't. Didn't want to'. She looked to science for solution, stating that 'Later on in biochemistry they will find some answer to those things. But there was no answer then'. Stead's comments indicate her perception of a problem and her realistic appraisal of her part in social amelioration.

Through Sam's reaction to Popeye Banks and Louisa's astute, unanswered comments, the novel quietly presents the problem: a perfect society that is free of individuals with visible physical disabilities, is, given certain drastic measures, a possibility; but a society free of 'imperfect' beings and their hidden deformities is unachievable given the susceptibility of the individual to the environmental influences institutionalised by the family - that self-colonising unit which can create its own monsters. Stead recognised that she had no solution, and that the increasingly practised contemporary social remedy for the 'problem' of deformity was unacceptable by her. Sam is the mouthpiece for the dilemma arising out of a supposedly 'perfect' society of conscious decision-making individuals that is, by necessity, founded on heinous precepts. Sam has stated that he would set the standards for selection and that he would do the selecting. The prospect is startling and wonderfully implausible by the very rules that Sam claims: in many states The Model Eugenical Sterilization Law ordered compulsory sterilisation of 'the socially inadequate classes' (Chase, p. 16): yet Popeye Banks is employed - he is not a member of 'the socially inadequate classes'. When Sam meets Popeye, it is he who is unemployed. The delicious irony is that Sam - the man who would be fertile - would theoretically be a contender for sterilisation under the Law. Through the reaction that Popeye's existence provokes in Sam we experience Sam's unreasonable eudaemonism, his mangled attempt to couple rational

thought with love of mankind. Stead pokes acidic holes in the fabric of eugenics, the institutions that cossetted such theories, and, ultimately, in her own earlier beliefs as instilled by her father. Evidence of her at least three abortions leads one writer to conclude that 'Stead had had enough of family life at the beginning to last her for good and all';<sup>24</sup> but the comment preceding that remark is perhaps more revealing: Stead says 'that it was just as well that she had no children, she would probably, as a parent, have been just like him'.

Real-life cause-and-effect speculation aside, Stead's observations call to mind the conflict between, and often messy assimilation of, science and religion - in Darwinian terminology, evolution and creation, in, as Gibbons calls it, the Age of Evolutionism - of opposites. The question posed is the same: is God the Father the creator of the human race and its imperfections; or can the scientist serve as God - as a redefiner of human beings with even minimum imperfections? To the first question Peggy Hanna would answer in the affirmative, since it is she who will rectify the 'mess God Almighty had made of her son' (*Swords and Crowns and Rings*, p. 6). To the second question we have Sam Pollit's answer. It is cold comfort; as is demonstrated in the dialogue between Olaf Ramsay and God in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* <sup>25</sup>:

'But you made me in your image, didn't you?' [God] asked mildly.  
'I think it was the other way. I'm sure it was'.  
'It doesn't really matter'. (p. 168)

<sup>24</sup> Lorna Sage, 'A Goat with Grit', *Times Literary Supplement* (26 February 1990), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> M. Barnard Eldershaw, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947; rpt. London: Virago Press, 1983).

### DOG FOX FIELD

The test for feeble-mindedness was, they had to make up  
a sentence using the words dog, fox and field.

#### Judgement at Nuremberg

These were no leaders, but they were first  
into the dark on Dog Fox Field:

Anna who rocked her head, and Paul  
who grew big and yet giggled small,

Irma who looked Chinese, and Hans  
who knew his world as a fox knows a field.

Hunted with needles, exposed, unfed,  
this time in their thousands they bore sad cuts

for having gazed, and shuffled, and failed  
to field the lore of prey and hound

they then had to thump and cry in the vans  
that ran while stopped in Dog Fox Field.

Our sentries, whose holocaust does not end,  
they show us when we cross into Dog Fox Field.

Les A. Murray  
Bundoora-Bunyah 1988.

Les Murray, Dog Fox Field  
By Kind Permission of the poet.

**Les Murray, Dog Fox Field**  
By Kind Permission of the poet.



## CONCLUSION

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The works studied here are all well-known and successful novels. *Jonah* was dramatised by the ABC-TV; *Swords and Crowns and Rings* won the 1977 Miles Franklin Award; *The Year of Living Dangerously* was a co-winner of the Age Book of the Year Award and the National Book Council Award for Australian Literature, as well as being made into an internationally successful film; Patrick White, author of *The Vivisector*, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973; *The Doubleman* and *The Acolyte*, won the Miles Franklin Award, as did *The Well*; and *Hook's Mountain* was serialised on ABC radio. And yet none perhaps would come readily to mind as a novel *about* deformity - and indeed, not one of the novels is specifically concerned with the problems of being deformed. Yet a general inability to note deformity in these novels, despite their exposure, demonstrates what has been shown in this study: that until the presence of deformed-persons in literary works is pointed out along with their emblematic or iconic significance, the reader un-sees, or makes invisible, the deformed person. This was well demonstrated in Braddon's *End Play* (see above, p. 31); and a prime example of un-seeing occurs in Adrian Mitchell's account of *Jonah* in which there is no mention of *Jonah's* hunchback.<sup>1</sup>

War literature, children's literature, biographical, and autobiographical portrayals of deformity have been excluded from this study for reasons

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Mitchell, 'Fiction', in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 99-100.

intrinsic to its thesis and themes. The war-mutilated comprise a large and specific group whose injuries are the result of particular socio-political actions. Further, war literature seeks, though not exclusively, to deconstruct the body and transform it into a non-sentient idiom: the whole, the individual, the body, becomes metonymical. It is transformed into a part of a group: the group then assumes its own identity; it is an identity that is not threatened by the loss of one of its parts. The group is further removed from identification as an organic structure by transforming it into a 'target'.<sup>2</sup> It is contrary to the distinctive mythological nature of *in utero* deformity, which defies moulding into the aggregate body of the group, as demonstrated by Jonah, Jackie Hanna, Billy Kwan and Rhoda Courtney.

Although Jeffrey Meyers in *Disease and the Novel* explores the late nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of deformity as an apt metaphor for the estrangement of the artist, there are few in real life who would voluntarily assume deformity as a physical self. Actual combat tends very much to present an arena of the perfect: in *Hook's Mountain* the crypto-dwarf Arthur Blackberry voices regret at his exclusion from soldiering; and in Tim Winton's short story 'Distant Lands' we see Fat Maze's father who 'had a club-foot and he was an angry man because the army had never wanted him'.<sup>3</sup> Then there is the less minor infringement upon the realms of normality in *Where's Morning Gone* (1987) in the case of Bern's brother, Frank: 'He's tried twice to join the airforce. And they rejected him on account of his psoriasis'.<sup>4</sup> War-deformity is further distinct from *in utero* deformity because injury results from the drama of human versus human. In

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Winton, *Minimum of Two* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble-Penguin, 1987), pp. 67-71.

<sup>4</sup> Barney Roberts, *Where's Morning Gone?* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987), p. 18.

the case of the *in utero* deformed, the drama is a blurred and less certain one: it invites the subconscious to conjure up an adversary that lies somewhere in the hazy regions that extend between the animal and the supernatural.

It is an immemorial symbol acknowledging all that is Other; it is a drama sprung to life from childhood fairytales buried deep in our consciousness, relaying subliminal messages powerful because they were learned instinctively not critically; it is this that Elizabeth Jolley for example has tapped into in *The Well*. As a wide generalisation, it could be said that as distinct from fairytale, contemporary children's literature is seldom concerned with multiple levels of meaning, and that complex metaphor is more likely to make way for the convenient stereotype. But as this study has shown, particularly through the character Hester Harper, fairytale - the domain of all ages - continues to inform our later readings in ways that are subtle and subconscious. Fiedler notes that in children's literature such as L. Frank Baum's *Oz* books, *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Gulliver's Travels*:

we cross in our imaginations a borderline which in childhood we could never be sure was there, entering a realm where precisely what qualifies us as normal on the one side identifies us as Freaks on the other. And after returning, we may experience for a little while the child's constant confusion about what really is freakish, what normal, on either side.<sup>5</sup>

In Louis Nowra's *The Misery of Beauty* we are faced with precisely the dilemma articulated by Fiedler; it is a work of the imagination that must tap into the subconscious for its material. This is quite apart from portrayals of the deformed in biographical and autobiographical works.

In biography, the writer is more concerned with the real and the

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<sup>5</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 27-28.

particular; as a reflection of cultural attitudes, biographies have their place in the study of responses towards deformity. For instance the factual biographical account written by Josephine Burton about her son's deformity *Crippled Victory* (1956)<sup>6</sup> (contemporary with Marshall's autobiography *I Can Jump Puddles*<sup>7</sup>) is about 'courage' and 'heroes'; it is as much about the victory of turning a deformed child into a Christian as creating a useful arm from out of a useless limb. Consciously or not, real-life accounts of deformity appear to be aimed at countering negative images by projecting the loud-and-clear message that the deformed and disabled person can also be a good person.

A recent Ph.D. dissertation entitled 'The Crippled Body Speaks' examines the lives of Helen Keller and Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>8</sup> Its author comments that the purpose of his dissertation is to 'alter the image of the disabled child' by pushing away 'piles of cultural debris'. Keller, born blind and deaf, author of *The Story of My Life* (1902), and Roosevelt, crippled by polio, have disabilities dissimilar enough to warrant the assumption that they were selected as topics by the mere fact of their disability. De Felice, himself disabled, has a personal and emotional investment in his area of research, which presumably is authenticated further by the fact of his interior knowledge; his work - a discussion about the disabled by the disabled - can perhaps be perceived as being at the other end of a continuum from this study, if we use Paul Robinson's distinction (further discussed below) between the humanitarian and the aesthetic as the polarities;<sup>9</sup> but it nevertheless has a

<sup>6</sup> Josephine Burton, *Crippled Victory* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).

<sup>7</sup> Alan Marshall, *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955; rpt. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1977). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> Robert De Felice, 'The Crippled Body Speaks' Ph.D University of New York at Buffalo, 1990 *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Vol. 51, No. 3, September 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Robinson, 'Responses to Leslie Fiedler, II', in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*. Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled, in collaboration with the United Nations (27



similar purpose: to alert the reader to the sub-texts that are in operation when the deformed-being is presented, and thereby expose the positive or negative 'cultural debris'.

Yet one may question whether the success stories of real-life deformed persons do not in some way transform *them* into icons or *logoi* of battlers and achievers. Marshall is a prime example; the federal minister, the Honorable Bill Hayden, the scientist and humanitarian Sir Mark Oliphant, the decathlete Dean Smith, and the visual artist Allyson Parsons were all featured during 1990 in libraries throughout the country, pictured on a poster which was headed 'We Overcame Deafness'. The promotion was put out by the 'Better Hearing Australia' group, and the caption read: 'These four great Australians have achieved eminence and *set an example* for everyone with a hearing disability' (my italics). Difference is insisted upon in a text about achievement, which at the same time places additional burdens on those disabled persons who are not interested in 'proving' themselves as qualified to exist.

One noted author whose work might have been predicted to be included here is Alan Marshall: my discussion here concentrates primarily on him, because of his critical and general popularity, and because his work provides an example to justify why autobiographical treatments of deformity have not been included in this study. His work also sheds light on the very real difference between the use of deformity as a responsibly manifested metaphor, and the actual 'being' of deformity as a physical disability. The major works in this study have all revealed 'responsibly manifested' metaphors of deformity: they have effortlessly transported the subfictions of

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October, 1981), pp. 21-26.

deformity and translated them into the post-colonial experience of perceived physical and cultural dislocation, which has yielded a richness to the narrative. In Marshall's case, what has made him stand out is his high profile: author of the well-received autobiographical fiction *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955), which was later filmed (1979), Marshall is himself a polio victim - his deformity signals him as different, in much the same way as Christie Brown gained a high profile in his autobiographical study *My Left Foot* (1954), published the year before Marshall's novel. Both their books are about their authors' deformity. Whereas Fiedler has said of the deformed that 'up-to-date *logoi* are translated back into the archaic *mythoi* which underlie them',<sup>10</sup> persons such as Marshall are *logoi* who set out to demythologise the underlying fictions of their deformity. For instance in *I Can Jump Puddles* Alan notes that the people of Turalla 'associated "Paralysis" with idiocy' (p. 2); Mr. Carter pronounces Alan's affliction 'God's will' (p. 3). Both responses are set up in order for Marshall to react against them. In addition, the early part of Chapter 10 appears to be devoted to setting the record straight, with such statements as 'the crippled child is not conscious of the handicap implied by his useless legs'; and 'Children make no distinction between one who is lame and the one who has the full use of his limbs'; 'In childhood a useless leg does not bring with it a sense of shame; it is only when one learns to interpret the glance of people unable to hide their feelings that one experiences a desire to avoid them' (all p. 78); 'a crippled limb often adds to the importance of its owner and he is sometimes privileged because of it'; and 'children's sense of humour is not restricted by adult ideas of good taste and tact' (p. 79).

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie Fiedler, 'Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts', in *Pity and Fear: Myths and Images of the Disabled in Literature Old and New*. Proceedings of a literary symposium sponsored by the International Center for the Disabled, in collaboration with the United Nations (27 October, 1981), p. 4.

Obviously this is the factual language of authority and intention: it is not the language of contrivance; of artifice; of illusion; of device - it is not the language of aesthetics. I question whether *I Can Jump Puddles* can be considered of equal literary merit to any of the major novels presented here, though it has not been excluded on the basis of personal literary judgement. What singles it out from the novels discussed in this study is that Marshall's novel has deformity as its primary topic. In his response to Leslie Fiedler's paper 'Pity and Fear' Paul Robinson uses disability as a benchmark in separating great literature from popular literature. Robinson states that:

to the extent that characters resembling what we have come to call "the disabled" are found in [Richard III and Melville's Captain Ahab], their function is so radically unlike that of the Elephant Man (or even a Tiny Tim) that to designate them with the same adjective - "disabled" - is an exercise in futility. (p. 23)

He goes on: 'these works are about other things as well, but what they are most emphatically *not* about is the problem of being a hunchback or a pegleg' (p. 24). Robinson, then, admits to disability as a device through which to channel universal concerns; whereas the personal and specific concerns of the abnormality are of little concern to him and presumably to literary aesthetics in general. None of the other authors discussed in this study writes about deformity as an interior, autobiographical experience. And unlike *I Can Jump Puddles*, none of the novels discussed are specifically *about* physical deformity. Even in Koch's fictional autobiography of Richard Miller, polio is emblematic of metaphysical unhealth. It is not the subject of the text, but rather a device - in the sense of 'an emblematic figure or design', 'a mask played by private persons' (OED) - which contributes to the language of the text.

Despite the 'Author's Note' in another of Marshall's novels, set in a

shoe factory, *How Beautiful are Thy Feet* (1949),<sup>11</sup> and the claim that 'the characters and incidents depicted in this book are fictional', one cannot overlook the fact that Marshall (who worked at the Truform Shoe Factory in the early thirties)<sup>12</sup> reveals the interior life of the main character from the atypical and personally relevant point of view of a man who uses crutches. In one episode the crippled man (the factory's accountant) examines the possible cause of his energetic sex-drive. If we reflect on the sexual lives of the fictional deformed characters inspired by the non-disabled authors represented in this study, it is almost as if the deformed persons have no sexual lives, or if they did, as if everything happened off-stage. For instance, Rhoda Courtney hungers, but does without; Hester Harper suppresses; we are told that Jonah shows little interest; Billy Kwan is a suspected voyeur; Richard Miller's sex-life is sterile, and he step-fathers a paraplegic; Arthur Blackberry's sex life is presumed onanistic by Hook. Only Jackie Hanna and, to a lesser degree, Jack Rowley are allowed to be seen to engage in explicit sexual activity; and Jack Rowley's is an imagined experience, as told by Vesper.

Though all this tells us very little about the characters it reveals an unwillingness by some authors to explore the sexuality of the deformed; either because it is presumed not to exist, or because it is presumed imaginatively distasteful; or perhaps because it threatens the primal fears associated with the instinct of self-replication and self-colonisation, and represents a type of de-evolution. Because Marshall speaks from an interior knowledge of deformity, he feels no need to avoid the issue - rather the reverse seems true, as he appears bent on authenticating the normality of his sexual urges by open

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Marshall, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* (1949; rpt. Hawthorn: Gold Star, 1972). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Marks, 'Talking to Alan Marshall: Notes for a Biography', *Overland*, No. 57 (1973 / 1974), p. 13.

discussion. His accountant-*persona* sets another record straight by positing his crippledom as the motivation for an increased virility:

Psychiatrists have explanations for my need of women, other than that of sex, he thought. Whether it affords a soul-satisfying compensation for the inferiority engendered by being crippled, doesn't very much matter. It is no crime. There is nothing to be ashamed of in seeking compensation. It is not abnormal. I have a psychological necessity that makes me want to rise superior to my handicap. It drives me into the field exclusively held by the unafflicted. I strive to become perfect in the very department I am least fitted for. . . . I have always sought success in those spheres that are supposed to be closed to us. I pursue women . . . and here, where success is valued among men, I strive the hardest. Am I seeing in every woman a challenge to my self-esteem? Am I developing into a woman-obsessed, would-be Casanova subconsciously, doubtful of my virility and striving to vindicate it by demonstrating its existence in a feverish search for conquests? . . . No matter the explanation. Never become beaten. The fewer the men the greater share of honour, the greater the handicap, the sweeter the victory. (pp. 94-95)

A non-disabled author could conceivably have written the above: but the fact that nothing like this occurs in the works studied here would seem to point to a difference in attitudes arising from interior and exterior observations of deformity. Marshall and others like him are excluded from this study precisely *because* of their deformity. As Kriegel tells us:

for the writer who writes consciously out of his existence as a cripple, the passion that sets him apart sets him apart from his fellow writers, too. The language, the images, the tenor of his work must be adequate to that which has been taken - his wound, his handicap. For he writes out of a pain that is distinctly his alone. He is not Bellow creating Einhorn or Shakespeare creating Richard or Melville creating Ahab. The loss he is writing about is specifically *his*, that which *he* has been denied. And all of his work springs from that sense of absence.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Robinson clarifies the issue of the use of deformity in literature, as a legitimate device - by discriminating the categories of the humanitarian and the aesthetic. He argues:

one should remember that Sontag's object in *Illness as Metaphor* was

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Kriegel, 'The Cripple in Literature', in *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987), p. 41.

humanitarian, not aesthetic. She protested the literary appropriation of disease (particularly by nineteenth-century authors) not because it made for bad art but because it made for bad living. Similarly, the liberation of the disabled from their symbolic exploitation by novelists, playwrights, and poets will likely do much more for the disabled themselves than for art. (p. 25)

And here we find ourselves back where we started in the Introduction when we examined the issues put forward by the rehabilitation counsellors, such as Shari Thurer and Hanoch Livneh; and by Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, C. J. Koch, and Susan McKernan. As was stated earlier, this study recognises that to dispose of all the symbolism deformity carries with it is, however well-intentioned, wishful thinking: though there is room for an aesthetic liberation to take place, ideally that 'liberation' would take the form of freedom from the stagnant metaphor, from the undeviatingly stigmatic connotations, and from the too-easy stereotype. Marshall's unique position has enabled him consciously to liberate deformity from 'symbolic exploitation'; though quite clearly autobiographical material such as Marshall's has no place in this study, which is concerned primarily with imaginative depictions of the deformed as a reflection of cultural attitudes, rather than with actual individual experiences of deformity. Marshall's autobiography seeks to make familiar what is unfamiliar, which is contrary to the artist's role in 'making strange'.<sup>14</sup>

A stated attempt to combine the two perspectives of deformity, humanitarian and aesthetic, exists in Barry Humphries *Bizarre* (1965),<sup>15</sup> in which he states: 'here we can contemplate in tranquillity the stunning variety of human nature, whether it be expressed poetically or teratologically' (p. 7).

<sup>14</sup> Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Humphries, comp., *Bizarre* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1965).

But as a part of a triangulation map of deformity it is an unsuccessful third piece. The book is not about deformity, nor is deformity a device that illuminates the work; the primary concern is with deviancy. A representative range includes a story by Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, 'Venus in Furs', which is a tale about bondage and sadism (pp. 32); there are many scatological pieces such as John Ramsbottom's 'The Urine Drinkers' (p. 34); 'Siné Lavatories' (p. 36); and anonymously, 'Handy Household Hints for the Mutilation of the Mona Lisa' (pp. 47-52). The book has a note of the voyeur about it; and Humphries admits 'this volume is addressed, frankly, to the jaded palate' (p. 7). Photographs and scant biographies of persons who are physically deformed or physically different are included alongside tales and illustrations of multiple social deviances. The implication seems to be that in nature physical deviancy produces deviancy within one's moral nature; the age-old idea exploited to the discredit of the physically abnormal persons who thereby become icons for deviancy. Despite the authority of such 'great men' as Aristotle ('Monstrousness is not contrary to nature, but contrary to the usual working of nature' (p. 150) ), an entirely different line of interpretation opens through de Sade's observation: 'so if there are beings on earth whose tastes defy all accepted precedents . . . they are no more responsible for having this bizarre taste than you are for being witty or foolish, handsome or hunchbacked' (p. 9). Humphries' compilation is a disservice to the humanitarian *and* the aesthetic: it relies heavily on the literal tropism signalled by the wondrous cover-picture of a hirsute male. Susan McKernan's attack on negative portrayals of the deformed would have been better served in the case of the Humphries book - but then McKernan is a *literary* critic. A Fiedlerian analysis of Humphries work might possibly yield a more revealing picture of the compilation.

Humphries' book fails to satisfy Robinson's criteria of the aesthetic or the humanitarian. For the most part the novels studied here provide excellent examples of responsible and sensitive portrayals of deformity and the metaphors of deformity. Thurer has said that: 'our literary tradition - especially the more sacred, "highbrow" forms of art, such as those that we study in college literature courses, film, children's classics, and drama - have remained protected from scrutiny' (p. 12). It is hoped that this study has made visible what was once un-seen; and that it has thus opened up the possibility of other and future work undergoing such 'scrutiny'.





Scene from the ABC-TV 1979 Production of  
Alan Marshall's *I Can Jump Puddles*  
Courtesy of Victoria Hollick, Stills Co-Ordinator ABC-TV

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