

**This Mortal Coil:
Travel, Identity, Mortality in the Work of
Robert Dessaix**

By

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Note on Abbreviations of Titles

For style and convenience, I will abbreviate in-text citations of the following primary sources as:

A Mother's Disgrace: MD

Night Letters: NL

Twilight of Love: TL

Abstract: "This Mortal Coil: Travel, Identity, Mortality in the Work of Robert Dessaix"

Robert Dessaix is a prominent figure in Australian literary culture, known initially for hosting ABC Radio's *Books and Writing* programme (1985–95) and subsequently for his books, essays and reviews. His major publications include: *A Mother's Disgrace* (1994), *Night Letters: A Journey through Switzerland and Italy* (1996), *Corfu: A Novel* (2001), *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev* (2004) and *Arabesques: A Tale of Double Lives* (2008). In each of these texts, Dessaix interrogates traditional tropes of travel literature in order to articulate a nuanced and revised understanding of concepts such as the self, authenticity and home.

This thesis examines the ways in which identity and homecoming are represented in Dessaix's travel writing. It shows that these concepts are structured around an inescapable awareness of mortality. Although the journeys of Dessaix's narrators seem to be made "in the face of death," or as a resistance to death, it is through an awareness of being subject to death that they find their voices; travel is not in this case a flight from death and the accompanying emotions of anxiety and fear, but a means of affirming life and identity. The central argument of this study is that despite defining his narrators as "placeless," cosmopolitan travellers, reminders of their mortality interrupt the journeys / writings of these figures and serve to inform a "placed," bound and human experience of the world.

Of central concern to the project is the way Dessaix's preoccupation with the mortal condition constitutes a simultaneous crisis / affirmation of identity.

Dessaix's narrators affirm their identities only when contemplating not being; it is only when exploring the silence of the grave, giving voice to the threat of death, that they find their own voices. Hence a constant play between presence and absence throughout his work. In this way, Dessaix's textual personae manifest themselves via an "aesthetic of absence" that revolves around three main phenomena: the absence of a central, "grand" narrative of the life of Dessaix's narrators; the absence of "place" in his definition of home; and the absence of the literary figures (and their epochs) in whose footsteps his narrators travel. These absences represent an underlying awareness of mortality and an anxiety toward the finitude of life; together with a rhetoric of unity and wholeness, they work to define a uniform, centred textual persona across Dessaix's body of work. Although this kind of self-certainty has been disparaged in certain fields—especially postcolonial studies—by defining themselves *through* absence Dessaix's narrators comprise a textual identity that is open to difference and is thus one that denotes a positive elaboration of essentialism free of the oppressive binaries that tend to characterise much travel literature.

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Writing anything in long-form is a solitary process, and I am indebted to my fellow postgraduate students for keeping the air alive with conversation and for their shared support and sustained faith in the study of literature: Ryan Burley, Britta Hartmann, Claire Konkes, Anna Lucas, Alessandro Sheedy and Zack Eaves. I am indebted to Professor Jeff Malpas for his advice and for his work on the subject of place. Thanks also to Professor Keith Jacobs whose knowledge of and sensitivities towards literature, migration and home has been an inspiration, as have our discussions on everything from film to Manchester in the early '80s.

A project such as this is, in the end, more than academic, and throughout the three years it took to complete, my remarkable family and friends made the experience bearable. In particular, my family has backed me

stoically and reiterated time and again the importance of what I was doing. My bandmates, Dreamboat, Peter and Sarah, reminded me there was more to life than work. Teddy and Rae Rae supplied many laughs, much serious support and a place to stay when in Melbourne for conferences; Benny Walter and Robbie Arnott kept alive the notion that the best literary discussion takes place at the pub. My dear friends, Antonia Thiel and Ulla Heher, not only put me up when I went journeying in Dessaix's footsteps, but ferried me to my various destinations and ignored their own protestations: "Who'd want to go to Baden-Baden?!" Imagine my surprise at finding myself being driven into Baden-Baden by two very cosmopolitan young ladies and discussing at length literature, Dessaix and Australia's place in the world. Talk about uncanny!

My sincerest thanks to Robert Dessaix, whose openness, generosity and spirited conversation left me more assured not only of the possibility of positive textual representations of the inner life, but also of his own expertise in the form.

Above all, my greatest debt of gratitude is to my wife, Emily; what follows would have been impossible without her support, her intelligence and her insight into my character. Her positivity, self-possession and grace inspired this project at every stage. It is dedicated lovingly to her.

You are the one who writes and the one who is written.

– Edmond Jabès *The Book of Questions* (i)

Introduction

“The Diver”: Somewhere between Life and Death

The final chapter of *Arabesques*, “So Be It,” begins with a discussion of “The Tomb of the Diver,” an Ancient Greek sarcophagus displayed at Paestum near Naples. On the lid of the coffin, amid a medley of scenes depicting, presumably, “the dead man who was buried inside this coffin [...] carousing with his friends,” there is the figure of “The Diver”:

He’s been caught, this young man (or so they tell us), plummeting from life into the sea of death [...] On second thoughts, he’s not plunging so much as *hanging*. He’s just leapt into the air, he’s just this moment kicked his legs up behind him, he’s not quite yet falling. He’s mortal yet eternal, doomed yet unchanging, caught by the artist at an ecstatic pinnacle. (238; original emphasis)

The proximity of “doom” to vibrant “carousing” is a typical feature of Robert Dessaix’s travel writing. Throughout his *oeuvre*, lively renderings of Europe, Russia and North Africa are almost always accompanied by an awareness of mortality. The journeys of his narrators, often framed as attempted escapes — from home, from established identities and stereotypes, even from anxieties about death itself — are interrupted by meditations on mortality and / or by images of decay that stand as reminders of the finitude of life. Like “The Diver,” Dessaix’s narrators are perpetually suspended, often ecstatically, between life and “the sea of death.”

This thesis analyses the theme of mortality in the literary output of Robert Dessaix, particularly how this theme generates meaning with regard to

concepts of identity and home. In examining each of Dessaix's five book-length publications to date, I argue that despite often affirming a "placeless" identity, the inescapable awareness of mortality throughout Dessaix's writings *places* his narrators in the world and informs a bound, human experience of it. Although their journeys are often motivated by the threat of death, and the associated feelings of dread and claustrophobia, Dessaix's narrators are unable to liberate themselves from these concerns; metaphors for and images and thoughts of death shadow them everywhere. This awareness of mortality, however, is given a positive, almost ecstatic, spin by Dessaix, who, like "The Diver," exults in the condition of being subject to death. For him, it is only through engaging with the limit of life that meaning, identity and one's place in the world can be articulated and understood. Travel for Dessaix is a spatial exploration of the boundaries of existence. Although reminders of mortality often trigger feelings of anxiety in Dessaix's narrators, they also produce nuanced and sophisticated notions of subjectivity and of being in the world.

Dessaix's concerns with the mortal condition and how his narrators cope with the threat of death are the central concerns of this project. References to mortality in these texts are numerous, sometimes explicit—such as the narrator's terminal diagnosis in *Night Letters*—but more often implicit: from ruins at Brie, France, to decaying Venice; from carcasses hanging in delicatessen windows, to belated journeys in the footsteps of nineteenth-century travellers; and from visits to federation homes across Europe, to the recurring motifs of spirals and coils. These *memento mori* characterise a body of work whose narrators are not oppressed by their mortality but rather incorporate such

awareness and fear of death into their sense of self and into their elaboration of identity.

The threat of death in Dessaix's texts is more than a physical threat (his narrators are rarely threatened physically); signifying a state of not being, reminders of the inevitability of death signify a state of silence, which, for a narrating persona, is a state of existential crisis. To be unable to represent oneself on the page means to disappear completely. Recurring images of death and decay signify not so much a preoccupation with physical suffering and atrophy as with a state of voicelessness, of having disappeared, the silence of the grave. Death thus stands as a distant but ineluctable metaphysical vacuum, a black hole of selflessness of the kind suggested by anti-essentialist theories of identity which hold that selfhood is nothing more than a series of interconnecting discourses.

Instead of *resisting* this supposed absence of self, I argue that Dessaix gives voice to his narrators *through* contemplations of death, thus transforming an apparent absence—i.e., not being and silence—into a presence—i.e., textual identity. In so doing, Dessaix develops an “aesthetic of absence” whereby the identities of his narrators revolve around absences that function to give voice to textual presence. For example, following in the footsteps of other travelling authors as Dessaix's narrators often do—such as those of André Gide, Ivan Turgenev, Laurence Sterne and Kester Berwick—these journeys / texts not only call these figures to mind and make them, in a way, present, but such journeys / texts also highlight the *absence* of these literary figures. Their absence is a keystone of the presence of Dessaix's narrators. Likewise, defining himself as he

does in *A Mother's Disgrace* via a series of silences surrounding his adoption and homosexuality, Dessaix's textual identity emerges through discussions and descriptions of the unsaid and vanished. Dessaix's narrators thus travel through a world of traces whose sources, or referents, are always absent. In spiralling around these absences, in building their personae on this hazy bedrock, they affirm their identities only through the crisis of not being, through meditations on the limits of existence, and through a metaphysics of the departed. Therefore the affirmation of self in Dessaix's work is bound to the crisis of self; his narrators speak of voicelessness and appear through the ghosts of dead writers.

This project highlights the distinction in Dessaix's work between the concepts of death and mortality. He does not focus on death so much as he does on being *subject* to death. For example, when in the opening chapter of *A Mother's Disgrace* Dessaix is mugged at knifepoint, the episode does not end with his death but with, as he says, "my finding a voice" (1). Being brought face-to-face with his mortality, Dessaix discovers a means by which to define himself, to make himself present. In defining his crisis, he defines himself. So while death marks the "end of the road" and a condition of being voiceless, it is the *threat* of such a fate that gives form to Dessaix's narrators, the threat of being absent, the threat of silence. Death itself appears very infrequently in Dessaix's books; other than brief discussions of the deaths of his adopting parents (*MD* 154), Russian author Ivan Turgenev (*TL* 182–83), and Greta's husband in *Corfu* (230), death appears as something of the distant past or the ill-defined future. However, an awareness of being subject to death, of always hanging suspended above "the sea of death," characterises practically every page. The various

absences through which these narrators articulate themselves stand as metaphors for the mortal condition, reminders of the unavoidable fact that they too will one day become absent. In coping with the anxieties that arise from such an awareness or threat, Dessaix's narrators reveal a profound attachment to home and give a very clear account of who they are and where they come from.

Other Voices: Career, Style and Reception

Dessaix is a popular and highly regarded figure in Australian literary culture. His body of work includes the five books examined here, as well as collections of personal and critical essays, *(And So Forth)* (1998), *Secrets* (1997; with Drusilla Modjeska and Amanda Lohrey), *On Humbug* (2009) and *As I was Saying* (2012); a translation of Turgenev's *Mysterious Tales* (1979) and a monograph on Turgenev's life and work, *Turgenev: The Quest for Faith* (1980); scholarly articles published during his years as an academic (1974–80); and many book introductions, magazine and journal articles, essays and reviews. Sections from several of these publications, mainly passages about being adopted as a child, are included in Sara Holloway's *Family Pictures* (1994) and Rosamund Dalziell's *Family Wanted: Stories of Adoption* (2006). Dessaix has also edited *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: An Anthology* (1993), *Picador New Writing* (1993; co-editor with Helen Daniel), the *Best Australian Essays* series (2004 and 2005) and a collection of interviews, *Speaking their Minds* (1998), conducted during his term hosting the *Books and Writing* show on ABC Radio (1985–95). His first play, *A*

Mad Affair, drawing on the life and amours of Turgenev, was staged at the Earl Arts Centre in Launceston in April 2013.

Citing the “European-ness” of his work, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman have suggested that Dessaix is “perhaps the most demonstrably learned and cosmopolitan of contemporary Australian novelists” (110). After teaching Russian language and literature at a tertiary level, and his subsequent work at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Dessaix rose to prominence with the publication of his first book *A Mother’s Disgrace* (1994). Largely autobiographical, it recounts his adoption as a baby, his childhood in suburban Sydney and education in Canberra and Moscow, his marriage, divorce, search for his birth mother and, ultimately, his homosexual awakening. *A Mother’s Disgrace* introduced the Australian reading public to Dessaix’s singular voice; mannered and searching, at once direct and elusive, prone to digressions and unashamedly sensitive, it is a voice that, in the words of Peter Craven, “represents with a kind of Helpmann-like elegance and virtuosity the side of our sensibilities we publicly repress” (11). Craven’s comparison of Dessaix to the dancer Sir Robert Helpmann alludes to another facet of Dessaix’s writing: performance. *A Mother’s Disgrace* not only tells the story of Dessaix’s life in a distinct style via a host of European cultural references, but it also features a narrator who is highly self-conscious of his narrative performance and attuned to the difficulties of representing himself textually. This self-consciousness throws into question the nature of the narrator’s subjectivity, a question that persists throughout Dessaix’s writings and one this project addresses.

Despite being a single author study, this thesis is not a biographical investigation into Dessaix's life and works. Rather, it is a critical engagement with Dessaix's texts, one that examines the ways in which he constructs his narrating identities. Because Dessaix's narrators share much with Dessaix himself there is inevitably a blurring of the distinction between author and narrator. Indeed, Dessaix encourages this confusion by playing between autobiography and fiction, by calling some of his first-person travelogues "novels," and by naming one of his narrators "R." In this project, however, I limit myself to the Dessaix that is represented in his works. This thesis is neither a comparison between the textual "Dessaix" and Dessaix-the-author, nor an attempt to conflate the two. It is instead an analysis of the rhetorical strategies by which Dessaix gives voice to his literary personae.

The emerging scholarship on Dessaix's work focuses in the main on the hybrid nature of his texts and his use of intertextuality. In general, commentators are more interested than I am in finding links between Dessaix's narrators and the author himself. Roberta Trapè, for instance, has compared Dessaix's visions of Italy in *Night Letters* to the diaries Dessaix kept on travelling through Italy in 1991 and 1995. She is interested in antipodean visions of Italy, and draws a distinction between "R." (the narrator of *Night Letters*) and Dessaix in asking, "How much do R.'s attitude and responses to Italy correspond to Dessaix's?" (106). Ultimately Trapè finds Dessaix's definitive statement about Italy in the moment author and narrator merge and argues that, for both, "Italy issues the recognition of the necessity of a new way of life [and] awakens an

awareness of the inescapable condition of mortality" (107). For Trapè, the conflation of the two figures equals a moment of truth.

Paolo Bartoloni, who translated *Night Letters* into Italian (1998), has also published three articles and an interview with Dessaix that deal with issues of translation, temporality, mortality and antipodean visions of Italy. These publications concentrate on the text's "state of being in-between" ("Virtuality of Translation" 77) two cultures—that of the original manuscript (Australian) and that of the translation (Italian)—and on how, from a postcolonial perspective, it exhibits a "typical[ly] Australian sense of unease and displacement" ("On Translation" 91). However, given his interest in the "in-betweenness" of Dessaix's texts, it is curious that Bartoloni does not explicitly take up the question of R.'s identity. Even though Dessaix encourages the critic to investigate the nature of the narrator's identity by calling him "R.," Bartoloni does not engage with him on this point and, after five publications on *Dessaix's* in-betweenness, it becomes the proverbial elephant in the room. Likewise, Robert Dixon discusses *Night Letters* as / in translation, and although he highlights the ways in which R. performs a "translation of the self" (94) to and from Europe, the analysis does not extend to R.'s translation of his self onto the page.

But where Bartoloni and Dixon resist such an enquiry, Javant Biarujia pursues Dessaix vigorously through the pages of *Night Letters*. Although he initially maintains a careful distinction between R. and Dessaix, Biarujia soon notes that, "As the author of *Night Letters* is also ill [Dessaix was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1994], it is difficult to avoid the conclusion, if we haven't

already decoded his tropes, that *Night Letters* is *his* story" (78–79). Following this, he abandons the distinction altogether, growing weary of "pretend[ing]" that "the author and the protagonist are not one and the same" (80). For the rest of the article Biarujia uses "R." and "Dessaix" interchangeably with a view to illustrating how R.'s "insistent refusal to reveal himself" (78)—i.e., his silence—is evidence of R.'s / Dessaix's "internalised homophobia" (80).

Thus, even when critics attempt to separate narrator from author there is invariably slippage. Rarely are Dessaix's narrators examined without a comparison with Dessaix-the-author. Textual persona and author merge once again when Ninette Boothroyd and Michelle Royer, discussing Dessaix's successful translation into French and subsequent status in French literary culture, note that Reflet (his French publisher) wanted to "publish an author rather than a book and they considered Dessaix as 'un véritable écrivain' ('a true writer')" (96). Boothroyd and Royer view the relative success of *A Mother's Disgrace* in France as a result of his public persona, which they see as the embodiment of his narrator. Likewise, in their analysis of *Twilight of Love*, and presumably talking about Dessaix the author, Kevin Windle and Rosh Ireland argue that "in seeking and finding Turgenev, [Dessaix] is also finding himself" (322). And, in his analyses of *Night Letters* and *Corfu*, Noel Henricksen switches between "Dessaix" and the initials R. and N. (the latter signifying the unnamed narrator of *Corfu*) without discussing the relation (or lack thereof) between author and narrator. Writing from a clinical perspective, Jill Gordon frames a discussion of the relationship between doctors and patients with references to the "Annunciation" scene in *Night Letters*, in which R. is diagnosed with an

unnamed life-threatening illness. In so doing, Gordon discards the handle of “R.” entirely and reads the episode as “Dessaix’s experience” (34).

In contrast, Russell West-Pavlov explores the theoretics of identity found in *Night Letters*. He notes that although the novel exemplifies “the sort of decentring of subjectivity integral to the poststructuralist thought upon which cultural studies depends [it] does not signal the death of selfhood” (172). Rather, Dessaix’s text evokes a mode of identification based upon movement and thus not restricted by notions of national belonging. West-Pavlov, writing in the context of translation studies, uses Dessaix’s text to illustrate the mutability of identity and the need for translators to be sensitive to foreign cultures. He is more concerned with the intertextual elements of the novel and R.’s mode of travel as a response to the threat of physical death—“the incipient extinction of the self” (167)—than he is in what death and R.’s voice might represent, or the connotations of such.

The rhetorical slippage between narrator and author that often occurs in these discussions signals, not so much a misreading, but the necessity for an investigation into the nature of Dessaix’s textual identity and the strategies by which this identity is formed. The subtle dynamics at work in Dessaix’s construction of his various narrating personae make it a mistake to identify these narrators as Dessaix-the-author, the private citizen, for fictionalisation, self-reflexivity and intertextuality are often just as important in defining these narrators as are autobiography and literal reportage. In making a theme of identity—for example, in naming the narrator of *Night Letters* “R.”—Dessaix throws into question who is speaking, not only in terms of the distinction

between narrator and Dessaix-the-author, but, more importantly for this project, between Dessaix's self-conscious narrators and the selves they produce in their narratives.

At the same time, however, this technique suggests that it would also be a mistake to identify Dessaix's narrators as *entirely* fictitious constructions, for this would be to deny the ironic, palimpsestic coexistence of identities with which he works. To this end, excluding discussions of *Night Letters* and *Corfu* (whose narrators I refer to as R. and N. respectively), I refer to the narrating voices as "Dessaix," while acknowledging the high level of self-fashioning evident in his texts and the gap that always exists between narrator and author. In particular though, this project highlights that Dessaix's textual identities are *surrogates*—not so much for Dessaix-the-author, but more importantly, substitutes, or stand-ins, for themselves. When, in *A Mother's Disgrace*, Dessaix's narrator states that he "wanted to fill in this shaft of silence running up through the centre of [his] life, *at least with words*" (20; my emphasis), he is suggesting that the narratives and identity he creates are a consolation—a self and a biography that take the place of (and rearticulate) the absence of metanarrative he finds at the centre of his life.

Dessaix's narrators are, on the one hand, conscious of their textual make-up, while on the other, via a rhetoric of centrality, unity and wholeness, they reveal a sense that *the* central, essential, defining element of their identities is always absent; the "shaft of silence" can be filled, but only with words, which are surrogates for anything more tangible, such as familial, gender-based or national ties. Dessaix and "Dessaix" might be related, but this project is more

concerned with how the author's narrators struggle to define themselves. In this way, the narrative voices reveal an essential absence at (or *absence as essential to*) the heart of Dessaix's concept of identity.

Dessaix's Travel Performances in Context

This thesis is divided into three parts comprised of two chapters; each part addresses a prominent theme of Dessaix's narratives and performances as a traveller: absence, placelessness and mortality. The first two parts consider how Dessaix dismantles notions of identity and "home" as fixed and immutable. The final part shows that despite this he does not do away with these concepts altogether; rather, they appear via a series of "present absence[s]" (Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss* xxxii)¹ whereby metaphors for death and decay work to establish each narrator's place in the world. These narrators often define themselves by what isn't there. This section analyses the manifestations of an awareness of death in Dessaix's texts and argues that they signify an unshakable attachment to home.

Little has been written about Dessaix's work in the context of travel writing studies. This is surprising given that travel is central to his texts and his ideas of selfhood and belonging. Nevertheless, some of the existing scholarship does provide a helpful starting point for considering his work from a travel writing perspective. Although neither Bartoloni nor Trapè examine R.'s identity in terms of mortality, both critics note that his travels are underwritten by his being subject to death. In particular, Bartoloni observes that R.'s awareness of mortality causes him to reconfigure Western conceptions of both the journey

and the narrative in a way that subverts the traditional structure of beginning, middle and end (“Traveling with Mortality” 109). In terms of the identity work Dessaix’s texts perform, West-Pavlov argues that Dessaix’s so-called “decentring” of identity in *Night Letters* does not necessarily signify the death of the subject but rather a more radical mode of human agency (172). In so doing, he highlights the way in which travel provides a spatial metaphors that denotes both physical and “disciplinary boundaries” (164).

Indeed, Dessaix’s work continually crosses (or transgresses) disciplinary boundaries, shifting between genres, never favouring one over another. Although it might loosely be categorised as life-writing, his *oeuvre* is far from being at home in this genre, moving as it does into literary biography, memoir, fiction, essay, and, most importantly for this project, travelogue. Movement is a key element of his work thematically, structurally and generically. While acknowledging the hybrid nature of Dessaix’s texts, this project defines these texts as travel writing. Although they might not belong to the genre exclusively, one cannot discount the significance of travel in these works, nor the way in which Dessaix’s narrators deploy the tropes of travel writing in articulating their textual identities. In particular, the theme of mortality that pervades Dessaix’s texts functions to reappraise many tropes of travel literature including the spatial enactment of identity, Orientalism, the pursuit of pleasure, cosmopolitanism, civilisation versus barbarism, the quest for authenticity, “touristic shame” (Frow 146), the uncanny and “the spatial anchor of home” (Lisle 150). This thesis investigates the ways in which Dessaix’s narrators deploy and revalue these tropes in the articulation of their textual identities.

The trope of movement as a form of interrogation (inner, discursive and disciplinary) is a primary one in travel writing studies. Much travel writing scholarship reads movement as evidence of a traveller's / writer's complicity with or critique of various ideologies. These investigations largely favour analyses of power dynamics, particularly in the field of postcolonial studies. This area of study was influenced greatly, perhaps even conceived, on the publication of Edward Saïd's analysis of the Orient as "a European invention" (1) in *Orientalism* (1978). Increasingly thereafter, modes of movement and reportage have often been read in terms of their bias towards a Eurocentric view of the world. Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) was instrumental in furthering and concentrating this line of enquiry when it investigated the question: "How has travel and exploration writing *produced* 'the rest of the world'?" (5; original emphasis).

Travel writing is a fluid and multi-faceted genre, and most commentators have difficulty defining its parameters. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan note that, "[t]ravel narratives run from picaresque adventure to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable, and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology, and social science, often demonstrating great erudition, but without seeing fit to respect the rules that govern conventional scholarship" (8–9). In *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing Studies*, Peter Hulme identifies five "overlapping strands" found in recent travel writing: the comic, the analytical, the wilderness, the spiritual and the experimental ("Travelling to Write" 93). These "strands" work to produce distinct modes of travel / writing, such as: the

comedic and often bumbling English gentleman (94); a “mixture of personal reportage and socio-analysis” (94); the “inner-journey” made in the face of grief and / or the powerful forces of nature (96); adventure or “extreme travel” (96); and the marginal re-workings of the genre via experiments with form at the levels of both literary technique and mode of travel (99).

As many studies reveal, it is the fluidity of its generic boundaries that enable travel writing to cover such vast territory, as it were (Blanton 5–6; Hulme and Youngs 10–11; Lisle 28; Holland and Huggan 8–9). Given its cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary nature, both the production and consumption of travel literature in all its incarnations have been considered “political acts” (Lisle 11) in relation to global power dynamics. Such analyses, like Debbie Lisle’s *Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Caren Kaplan’s *Questions of Travel* and James Clifford’s *Routes*, focus on the ways in which political discourses between regions appear in the travel accounts that deal with those same regions. In these cases, travel / writing is viewed as a metaphor for global political relations. Other texts, such as Pratt’s, Saïd’s, Sara Mills’ *Discourses of Difference* and more recently Graham Huggan’s *Extreme Pursuits*, are perhaps more nuanced, focusing on the performance of the traveller / writer and the ethical implications of the genre. These studies describe the struggle for autonomy on the part of both the traveller and travellee and highlight the moral implications of travel literature and its consumption.

In addition to revealing cross-cultural tensions, travel writing scholarship over the last few decades has highlighted biases and resistances toward the traveller’s own culture from the perspectives of the traveller /

writer, the travellee and the reader of travel literature. Hulme and Tim Youngs note the range of contemporary issues and discourses to which such studies lend themselves, including feminism and gender, race relations, translation studies, anthropology, the genre of travel writing and the phenomenology of travel itself (8–10). In this way, like the postcolonial novel, travel and its writing has also been seen as a “writing back” (Hulme and Youngs 10) against the central ideologies and myths of Eurocentric culture. Instead of being a vehicle of arrogance and oppression, in more recent years some travel writing has come to be used as (or viewed as) a mode of resistance, central to which is the textual construction of the travelling subject.

The issue of subjectivity is a primary one in travel writing—firstly because the travel writer is the anchor in a genre that traditionally comprises a series of episodic encounters that are shaped and thematised after the fact; and secondly because the generic opacity of the form (which often includes fictionalisations) casts a shadow of doubt over the veracity of such accounts. As the “lens” through which the reader views the world, the nature of the subject at the centre of the travelogue determines the nature of that world. Those travel narratives that assume the secure, clearly delineated subjectivity of the traveller have come under heavy scrutiny, particularly from postcolonial commentators. Pratt has defined this kind of self-assured traveller as “the monarch-of-all-I-survey,” which, in its unity, certainty and attempted mastery of foreign regions, deploys discourses “associated with European forms and relations to power” (202) in what she calls “a rhetoric of presence” (205). Such a perspective involves the interaction between aesthetics and ideology whereby the qualities

of foreign places are constituted in terms of the “social and material value” (205) of the explorer’s home culture, while any deficiency in these places suggests the need for intervention by this same (Eurocentric) culture. The self-possessed traveller, therefore, is characterised and consoled by the *presence* of his / her home culture; the foreign world is constituted in terms of its relation to “home” and the immersion of the traveller in the myths, rhetoric and narratives of such a culture.

Absence

Dessaix’s travel writing engages in a critique of the kinds of ideologies that underpin “the monarch-of-all-I-survey” attitude which Pratt describes, particularly in the way his narratives and journeys enact a constant interrogation of identity. While Pratt’s imperial traveller often constitutes himself in terms of the presence of his home culture, Dessaix’s narrators do so in terms of the absence of such certainties. This does not signal the death of identity, but rather reconstitutes the concept in radical and humane ways. His work shares what many see as travel writing’s primary focus: the self (Hulme and Youngs 6; Holland and Huggan 12; Blanton 12). The generic playfulness of Dessaix’s texts serves as a means by which he might define his relationship with the world. Dessaix’s travel writing engages with various “strands” of the genre, particularly the inner-journey and literary re-workings of the genre at its margins. It is not, however, travel literature in the sense of constituting a pragmatic guide or literal travelogue. Dessaix lays no claims to factual veracity. Rather, he avails himself of the generic slipperiness of travel writing in order to

define his narrating identities. Destinations are reported in a way that deepens his literary personae, not in a way that might inform the reader about that destination's specifics; his journeys favour travel with a capital "T," which invests them with an existential, philosophical bent. In so doing, his work exemplifies Lisle's observation that "travel writers are profoundly self-reflexive" (68–69) in two respects; on one hand, Dessaix's narrators are conscious of the traditions in which their travel / narrative performances engage, while on the other these narratives are "conscious of the self" they are creating textually.

At the heart of Dessaix's travel writing is the problem of the *nature* of identity. Throughout, the threat of death symbolises the self-in-crisis, the threat of silence, and the absence of an essential, underlying identity that might be expressed through language. His narrators define themselves through the threat of the "void." However, instead of characterising themselves as the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" via a "rhetoric of presence," Dessaix's textual personae are by nature unfixed and mutable, constructed as they are via an aesthetic of absence. This is neither to say that Dessaix denies the presence of a central, all-seeing figure in each of his narratives—the agent of "the surveying and policing eye" (Spurr 20)—nor that he adopts a completely anti-essentialist, poststructuralist view of subjectivity. Rather, he collapses the binaries of presence / absence, essentialism / anti-essentialism.

The unity and self-assuredness of Pratt's figure of "the monarch-of-all-I-survey" is defined by an essentialist conception of identity, which claims that a variety of fundamental, inherent attributes constitute the nature of the

travelling subject. Thus the travelling subject carries cultural assumptions formed at home and projects these onto foreign landscapes and people. Dessaix, however, has an ambivalent relation to essentialism. Journeys in his texts are quests for self structured as quests for narrative, for the stories of his own life and for the stories of the lives of other authors; he uses travel as a means to define his narrators and where they come from. These travels do affirm identity, but they do so in a manner that maintains a simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self. It is only through the awareness of mortality—i.e., the threat of death as it is represented throughout his texts—that Dessaix's narrators might give voice to their selves. In this way, the crisis is essential.

Drawing on the distinction Diana Fuss makes between essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of identity, chapter one of this thesis examines the construction of the narrator of *A Mother's Disgrace* in order to highlight Dessaix's ambivalence toward essentialism. This chapter discusses what I call Dessaix's "will to essentialism," which reveals itself through his rhetoric of unity and centrality and manifests itself in several ways: firstly, in the form of a spatial metaphoric that contrasts "wild," natural spaces with tame, constructed spaces; secondly, in his search for "Motherlands"; and lastly via the recurring motif of spirals and coils, revolving around a central point, that defines his inner-geometry.

However, Dessaix's will to essentialism is complicated by competing discourses in the text involving surrogates, failed quests and the silences that surround his homosexuality and his mother's giving birth out of wedlock. These absences—the absence of voice, the absence of an underpinning

genealogical narrative—prove to be essential to Dessaix’s literary persona; in his articulation of these absences, Dessaix gives an account of his identity. Rather than affirming himself via a “rhetoric of presence” (Pratt 205), this figure is defined by an aesthetic of absence. In chapter two, I analyse *Arabesques* in order to explore the ways in which Dessaix’s aesthetic of absence subverts Orientalist discourses. His rhetorical strategy produces both silences and clichés that re-characterise North Africa as a “landscape of forgetting” (*Arabesques* 31)—a trope of Occidental travels to the region—while remaining sensitive to the limitations, exploitations and history of this image. In so doing, he affirms silence as a defining characteristic of his narrating persona. *Arabesques*, with oblivion as its central focus, thus effects a kind of “writing back” against the assumptions and representations typical of traditional Occidental travelogues.

Holland and Huggan note that “[c]ontemporary travel narratives [...] rely upon the authority of the witness [and], in [the] postmodern vein, often [play] on such notions of authenticity, either showing how the traveler imposes subjectivity on the narrative or laying bare the power structures underlying claims to truth” (16). By defining the central “witness[es]” of Dessaix’s world via an aesthetic of absence—one that symbolises a simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self—both *A Mother’s Disgrace* and *Arabesques* maintain the centrality of the travelling subject while “laying bare” traditional discourses of identity. Further, through an analysis of the spatial metaphors of these texts, and Dessaix’s exposure of the unreliability of supposed traditional identity-forming narratives, the opening chapters of this study illustrate the way in which Dessaix conceives of his narrating voice as a surrogate for an essential

identity, one that is “grounded” in a state of continual upheaval and revolves around a “present absence for which death is another word” (Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss* xxxii). For Jonathan Dollimore, a “present absence” is akin to the title of a forgotten book or the “stillness” of the dust it collects in a second-hand bookshop (xxxii–ii). These lingering traces not only stand as reminders of those texts, but also as reminders of mortality, as *memento mori*. They are characterised by their relation to oblivion and silence. It is these traces, these present absences, by which Dessaix’s narrators define themselves. Dessaix’s texts demonstrate the ways in which travel and narration can function as modes of self-expression without resorting to the kinds of domineering techniques that have traditionally characterised much travel literature.

Placelessness

Casey Blanton observes that it is not simply the self that is travel writing’s main concern, but rather “the *relationship* between self and world” (29; my emphasis). Travel narratives depict and delineate the travelling subject in the context of the journey; although the self is a central issue of travel literature, it is so in reference to place. In order to define the self, the travel writer must produce the world through which s / he moves. As Dennis Porter suggests, the travel writer’s attempts to map the globe “are always concerned with the question of place and of placing, of situating oneself once and for all vis-à-vis an Other or others” (20). Such attempts have often maintained a rigorous differentiation between the traveller’s homeland and the foreign places s / he visits. In so

doing, travel literature's "cultural cartography" "masks the effort to control" (Porter 20) foreign regions and people.

In recent times, travel, particularly tourism, has been theorised as a symbol for the late-capitalist human condition in which the forces of globalisation have effectively eradicated differences between cultures and displaced their inhabitants (MacCannell 15). Global capitalism has produced the same imperial cultural cartography found in much early travel literature. By eliminating differences between and within nations, globalisation has arguably detached populations from the idiosyncrasies of home cultures and severed connections to the past. Travel and the business of tourism, as Dean MacCannell writes, serves not only as an image of the spread of capitalism, but it is also a modern "alternative" to "everyday life" (read: "alienation"), one that "makes a place for unattached individuals in modern society" (15). Travel is thus not only indicative of the late-capitalist erasure of borders, but also of the global citizen's consequent search for meaning, authenticity and a place in the world.

Studies of "the traveller" as an embodiment of the late-capitalist human condition have focused on discourses of empire and a host of discourses and symbols of displacement, including immigrants, refugees, exiles, nomads, cosmopolitans and the homeless. These discourses are the language of what Kaplan calls a "lived intensity of separation" (2), often resulting from phenomena such as war, famine, persecution, employment and the spread of global capitalism. Although each has its own parameters—and keeping in mind

that “[a]ll displacements are not the same” (Kaplan 2)—these categories can be broadly conceived under the moniker of detachment.

In deploying the tropes of travel and tourism to affirm his narrating personae, Dessaix engages with this rhetoric of detachment. The absence of anchoring narratives that might define his identity motivates and informs his journeys; like tourism itself, Dessaix’s travels are (1) an expression of detachment and (2) a quest for meaning and authenticity. The second section of this thesis, chapters three and four, deals with these two phenomena respectively. As an expression of detachment, Dessaix’s journeys and texts work to assert his “placelessness.” I borrow this term from Dessaix himself, who, in his 2011 Seymour Biography Lecture, notes that placelessness has come to identify a state of crisis in national identity: “Large numbers of us nowadays float placelessly above the world’s nation-states, cocooned in our own private memories, allegiances, and dreams” (“Pushing” 36). In this lecture, Dessaix claims that it is his sense of being “placeless” that motivates his travels, for it is through travel, and particularly the narratives of travel, that he might define and “place” himself.

Dessaix is, of course, not the first writer to use the term “placeless.” In his influential study, *Abroad: British Literary Travel Between the Wars* (1980), Paul Fussell likens placelessness to the “vapid non-allusive” (44) environment of “non-places,” such as the interiors of the aeroplane, the airport and the ocean liner. The stark uniformity of these settings resists the travelling subject’s attempts at self-expression or identification. Placelessness is indicative, for Fussell, of other “replacements” that characterise contemporary life: “the

replacement of coffee-cream by ivory-coloured powder, for example, or of silk and wool by nylon; or glass by lucite, books by 'bookstores,' eloquence by jargon, fish by fish-sticks, merit by publicity, motoring by driving, and travel by tourism" (44–45). Placelessness, for Fussell like Dessaix, is characterised by surrogation and the homogenising forces of globalisation.

Importantly, placelessness is distinct from many other terms within travel writing's lexicon of detachment. Dessaix is not, for instance, homeless; although his narratives assert his placelessness, Dessaix is not without a sense of home. Within the articulation of his placeless condition can be found a theoretics of home and homecoming (which I discuss in the final section of this project). Home, like self, is conceptualised through a constant process of interrogation, fluid and open to difference. This is not to say that Dessaix is nomadic in the style of, say, Bruce Chatwin whose "preference for wandering [...] allies him with the nomadic heritage of permanent displacement" (Blanton 107). Dessaix is not, as Blanton describes Chatwin, "decentred or displaced" (107); although he might sometimes wish to "travel light" (107) and wander without attachment, plan or itinerary, reminders of home / death infiltrate and interrupt these detours. Dessaix's narrators always gravitate toward home; despite their attempts to favour wandering and chance, their travels are always round trips.

Nor does Dessaix's placelessness connote a sort of exile; just as he is not homeless, Dessaix is not an exile. Exiles harbour a profound sense of the loss of home, and often await the time they might return; Dessaix's home is never lost, despite his frequent efforts to lose it. Home is a powerful presence in Dessaix's

work and is manifest in a series of uncanny returns that often produce feelings of anxiety and claustrophobia in his narrators. His overall project is how to live *with* anxiety and claustrophobia, how to incorporate these emotions into a sense of self and home. It is not Dessaix's case, as it *is* with exiles, that home has been lost; rather, for him, home is absent, or always somewhere else. Gelder and Salzman's observation that Dessaix is one of the most "cosmopolitan of contemporary Australian novelists" (110) highlights his detachment from place, particularly in relation to national identity. Indeed, Dessaix rarely discusses Australia explicitly (unless critiquing the elements of its culture that contribute to a sense of national identity). In the texts under discussion, Australia appears as an aside, with practically all the action taking place in Europe, Russia and North Africa, and with the majority of the cultural references European. Thus a sense of detachment from national belonging permeates practically every page of his output, which both lends his texts their cosmopolitan character and informs his placelessness. Ironically, as this project highlights, the feelings of anxiety, claustrophobia and non-belonging that motivate Dessaix's narrators to leave or dismiss Australia are precisely those that draw them back again.

Chapter three examines *Twilight of Love* in order to highlight the way in which Dessaix "maps" Europe as a "non-place" and casts himself as a detached figure within the milieu of late-capitalist globalisation. This section of the thesis focuses largely on the "touristic" side of Dessaix's work: how he views the world of tourism, how he interacts with it, and how it is useful to him in articulating his textual identity. This chapter draws on Friedrich Nietzsche's figure of the "civilised" nineteenth-century "*good European*," who envisaged a

culturally united Europe of the future, in order to discuss the ways Dessaix maps his Europe. Although it is a largely united place, it is, for Dessaix, characterised by the absence of such Nietzschean civilisation. Instead, Dessaix's Europe is one united by a series of what Marc Augé terms "non-places" (94): the homogenised places of late-capitalism, detached from history; places which are, like Dessaix himself, defined by the absence of narrative and "civilisation." This chapter examines Dessaix's revaluation of the terms "civilisation" and "barbarian" and considers how an awareness of mortality, symbolised by an awareness of the passing of history, is central to his understanding of a civilised existence.

Chapter four remains with *Twilight of Love* in order to investigate the second part of the modern touristic experience: the quest for authenticity and meaning. This chapter analyses Dessaix's conceptualisation of authenticity, by illustrating the ways in which his travels are self-authenticating. Those places that enable him to further his narrative of himself (even the maintained, constructed houses and museums he visits) are deemed authentic, whereas those that resist this narrative are written off and abandoned. Despite his scepticism toward the "inauthenticity" of the "tourist gaze" (Urry 1), certain destinations embody for Dessaix an "authentic domain of being" (Frow 129) in terms of the way they lend themselves to an expression of Dessaix's placelessness. These places are characterised by a rhetoric of absence via their allusions to silence and the "traces" of Turgenev in whose footsteps he travels. This chapter investigates the way these "absences," as echoes of an awareness

of mortality, enable Dessaix to reassess the categories of the tourist and traveller, and the authentic and inauthentic.

Having in the first section of this thesis described the essential absence around which Dessaix constructs his textual persona, this second section elaborates on his position by examining its spatial connotations. In “mapping” a placeless Europe, in travelling through “the world of the dead” (Westover 303), Dessaix gives voice to himself. Although his identity is constructed via a somewhat postmodern absence of metanarratives, Dessaix’s journeys are not a celebration of these absences; rather, they serve to define and, in a way, place him in the world. In this way his writing reveals a tendency toward modernism, with its questioning of the value of Western civilisation, the centrality of flux and instability to his narrating identities, and the way in which his work is characterised by a dark undercurrent of death that serves to inform a critique of established knowledges and myths. At the same time, however, Dessaix’s work does not lament the breakdown of institutions, nations and identities as much modernist travel literature does. Nor does it posit a decentring or fracturing of identity. Instead, it deploys these absences in a positive expression of identity, one that denotes a constant interrogation of selfhood, which necessarily involves both travel and writing.

Mortality

Several critics have discussed briefly the ways in which an awareness of mortality functions in Dessaix’s work. In general, they argue that the threat of death leads to a disruption of both spatial and temporal linearity. These critics

often view the journeys and literary techniques in Dessaix's work—*Night Letters* in particular—as a means of escape, of dodging time and elongating existence. It is my contention that this is not the case, and that Dessaix's narrators are placed in the world, for his journeys always feature some kind of return and / or posit the impossibility of escape, regardless of how one might reconceive time and space. Bartoloni suggests that “traveling with mortality” connotes “a sort of ‘sentimental journey’” in *Night Letters*, one that causes a reappraisal of notions of linearity regarding time, traditional Western narratives and the journey itself (“Traveling with Mortality” 107–8). Likewise, Alberto Manguel notes that in “coming to terms with his own end” (174), Dessaix's narrator must both “keep travelling” (176) and “[s]pinning tales” (175), for such tales not only postpone the hour of death (175) but, also, “silence equals death” (176). And, as noted above, in her analysis of Dessaix's visions of Italy, Trapè highlights the way in which the region “awakens an awareness of the inescapable condition of mortality” (107).

These discussions are limited to *Night Letters*, but they provide a useful starting point from which to examine the theme of mortality throughout Dessaix's writings. Taken together, the criticism of Dessaix's work that deals with mortality makes three main claims: (1) the experience of foreign spaces is characterised by “anxiety and panic”; (2) his narrator's journeys are made in order to escape death; and (3) these travels are “sentimental journeys” that constitute a “working through” of the grief that accompanies R.'s life-threatening diagnosis. These three claims coincide with the ways in which mortality has been treated in the study of travel writing.

Broadly speaking, the theme of mortality has been addressed only marginally in travel writing scholarship. Commentary on the theme of death in travel writing can be grouped loosely into the following categories: as a political “zone” (such as in colonial “survival literature” [Pratt 86]); as defining those (largely communal) spaces, often linked to “extreme” or “dark” tourism, in which death and tragedy are sought out and / or mourned; and as motivating an inner, “sentimental journey,” a working through of a more personal grief and loss. The threat or evidence of death in various works of travel literature may take on more nuanced forms than these, or in fact combine them. But in the field of travel writing scholarship, narratives of encounters with death are often treated as vehicles for Eurocentric domination, and have thus been viewed as examples of power imbalances or as points around which ethical dilemmas arise.

Within the first category—that is, using the theme of death to establish a political zoning of territory—there are three further subtle variations: the presence of death in “survival literature,” which is, obviously, overcome and as such reinforces imperial discourses; the delineation of space between “home / safe” and “away / unsafe,” a process by which the “rest of the world” is “othered”; and “extreme travel,” which, like survival literature, often reinforces stereotypes associated with the (masculine) heroic quest. For Pratt, the threat of death in what she calls “survival literature” (a sub-genre of travel writing) produced a literature that was not only thrilling—“first-person stories of shipwrecks, castaways, mutinies, abandonments, and [...] captivities” (86)—but also racialised, or “othered,” this threat, equating death with the Other. The

survival of the European traveller amounted to the survival of European imperialist ideals, representations and domination.

Survival literature thus creates a binary between the safety of home and the danger of foreign spaces. As Lisle points out, this spatial coding, according to which foreign territories are “wholly other to civilised homes” (151), reproduces colonial space. Not only does this division apply to the way in which travel writing has been structured by travel writers, but also to the scholarship that examines it. Although neither sets of authors have much to say explicitly about the theme of death, both Huggan and Holland and Hulme and Youngs territorialise death when it is allied with certain “zones” of travel: the Congo and the Amazon in the former, and the Middle East, South America and the Congo in the latter. For each, death is a significant characteristic of these zones, which arguably reproduces the spatial divisions found in survival literature and the discourses of imperialism these authors critique (Lisle 157).

Throughout Dessaix’s work, reminders of death in the form of, for example, the decaying landscape, physical threat, or intertextual references—to Dante, Turgenev’s supernatural tales, Anton Chekhov and Greek myth—characterise foreign destinations as threatening. In an interview with Bartoloni, Dessaix suggests that the Italian setting of *Night Letters* is informed intertextually by Italy’s cultural history—citing Dante and Thomas Mann—as a place of “anxiety and panic” (“Traveling with Mortality” 23). And in the opening scene of *A Mother’s Disgrace*, Dessaix’s life is threatened in Cairo when he is mugged at knifepoint. In travelling to court death, Dessaix is thus

seemingly engaging with these “survival literature” binaries by casting foreign spaces as threatening.

For Huggan the presence of death is often sought out by travellers in what he calls, via Kathleen Adams, “danger-zone tourism” (100). This kind of journeying is a form of “extreme travel,” in which travellers venture to locations in order to court danger, devastation, suffering and even death. It includes “humanitarian / activist travellers,” “adrenaline-rush pursuers” (i.e., extreme sportsmen and -women), “latter-day pioneer explorers, and hardened professionals [...] whose work [...] places them at dangerously high levels of risk” (100). In the context of danger-zone tourism, the threat of death is a measure of authenticity; depleting the body’s resources and facing death, the extreme traveller is brought apparently closer to who s / he “is” and “[a]ccorded a mental clarity in death [s / he] rarely appears to have had in life” (Huggan 113). Extreme travel is reminiscent of the tourist’s search for meaning and value, though the unknowability of death (particularly the process of dying) gives licence to some travel writers to enter the poetic register, mythologise their travels and (perhaps unwittingly) reproduce colonial discourses of space.

While the travels of Dessaix’s narrators are far too mannered and highly controlled to be considered in any way extreme—not to mention the fact that the narrators themselves are rarely threatened physically—Dessaix’s travel / writing is permeated with an awareness of approaching death. In certain cases, such as when Dessaix is mugged in Cairo and when R. is diagnosed with a terminal illness, Huggan’s analysis of extreme travel is helpful in discussing the

ways in which Dessaix's narrators have recourse to the poetic and are brought closer to who they are in the presence of death (see chapter five; in particular my discussion of the "Annunciation scene" in *Night Letters*).

Likewise, while Dessaix's travel narratives are characterised by an awareness of the mortal condition, and focus on the "dark" side of travel, they are not concerned with what has been called "dark tourism." As opposed to extreme tourism, where the travelling subject is often exposed to death as a physical threat, this form of tourism describes relatively safe travel to sites associated with individual or communal deaths: "mass grave sites, concentration camps, battlefields, grisly scenes ranging in scale from celebrity assassination to genocidal extermination" (Huggan 102). Richard Sharpley defines dark tourism "simply and more generally as *the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre*" (10; original emphasis). Although an awareness of mortality suffuses Dessaix's works, and although they include journeys to "dark" places such as torture exhibitions (NL 40), the Venetian Ghetto (131), S&M clubs (198–99) and the various homes of dead authors (*Corfu*; *TL*; *Arabesques*), they are not examples of dark tourism. The "darkness" of some of the destinations that appear in Dessaix's *oeuvre* functions more as a motif that informs the greater theme of how to cope with mortality. Further, it is not the goal of Dessaix's narrators to visit sites of death and trauma; rather, they gravitate toward places that speak more broadly to an awareness of mortality, which necessarily includes sites associated with death but also includes places notorious for artistic creation, love, travel, self-realisation and a host of other associations that exceed the narrow boundaries

of dark tourism. And while Dessaix engages with the discourses of travel which courts death, he does not reproduce colonial discourses of space unintentionally. One thing this thesis is interested in is how his awareness of the politics of such representations—and of the constructed nature of tourist sites such as those central to dark tourism—produces subtle nuances that subvert discourses of “safe home” / “unsafe away.”

Travels structured around death exemplify Dollimore’s observation of “how profoundly formative the trauma of death has been in the formation of Western culture” (123). In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Dollimore identifies death, and associated feelings of loss and grief, as being central to our culture: “it could be said that we can only begin to understand the *vital* role of death in Western culture only when we accept death as profoundly, compellingly and irreducibly traumatic” (126). For Dollimore, death “has not been repressed so much as resignified in new, complex and productive ways which then legitimate a never-ending analysis of it” (126). This is perhaps compatible with Huggan’s observation that many accounts of danger-zone tourism “*derealize*” death in their recourse to poetry, mythology and metaphysics. Such travel practices, and the texts they produce, are reliant on a signification of death—not a denial but an ideological imagining—that makes death a central theme while at the same time keeping the “reality” of death—what might be called the “experience of the deathbed” (Tercier 22)—at arm’s length. Although such a claim might be levelled at Dessaix’s writings, this thesis argues that his awareness of death produces very real and grounded conceptions of being in the world that resist stereotyping binaries.

Dessaix's travel writings thus describe a working through of existential problems. Instead of being viewed as a romanticisation or mythologisation, death here serves a positive function in the generation of meaning, value and social commentary. In this context travel is therapeutic or at least reveals certain personal / cultural taboos. Porter in *Haunted Journeys* discusses the ways in which Sigmund Freud's theory of the death-drive, the psychological impulse toward auto-destruction, is "narrativised" (188) in the tradition of European travel writing. Porter claims that without Freud's concept, "one has trouble explaining what is going on" (11) in these accounts. Underscored as it is by psychoanalysis, his study illustrates the ways in which travel across physical borders reveals desires to transgress forbidden psychic frontiers. While Dessaix's travel / writing addresses a range of issues and so-called taboos, the primary issue I am concerned with here is mortality. His work enables him to confront death, something his narrators try initially to escape. I am not so much interested in revealing an underlying death-drive as I am in exploring how an underlying awareness of mortality enables a more open view of identity. Porter's work is helpful, however, in that it highlights how travel can unearth suppressed or repressed emotions and desires. Noting Dollimore's observation of the way in which, in Western culture, death is simultaneously central but "resignified," this thesis discusses the ways in which Dessaix's texts enable him to "transgress" into the sphere of death.

In his analysis of European travel writing, Porter's aim is to show that these transgressions, often erotic in nature, reveal the traveller's death-drive, the desire to lose himself (his focus is on male travellers) in the "seduction of

the void" (181). Such journeys focus on loss and come to signify "the melancholy of tourism [and the] ultimate nakedness of the void against which no writing is proof" (183). Porter's point, echoing MacCannell's, is that travel and tourism are acts that reflect a contemporary sense of loss, melancholy and a longing for annihilation.

For other commentators, travel is not so much an enactment of melancholy and loss as it is a way of *coping* with melancholy and loss. Not only can it reveal existing social and cultural problems associated with death and loss, but travel can also provide a means of working through personal loss and grief. Death has often instigated an inner quest where travelling becomes a "double journey" (Blanton 72), one geographical and the other sentimental. A typical example of this kind of travel / literature is Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* in which Matthiessen travels through the Dolpo region of the Nepalese Himalayas with the objectives of exploring the region, finding the elusive snow leopard and "assuage[ing] the grief and guilt" (Blanton 73) he feels following the death of his wife from cancer. The difficulties of the terrain, and the suffering of the people he meets, come to signify his own suffering and, by extension, that of his wife. Unable to find the leopard, Matthiessen learns to accept its absence, and as such "learns lessons about himself and his desires" (Hulme 91). Ultimately, "[w]ith the acceptance of loss and pain, the journey is complete" (Blanton 81). His travels mirror that of the "journey through" grief and thus become an act of mourning.

In Matthiessen's case, the loss of his wife and the resulting loss of his ontological security characterises a mode of travel that focuses on "what was."

In this context, the combination of death and travel, as Porter has noted, signifies loss, and is the catalyst for melancholia and mourning, the politics and ethics of which have come under increasing scrutiny (Eng and Kazanjian; Gilroy; Huggan 138–69; Sandroock 148; Middeke and Wald). The literature of loss centres around “what remains,” and, as David L. Eng and David Kazanjian suggest, “the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of what remains—how remains are produced and animated, how they are read and sustained” (ix). While Eng and Kazanjian highlight the positive and productive power of loss, “configuring absence as a potential presence” (ix), their notion of absence is in contradistinction to the way in which I conceive it here. Where they conceive a “world of remains” (5), a world of absence in which once there was presence (and where there may be presence again), Dessaix’s is a world of absence without any sense of preceding or anticipated presence. While standing in one of Turgenev’s former dwellings, it is the Russian’s “present absence” that is of primary significance to Dessaix, not the loss of the nineteenth century and the age of the Enlightenment. Likewise, when encountering silence, Dessaix’s narrators do not mourn the loss of voice or anticipate the future presence of voice, but rather observe the absence of voice. The aesthetic of absence in Dessaix’s work is therefore not underscored by feelings of loss or melancholia; his travels are not acts of mourning, in fact quite the opposite. His narrator’s quest, in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, for a genealogical narrative is not motivated by a sense of having *lost* one, but rather by the sense of the *absence* of such a narrative. Although they travel through a world of “what remains,” the focus of Dessaix’s narrators is on “what isn’t” as opposed to “what was.” This project

thus conceives of death in Dessaix's work not as loss but as absence, the absence of voice, the absence of home and identity as fixed, immutable entities, through which his narrators give voice to themselves and where they come from.

In the final section of this thesis, then, I am concerned with the ways in which Dessaix's awareness of mortality constitutes a move towards an affirmation of "home." Following John Zilcosky's work on "lostness" in the novels of W.G. Sebald and Freud's essay "The Uncanny," chapter five explores *Night Letters* and R.'s attempts to lose himself in the Italian landscape. This chapter highlights R.'s anxieties towards the familiar—what Porter refers to as a "horror of home" (235)—and argues that, although he attempts to flee Australia and himself, his journeys are characterised by a series of uncanny returns in which images of death and decay serve as reminders of home and confirm his inability to lose himself in his travels. In this way, I show that Dessaix's work is not defined by loss, mourning or melancholia, but rather by an awareness of mortality that continually, and positively, places him in the world. Finally, chapter six examines *Corfu* and illustrates the ways in which Dessaix's conception of home is constructed via a positive conceptualisation of vulnerability and absence. Specifically, I investigate how Dessaix's narrator occupies the house of Kester Berwick on Corfu, and how the resulting feelings of anxiety and reminders of death prompt a return to Australia. Back on home soil, Dessaix's narrator conceives of home not as a place immune to threat and change, but as a place for the placeless, one characterised by feelings of vulnerability and anxiety, and one open to change and difference.

Dessaix's work thus hinges on an awareness of mortality, and although the theme of death is ever-present throughout his books, it functions in a way that is distinct from the way it functions in much travel literature as discussed above. His conceptions of home and identity resist the stereotyping, colonial binaries of "safe home" / "unsafe away" and other cultural myths surrounding the conquering hero and the "monarch-of-all-I-survey." Home is a place (a state) of stillness, where mortality is foremost in mind, which means that it is also a defined, fixed place. In turn, however, reminders of death stimulate in Dessaix's narrators the desire to travel, which ultimately results in a mode of being in the world that simultaneously draws them toward and away from home. An awareness of mortality thus pervades Dessaix's representations of *both* home and away, self and other, and his textual journeys serve not so much as a "working through" or a process of learning, but as a direct expression of a sense of being in the world that is by nature vulnerable, finite and fixed, but also, essentially, mobile.

¹ Dollimore uses the term "present absence" to describe death and the way in which it manifests itself in "the formation of Western culture" (*Death, Desire and Loss* 123). Throughout the thesis I use this term in a similar vein to describe the ways in which Dessaix's narrators refer to the lives of other authors and civilisations in the construction of their identities. The objects and modes of travel associated with these other writers comprise a present absence that is the keystone to Dessaix's textual make-up.

PART ONE: ABSENCE

Chapter 1

The Absent Centre: Dessaix's Will to Essentialism in A Mother's Disgrace

Dessaix's first book, *A Mother's Disgrace*, begins with a brush with mortality: "One warm April evening in 1984, in a pleasant suburb of Cairo called Zamalek, three exquisite young men tried to kill me. A dance with knives and a pricking at the throat that began with a coffee at Groppi's and ended, not with a severed windpipe, but, oddly enough, with my finding a voice" (1). Without preamble, these two sentences establish the primary themes and motifs not only of *A Mother's Disgrace* but of Dessaix's writings in general. While raising issues of travel, severance and detachment, alluding to triangles, and conjuring images of exotic young men in cafés—all of which feature frequently throughout his texts—this passage highlights two important and interrelated elements of Dessaix's work: the self-in-crisis and the presence of death. Despite his texts exploring a range of topics and employing a host of literary techniques spanning many genres, these two motifs are never far from the action, appearing in some form on practically every page as an exploration of the overarching theme of identity. Rarely are they more apparent than in this opening scene in Cairo. From the very outset of his career as a fulltime writer, then, the problem of self in relation to an awareness of mortality is paramount.

Importantly for this study, the final section of the passage suggests that the threat of death produces a voice, a mode of speaking, by which he may assert his identity. This voice is not his self *per se*, but it is his means of establishing it. *A Mother's Disgrace* is the story of Dessaix's adoption and childhood in suburban Sydney, his education in Canberra and Moscow and his marriage and divorce, all of

which is framed by his search for and eventual discovery of his birth mother, Yvonne. Broadly speaking, it is a quest for belonging, to see where he fits in. It is also, by extension, a search for self, which Dessaix conducts via travels to North Africa and France in order to unearth the story of his ancestors, and within Australia in order to find his birth mother. These searches connote a longing for a centre, for a place (or person) of origin. But this quest is complicated by two factors: his ultimate inability to trace his genealogy and the silence that surrounds both his homosexuality and his mother's pregnancy out of wedlock. Although *A Mother's Disgrace* might be viewed as a quest for an essential self, the self that is affirmed by the text is underwritten by the undecidability (in the form of both silences and failed quests) favoured by anti-essentialist deconstructions of the human subject. In particular, Dessaix's travels and writings are quests for *narrative*, which are his means of articulating himself. His inability to find a single, defining narrative, one that might contextualise his existence in the world, opens a gap between the narrative "voice" and the self; even as Dessaix narrates *A Mother's Disgrace* he seems to affirm the absence of an essential self / narrative. The very yarn of his crisis comprises the fabric of his identity.

In support of the notion of the absence of an essential self, Dessaix has stated elsewhere:

Not actually believing in these essences or manas or auras, whether Kennedy's or St James's or my own mother's, or at least not in *inherent* essences, I am constantly aware that what I am doing is legerdemain, not real magic. This awareness—that in some metaphysical sense there is nobody there, just an effervescence—is, I think, part of the void at the heart

of my writing, the emptiness I swirl around spinning tales. ("Pushing" 40; original emphasis)

Despite downplaying his efforts to write his self, there is more to Dessaix's writing than mere trickery. If there is any nimble deception, it is in the way he looks to dismiss the seriousness of his endeavours to write himself. But to say that Dessaix denies the existence of an essential, defining nature of his being is to oversimplify the matter. Rather, this absence of self, reflected in *A Mother's Disgrace* by his inability to write himself into his family history, is key to the nature of his literary being. While affirming the absence of a central, innate self, this void is nevertheless *essential* to his sense of self in the same way that the threat to his life that opens the text is essential to his finding a voice. In maintaining the gap between voice and self, Dessaix essentialises this gap, making it the defining feature of his narrating persona and revealing a self that is constantly in flux. He therefore gives voice to an essential identity by way of anti-essentialism, which suggests that *some* positive elaboration of an essential self can be sustained in the face of anti-essentialist dismantlings of subjectivity.

A Shaft of Silence: Essentialism versus Anti-Essentialism

While recounting his life-threatening episode in Cairo, Dessaix's narrative flashes back to his childhood and includes a description of the house in which he grew up on Sydney's lower North Shore: "It was an unremarkable house we lived in, wedged between the primness of a lawn-edged street out the front and the wildness of a bush-filled gully behind" (10). This flashback not only reveals his recourse to narrative when confronted with annihilation (I will come back to this soon), but it

also reveals the conflicting conceptions of self at work in the text. The image of the house on Austin Street, not uncommon in Australian suburban landscapes of the 1940s, serves as a metaphor for the tension that exists throughout Dessaix's *oeuvre* between the pre-social and the social. In being "wedged" between the ordered, maintained space of suburbia and the "wildness" of the bush, Dessaix's childhood home illustrates where he is coming from in terms of his concept of identity; standing between "wild" nature and "ordered" suburbia, it symbolises the way Dessaix's work straddles, or is ambivalent towards, essentialist and anti-essentialist concepts of identity.

A Mother's Disgrace reveals its essentialist bent via Dessaix's search for his birth mother and the journeys he makes to and in France in order to trace his genealogy. It is a text that recounts and enacts Dessaix's quest for family origins, for the pre-social (in terms of his own character), the inherited elements of his identity that "are surely given" (187). The search for his roots, for his mother, is a mission for a centre: "I wanted to fill in this shaft of silence running up through the centre of my life" (20). And yet despite this goal, a central, essential self remains, in a sense, elusive, for the essential, identity-forming narratives in which he places so much stock often fall away and leave him without a fixed history. Despite Dessaix's idiosyncratic narrative voice, the problem of the "shaft of silence" at his core remains intact.

Drawing on Diana Fuss's distinction between essentialism and anti-essentialism, this chapter focuses on the way in which *A Mother's Disgrace* interweaves the two concepts in a positive elaboration of subjectivity. In discussing the problems associated with feminist pronouncements regarding a defining,

inherent voice of “woman” —because, for many feminist critics, language itself has traditionally been a patriarchal tool of oppression—Fuss has outlined the parameters of the essentialist / anti-essentialist debate. On one hand, she notes that essentialism is “a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). On the other hand, anti-essentialism, or as Fuss calls it, “constructionism,” “reminds us that a complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences, and not a set of pre-existent human essences, position and constitute the subject” (xii). Following the anti-essentialist deconstruction of the human subject, any appeal to a humanist, essentialist rendering of the individual has been regarded with scepticism as romantic and falsely idealist. Some theorists have deplored essentialism because of its arrogant, typifying nature (Nixon 77), its propensity to “metaphysical idealism” (Moi 139), and its fallacious assumptions, tendency toward Orientalism and other kinds of racial and sexual discrimination (Saïd 97). Roland Barthes has written that the “disease of thinking in essences [...] is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man” (*Mythologies* 75). For the travelling subject, an essentialist conceptualisation of identity, as Pratt notes, is typical of the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” (201), which relies on a “rhetoric of presence” (205) that exemplifies the “European’s claim to mastery and will to intervention” (208).

The following section of this chapter analyses Dessaix’s “will to essentialism.”¹ His description of the house on Austin Street, together with his portrayals of “wild” spaces, such as “seedy,” disordered Cairo and Sydney (1; 21), and their links to his homosexuality and birthplace, connote an inherent essentialism and commitment to origins. However, in the final section of this

chapter, I investigate the ways in which Dessaix's "will" is complicated and deferred. During and following several traumatic experiences in the text, Dessaix looks to anchor his identity in the narratives of his family history; but his subsequent genealogical searches turn up nothing. In ploughing the earth for his roots, the ground ultimately falls away from him. Further, in the final section of this chapter, I include an analysis of an event that is only alluded to in *A Mother's Disgrace*, but it is one that serves to illustrate Dessaix's slippery notion of identity. Although he does not describe it specifically, his "adoption" of his birth mother's name, Dessaix, over his adopted name, Jones, is revealing. Just as his narrative voice is a stand-in for an essential identity, Dessaix's self-fashioning operates in lieu of an essential "whatness," one that is centred around an essential silence or present absence at the core of his identity, one that reveals a self that is constantly in crisis.

"Some things are surely given": The Quest for Essence

From the very outset, *A Mother's Disgrace* reveals Dessaix's will to essentialism via a spatial metaphoric that presents Cairo as both threateningly and promisingly "wild." The opening scene takes place in Groppi's, not only centrally located, but, according to Dessaix, a hub for visitors to Cairo: "Everyone at some time or other drops in to Groppi's" (1). Dessaix has come to the café seeking momentary refuge from the "raucous seediness and squalid grandeur" (1) of the city. "I felt safe there" (1), he says.

Taking his seat Dessaix is joined by two young Cairene men, "lean-faced and grinning" (1). Immediately there is the question of being stalked — "Had I been followed in?" (1) — giving the impression of impending drama. The waiter,

increasing the sense of salaciousness and danger, comes over “sharp as a knife,” and tells him: “I can’t serve you if you talk to these two men. You’ll have to leave” (2). The Cairenes move to another table. Soon, however, the flirtation begins again, and Dessaix finds himself accepting an invitation to take a drive through the darkening city clogged with traffic and wild with ramshackle architecture “forking off around us at crazy angles” (3). After escaping the congestion of the inner-city, he and his new acquaintances soon arrive at “some vast, dark pleasure garden, thudding with loud music” (3–4). Here they are as promptly turned away as they were at the café. Eventually, the car stops outside “a middle-class Cairo apartment block” (4) and another man, apparently a friend of the other two, invites them all upstairs. “That’s Hassim,” says one of the men to Dessaix. “He says to come up and meet his mother” (4).

From the jungle-like streets of Cairo, then, Dessaix enters an ornate apartment “cluttered with objects—carpets and hookas, brass jugs and paintings—but no mother” (5). As the boys drink Algerian wine and smoke hashish, he disappears into the bathroom whereupon things take a turn. Outside, his hosts become aggressive, hammering on the bathroom door, and, after forcing their way in, they hit, rob and, with a knife to his throat, order him to strip down to his underwear. In a final moment of humiliation, he loses control of his bowels. As he entertains thoughts of the banality of what will surely be his death (6), the Cairenes thrust his clothes into his hands and order him to leave. Disgraced, “stripped bare of any self” (11), Dessaix zigzags his way through Cairo back to his hotel where he begins to write of the encounter.

Noting the way in which “wild spaces impinge on the *author-ized* representation of self in post-colonial settler autobiographies,” Anna Johnston has suggested that the mugging that opens *A Mother’s Disgrace* not only intrudes into the space of Dessaix’s European reverie, but “the potential wildness of the settler-invader body also leaks out” (32–33; original emphasis).² The “wildness” of Cairo is threatening because it can potentially cause dormant or repressed elements of the Occidental persona to erupt. The danger in this case, as in many cases of Occidental travel to the East (which I discuss in the following chapter), is a sexual one. Throughout the scene there is the undercurrent of erotic possibility, such as the flirtation at the café, the origin of the scenario, which is characterised by words and phrases such as “edgy,” “taut,” “lots of subtext,” and “[w]e were all waiting” (2). This is followed by a romantic, whimsical “gliding” through the streets of Cairo in the old Mercedes owned by Mohammed and / or Farouk. Simply taking a drive with new friends need not necessarily be erotic, but when this kind of freewheeling occurs in Dessaix’s work it has distinctly erotic undertones. While in the car with Mohammed and Farouk, Dessaix recalls his “pleasure” (3) on a night in Paris when he had swept across the city on the back of a motorbike. He describes the squares and bridges, “soft-lit, classical façades” (3) and winding, unruly streets; Dessaix concludes the digression with: “Thomas his name was. I’d only known him for half an hour” (3), as though the joyriding were some sort of foreplay. Likewise, in *Twilight of Love*, he recounts his first night in Paris, being driven back to his hotel by Roger, a young man who helps him with his map of the city. Roger follows him upstairs, and “without much finesse, [gets] down to business” (109).³

Although the opening episode of *A Mother's Disgrace* is more menacing than these two, there is a whimsical fancy shared by all three, a sense that in each scenario Dessaix is slipping out of the "moral straightjacket" of home and giving himself over to pleasure, chance and ultimately, in the scene involving Roger, sex. And although, when reporting his mugging to the Cairo police, Dessaix denies any sexual subtext to the encounter (twice, in fact [15; 18]), he also doubts that the officer to whom he tells his story, Sergeant Mustafa, "quite believe[s] it" (4). Nor, for that matter, does the reader. In the context of a homo-social / -sexual encounter, the ubiquitous threat of bodily and psychic penetration, coupled with connotations of urban and bodily wildness, combine to exemplify a homosexual essentialism. What is wild and natural (even unseemly) in Dessaix, however undesirable, emerges to meet the wildness of the racial / sexual Other.

The theme of gay awakening in North Africa is one Dessaix explores in greater depth in *Arabesques*, which I address in the following chapter. For now, my primary concern is with the ways in which Dessaix's will to essentialism are manifest in *A Mother's Disgrace*. Standing naked save for his soiled underpants, bereft of practically everything, Dessaix is reduced to his basic humanity, to what Gilbert Yeoh calls, with reference to Primo Levi's account of life in Nazi death camps, a "minimal existence" and "a state of zero" (81). While I am not suggesting Dessaix's experience in Cairo is analogous to the experiences of Jews in Nazi concentration camps, there is a correlation between the way Yeoh reads Levi's text and the way I am reading Dessaix's. In discussing the way in which Levi is "[s]tripped of all his possessions after entering the camp" (83), and how he undergoes the Nazi's "brutal strategy [...] to demoralize the new prisoner" (82),

Yeoh notes that such degradation and deprivation “crystallizes the focus of ‘one’s attentions and desires’ into absolute, essential forms” (83). He argues that Levi’s account of the many people living in such conditions suggests that “there exist shared, essential aspects of human experience” (84) to which this unique experience testifies. Yeoh classifies Levi’s text as humanist and argues that such a “minimal existence” reveals the essential elements that constitute the human being. Whereas Yeoh’s article discusses humanity as a whole, citing common elements between human beings, I am concerned with the identity of Dessaix’s narrating persona; so where Yeoh uses “humanism” to connote essential attributes shared between humans that are revealed during times of humiliation and degradation, I am using “essentialism” to connote the essential, defining attributes of a single identity that appear in a similar way in *A Mother’s Disgrace*.

Coupling this “basic” state of being with homoerotic desire reveals a notion of essentialism within Dessaix’s text, in particular the notion of an innate homosexuality. Despite the fact that homosexual awakenings in the “erotic East” are by now clichés of Occidental travel, and thus reveal more about the traveller’s acculturation than his / her resistance to it (see chapter two), the fact that Dessaix’s encounter has homosexual undertones *and* supposedly returns him to a “state of zero” suggests a desire on the part of the narrating persona to represent himself as, underneath it all, homosexual.

While the image of Cairo in *A Mother’s Disgrace* might be considered complicit with Orientalist representations of North Africa, Dessaix’s subsequent rendering of Sydney in the second chapter of the book suggests that the wildness of

the East has its roots in Dessaix's city of origin. With an emphasis on the gritty, grimy, undomesticated nature of Sydney's inner-city, "Motherlands" begins:

Peg was in William Street in Sydney's seedy inner east looking for my office.

William Street, if you don't know it, is a grand avenue gone hideously wrong, a hideous cock-up of a boulevard, very Sydney, sweeping down from the birthday-cake Town Hall into the jumble of Woolloomooloo and then up again to the gigantic neon Coca Cola sign on the hill at Kings Cross. Scattered amongst the hamburger joints, futon shops and car sales rooms down in the trough at that time were the offices of the ABC. Peg was late and confused about which building my office was in. Westpac? Westfield? That red brick tower further up the hill? (21)

Here, "Sydney's seedy inner east" is reminiscent of "Cairo in all its raucous seediness and squalid grandeur" (1). And just as Cairo has a centre in the form of Groppi's, Sydney too has a definite centre. In 1978, following his divorce, Dessaix returns to Sydney, to "experiment" (163) with gayness. In particular, the "Annandale to Bondi belt, was defiantly gay" (163):

There were homosexuals dotted about in other parts of the city as well, of course, and homosexual acts, we must presume, were committed all over the place from 1788 onwards (and, needless to say, before 1788, but we're talking about the city). But gayness as such was an inner-city phenomenon, the Annandale to Bondi belt was the hive the bees clustered around [...]. (163-64)

The "belt" to which Dessaix refers literally marks a centre line through inner Sydney, and, in the 1970s and '80s, it included William Street where Dessaix

worked at the ABC (nowadays this journey is taken underground on the Cross City Tunnel).

Despite its disorderliness, this area was the “hive the bees clustered around” (164). Not only is the wildness of the inner-city suggested by its jungle-like topography and infrastructure, Dessaix’s allusion to the “birds and bees” metaphor also suggests that, at least for him, there is something natural to his gravitation toward this centre. As it is in Cairo, boundaries between the subject’s interior and exterior become fluid as gayness “flourish[es]” (164) in both the city and the man. Further, given that Sydney is the place of Dessaix’s birth, his journey back following his divorce connotes a reinscription into an originary state and enacts a kind of prodigal return.

Returning to Sydney, Dessaix looks to find those things about himself that “are surely given” (*MD* 187). Here, Dessaix conducts a search for his birth mother, Yvonne Dessaix, one that returns him to the landscape of his childhood. His first meeting with his mother is conducted neither at Dessaix’s house nor hers, but at the house of a distant relative (also named Yvonne), close to the house he grew up in on Austin Street:

Apart from anything else, this was a house I had walked past hundreds if not thousands of times in my childhood. It was on a route I took on countless late afternoon walks with the dog-clipped lawns and nature strips, luxuriant gardens, the Lane Cove river glinting through the trees to the west, just the kind of quiet, green streets to stroll along with a nosy dog, talking to yourself in foreign languages. The house was also, oddly enough,

just around the corner from the Presbyterian church I'd been fruitlessly
christened in and led up the garden path in about Jesus. (95)

It is worthwhile noting that even here, Dessaix's movement "back" to the family hub also involves the peripheral figure of "the false Yvonne" (92), whose branch of the family separated from that of the narrator's several generations prior. Here "the false Yvonne" proves *essential* in orchestrating the encounter between Dessaix and his birth mother. (Dessaix meets the "false Yvonne" through a tiny network of chance encounters; this Yvonne, with distant connections to Dessaix's branch of the family, makes contact with the "Yvonne Dessaix-that-was" [94] and arranges for mother and son to meet.) Given Dessaix's adoption, it is understandable that the sense of a surrogate or double would underpin his discussion of parental figures. Thus "the false Yvonne" always stands in the peripheries, a shadow of doubt questioning the fixity of the origins Dessaix hopes to define.

At the same time, however, the house and surrounding area in which Dessaix finds his birth mother is unmistakably familiar, returning him to the days of his childhood. Additionally, it awakens Dessaix to even deeper, more genetic, origins. On meeting his mother he describes himself as feeling "at the still centre" of what he calls "a kind of tumult" (96). More concrete still is his awakening sense of inheritance, his almost immediate recognition of shared physical and character qualities: Dessaix writes that when discussing this first meeting much later, Yvonne tells him that he came "towards" her "out of a terrible remoteness with the eyes of [his] father" (96); later also, she describes him as being aloof, whereupon Dessaix notes that "[s]he underlined 'aloof' exactly the way I would," and that "haughtiness runs in the family" (96).

After finding both his mother and grandmother, Dessaix becomes keenly aware of many things that “[run] in the family”: his taste for French (102), his childhood desire to become a dancer (103), his physical resemblance to his half-brother (114), even his unhappy attempt at marriage (115; 120) and his and Yvonne’s shared so-called “disgrace” (107–19). The discovery of these similarities alters his conception of identity: “I’m beginning to suspect, now I’ve met my mother and grandmother, that more of what forms deep down is innate than I once thought, less open to remoulding by the purveyors of advanced social doctrines than I’d hoped” (120). Despite his sense that he has been “self-made” (20), and the question of an absent origin that seems to taint such assertions, meeting his mother and maternal grandmother yields a particularly essentialist conception of self. Not only does Dessaix’s search for his mother connote a longing for a centre, on becoming acquainted with her he also confirms a positive elaboration of essentialism, for those parallels he finds between himself and his relatives give rise to a sense of his own “whatness.”

On finding echoes of himself in other members of his biological family (or of them in him), Dessaix questions the constructedness of homosexuality:

After meeting Yvonne [...] and watching the way she sits and walks, listening to her talk and tell jokes, looking at photographs of my half-brother (he even stands like me) and thinking back over my life in order to be able to explain it to her, I find [the anti-essentialist ideology of the self as a discursive construction] an unconvincing view of human nature and who we are—beautiful and ripe for exploitation by people like me, but at best only part of the picture. Social forces may largely determine the form a

preference for one's own sex takes, but I now doubt that it always produces it in the first place. (129)

Dessaix suggests that he can only understand his own homosexuality in terms of "some innate disposition" and his awareness "from earliest childhood of an attraction to males which excited my genitals" (129). But while he uses empirical evidence to deploy an ideology of familial inheritance, or at least to give himself a particular history, he applies the same logic to his homosexuality without suggesting how it might have originated. This is not necessarily a problem for statements regarding homosexuality *per se*—but it is significant in terms of Dessaix's quest for origins and an essential identity. Although he portrays Sydney as having a centre, the Annandale to Bondi belt, the "hive the bees clustered around," the centre of his own homosexuality is patently absent. While the metaphor of the hive is, as I have said, indicative of a natural wildness or innate disposition, it might also work against itself when considered in terms of its architecture comprised as it is of clusters of cells, as a substance shot through with holes.

For Dessaix, although Sydney's gay community in the 1980s had a natural centre, this centre is characterised or at least complicated by a competing connotation of absence. Just as he reveals that "abandoned" is a "root word in my shaky construction of myself" (98)—a sense "linked with the day at the unmarried mothers' home in Strathfield when my mother had 'let me go'" (98)—so too his attraction to men is equally significant, perhaps not genetic in the sense of familial inheritance, but nevertheless innately present. The fact that he cannot locate the origins of his homosexuality, in terms of defining any empirical, familial evidence

or narratives, indicates that it is this, arguably more so than his adoption or “abandon[ment],” that is most difficult to reconcile in terms of his apparent desire for an essentially defining narrative explanation for why he is who he is.

But to suggest that Dessaix’s homosexuality is the primary or sole cause for his sense of absence would be to oversimplify the matter; better to suggest that his inability to locate a source for or explanation of his homosexuality—in a text concerned largely with a quest for origins—is indicative of the sense of absence that is essential in his construction of self. When Dessaix “comes out” to Yvonne for the first time, her response is revealing in terms of where he fits in (or doesn’t). At first Yvonne is surprised, and when he suggests it must have occurred to her given that he was living with Peter, she says: “No, it didn’t [...] It’s never happened before *in our family*” (123; original emphasis). Even when Dessaix notes that, given the size of the family, “[surely] at some point somewhere along the line someone had at least given it a go,” she replies, “It’s funny you should say that [...] because I did wonder about ...” and here, he writes, Yvonne names “a relative I couldn’t place” (124). Homosexuality therefore remains peripheral and “placeless.”

Dessaix’s sexuality complicates his quest for wholeness and causes a slippage in the wild / ordered binary. Whereas Sydney is depicted as a wild space, connoting some kind of earthly origin, it is also a divided space. On one hand, it is the centre of a flourishing gayness that mirrors Dessaix’s own flourishing gayness; his return following the breakdown of his marriage connotes a move toward a sexuality that has always been simmering beneath the surface, a more “real” state of being. On the other hand, Sydney is also portrayed as a family hearth; not only has he grown up here, but it is also where he meets his biological mother, learns of his

biological family and discovers the many “given” elements of his identity. But as the above extract illustrates, these two “Sydneys” are not compatible, for as it is presented in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, there is no room in the family for homosexuality. While Yvonne is undoubtedly reconciled to Dessaix’s sexuality, it cannot be “placed” within the family history. And given his account of Sydney’s bathhouses (as gay “institutions” [164]), it seems there is little room for family in the city’s gay culture: “These clubs did an enormous amount to subvert the preposterous notion that sex must be accompanied by certain sentiments (love, loyalty and so on) in order to be legitimate” (165). From this perspective, the institution of family is the “ordered,” and thus synthesised and unnatural, pole of the binary. Although he returns to Sydney seeking a sense of belonging, the simultaneous longing for a family hearth and to identify as homosexual seem incompatible.

Dessaix’s critique of family structures, underpinned as they are by the institution of marriage, is more explicit when he recalls the time he spent living in Canberra. In contrast to Sydney, Dessaix’s Canberra is disturbingly ordered, with “its circular streets, the arid new suburbs, its unreality, its lack of a city centre” (155). For him, Canberra is “planned, beautiful (lakes, gardens, mountains), ruled by benevolent dictators, not the mob, cleansed of the grosser aspects of capitalism” (155) and resistant to anything that might present a “threat to the social order” (156)—homosexuality, in particular, which, according to Dessaix “never really raised its head in Canberra” (156). In short, it “lulled you into thinking all was right with the world” (156). Dessaix’s Canberra is also curiously ahistorical, as though it simply materialised in the middle of the bush, ordered, ideal though far from mythical: “God only knows who built the roads or dug the lake—they just appeared

where someone very highly placed had decided they should" (155–56). That is to say, there is nothing "wild" about Canberra; empty at the centre, it effectively lacks an essence. While this image of Canberra might mirror Dessaix's absent centre, it stands as a contrast to Sydney, which has a definite centre. Dessaix's move from Canberra to Sydney reflects his desire to fill in the "shaft of silence" at his core, the story of which both describes this silence, this absence, and demarcates it.

Given that Canberra is where he "lived out" much of his married life in the early 1970s (155), it functions as a metaphor for his married self. And just as he is not compatible with the institution of marriage, nor is he, by extension, with that of family. To both he is a "threat to the social order." Nevertheless, Dessaix does admit to a sense of "belong[ing]" (155) in Canberra. Married and teaching at the Australian National University, in a city where "[t]he people with status [...] seemed to be members of the intelligentsia—professors and poets and chief librarians, senior civil servants and eminent biologists" (155), Dessaix finds, at least for a time, that he can fit in. Following his divorce, however, and feeling suddenly that he "did not exist" (159), he returns to Sydney in an effort to discover a more grounded, innate sense of self. At heart, Dessaix's search in *A Mother's Disgrace* is for belonging, one that might be invulnerable to shifts in culture or to the whims of the heart or libido. It is a quest for those things that are unchanging.

And it is a quest that is common throughout Dessaix's work. In each of his book-length publications, the prevailing objective is belonging. Both his travels and writings serve as a means of grounding his position in the world, of describing where and how he fits in. This is achieved, in the texts that follow *A Mother's Disgrace*, by his technique of entwining the narratives associated with other

writers — Gide, Berwick, Turgenev, Mann etc. — with the narrative of his own life.

Even when describing, for example, Turgenev's sense of homecoming at Courtavenel in France in *Twilight of Love*, he is, as I discuss in chapter four, articulating his own concept of homecoming and the difficulties he has with a sense of home as a fixed place.

Dessaix's suggestion that he belonged for a time in Canberra reveals a notion of identity as being structured around narrative and discourse. It also reveals the flimsiness of such a mode of identification, for following his divorce he falls out of synch with the discourse of the city, thus feeling as though he does not exist. Consequently, he returns to Sydney in search of a more stable narrative and discourse by which to anchor himself. His respective renderings of "planned" Canberra, which he flees in order to be "more himself," and "wild" Sydney, which he returns to in order to find those things that are "given," connote a seemingly essentialist conception of identity. His journey home is supposedly the journey to the heart of who he really is. This is complicated, as I have suggested, by the competing discourses of family and homosexuality; Dessaix's search for a secure, invulnerable source begins to unravel with the dual discovery of his birth mother and the acknowledgment of his homosexuality. In the following section I discuss how Dessaix's search for a central, defining genealogical narrative further unravels the notion of an essential self, leaving him "placeless" and with an absent centre while at the same time retaining the rhetoric of a centre.

"My spiralling moment": Dessaix's Essential Absence

Given Dessaix's will to essentialism, what does *A Mother's Disgrace* ultimately reveal about his identity? The account of his mugging that opens the text certainly suggests a denuding of cultural accoutrements, a self "stripped bare" and allowed to be the person he has always been, the pre-social self, in other words. There is a sense, in this opening account, of a return to the centre, or at least of a desire to return to the centre. This sense is not only achieved through the spatial metaphors of "wild" Cairo and the central positioning of Groppi's, but also via the invitation Dessaix receives to meet Hassim's mother and through his literal and figurative disrobing at the hands of the three Cairene men. Indeed, throughout *A Mother's Disgrace* there is a gravitation towards (or at least a longing for) a natural state of being.

Standing in Hassim's bathroom, Dessaix finds himself in a "state of zero," which might suggest a return to a natural, wild, pre-social condition. Yeoh, in his reading of a "state of zero" in terms of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, suggests that this kind of debasement reveals "absolute, essential forms" (83) and articulates a "shared human essence" (85). What Dessaix finds, however, is "a sense of nothingness, of being stripped bare of any self, of being brutally silenced, untongued, reduced to animality" (11). His use of the term "animality" suggests that, underneath, there is nothing "human" at all about the subject, that there is no inherent "whatness" to the human being. Not only is his sense of self "stripped bare," but this inner nothingness is also equated with silence and an inability to speak. "[U]ntongued," he loses the narrative connection, or at least the ability to form narratives that are so essential to his concept of being. (This scene might, as I have suggested, allude to a "wild" homosexuality; but this does not help Dessaix's

cause, for I have also shown how homosexuality in Dessaix's text has no underpinning, essential narrative or centre by which he might stabilise his identity.)

Dessaix's "barest minimum" (Yeoh 81) reveals an essential absence, not an essential connection or common humanity. His "zero" is literally that: empty at the centre. There is little in this scene that yields an affirmation of an essential persona; nor is there anything he might have in common with anyone else other than perhaps an austere nothingness. The two things to arise out of this moment are an awareness of an essential void at the core of his persona and a more pointed longing (more so than when he entered the Cairene apartment) to ground himself again. The latter is evident when he is ejected from the apartment whereupon he rushes back to his hotel and begins to write, to use his narrative voice to install himself within a plot.

Back at his hotel in Cairo, as he writes, Dessaix describes himself as "spiralling [...] On words, then phrases, sentences and whole stories" (9). He reconstructs the narrative of the whole episode, which he relates the following morning at the Cairo Police to one Sergeant Mustafa. Despite the story being "word-perfect" (15), with the "hero of [his] tale standing up quite well" (16), it is far from definitive. Later that day, Dessaix signs his name to a police statement written in Arabic (one he cannot read), describing "presumably" (19), "[y]et another version of the night's events" (18), which, Dessaix confesses, also differs from other versions: the one he tells the reader, the one he tells Mustafa, the one he tells "P." when he arrives in Rome (Dessaix's next stop), and from the versions that would eventually be "beaten out of" (19) his attackers.⁴ In the end there is no definitive

account, and the only closure is Dessaix's departure for Rome while the case is still being investigated.

As he recounts this episode, describing himself writing at his desk in the Sheraton Hotel—what he calls his “spiralling moment” (11)—Dessaix immediately has recourse to his family history. This happens quite frequently throughout the text; whenever he finds himself in an existential crisis, he looks to anchor himself in the narrative of his genealogy. At the centre of his “spiralling moment” the narrative takes a tangential turn: “There was something not inappropriate about having these thoughts in Cairo within sight of the pyramids [...] Now, in the annals of the Dessaix clan, Egypt has always had an important place” (11). Here he recounts his supposed blood ties to the Napoleonic General, Louis-Charles-Antoine Dessaix (with one “s”), who conquered Upper Egypt in the late eighteenth century. No sooner has he been left floating, a self-in-crisis, than he looks for a narrative that might give shape to who he is, one he might revolve around.

But even this effort proves elusive; although his family links to Egypt seem “not inappropriate” at the time, by the end of the text they are summarily severed. In Dessaix's words: “The whole thing fell apart last year in a library in Riom. Well, not the *whole* thing, but the central storyline” (178; original emphasis). The “whole thing” is the “French business” (178) to which Yvonne refers when they first meet: “Remember you come from Very Good Stock” (11–12).

After meeting Yvonne and hearing her talk of his French heritage, Dessaix journeys to France “determined to get to the bottom of it [and] intent on fleshing out my ancestral roots” (178–79). Riom, for Dessaix, is idyllic and homely: “a placid part of central France where in spring, according to my guidebook, the stables fill

with lowing, the dovecotes with cooing and the peasants were traditionally noted for their sobriety" (178). In a way, Riom is similar to Dessaix's Sydney in terms of its being "natural" and "wild"; his journey there suggests a return to nature. He takes a room at the Hôtel Dessaix on the boulevard Dessaix, "only a hop, step and a jump from the Fontaine Dessaix [...] and the restaurant Dessaix" (179). Ignoring the missing "s" in the names of these places, he states that "[i]t was all very affirming" (179). Even the hotel *patronne* resembles Yvonne: "They could have been sisters" (179). But regardless of how affirming it might be, the central storyline of his family history falls away in the Reference Section of the Municipal Library.⁵ He examines several volumes on the Dessaix family and comes across a family tree:

My eyes were racing up and down the branches and twigs and tiny twiglets ... *célibataire* [unmarried], *sans issue* [childless] ... and there, suddenly, with awful clarity, I came at last to Léon Joseph Aymard Dessaix: hunter of small game, active in the Resistance, died in his bed 3rd November 1941 a bachelor and [...] *with his highly coloured personality [...] the name of Dessaix was extinguished.* (181; original emphasis)

The fact that he is barking up the wrong family tree is foreshadowed several pages earlier when, while walking around Riom, Dessaix comes across "the real Hôtel Dessaix, the family's *hôtel particulier* or town residence with its walled garden and archway and heavy iron gates" (179). This second Hôtel Dessaix suggests a dislocation on Dessaix's part, depicting him as somewhat of an impostor in the family. More than this, the connotation of a "false" Hôtel Dessaix (at which he is staying) is reminiscent of the "false" Yvonne who arranges the meeting between Dessaix and his natural mother. Even as he wanders through the idyllic pastoral

wilds of Riom, potentially crossing the very soil that covers his ancestors, there is the reminder of a surrogate and the ghostly hint that he will not find what he is after. Further, the falling away of this narrative in the context of discovering a “childless” bachelor with a “highly coloured personality” alludes once again to both the connection between the absence of narrative and homosexuality and to the way in which homosexuality is incompatible with traditional conceptions of family.

However, as it is in Cairo and his “spiralling moment,” as soon as this narrative falls away, Dessaix looks to inscribe himself immediately within another. Rising from the library desk, paranoid that others will snigger at him and whisper “Fraud!,” he turns to the *Grande encyclopédie biographique* and finds there another potential storyline in Volume Six, “Dessaix with *two s’s*” (181; original emphasis). This volume contains an entry regarding another General Dessaix, Joseph-Marie, also a Napoleonic General, but this time from the Russian campaign, and hailing from Savoy, not all that far from Riom, towards Geneva. He returns promptly to Paris to continue his research. Within the same paragraph, Riom turns from promising Motherland into a “dead-end,” and Savoy becomes a new potential homeland: “Now I came to think about it there in ‘Le Savoyard’ [Dessaix is suddenly in a restaurant in Paris], I’d always felt a certain ... how should I put it? *affinity* with [Savoy], I even rather liked Geneva, which everyone else found so cold and alien” (182; original emphasis). Investigating further, he discovers that this bloodline is connected to nobility—Joseph-Marie Dessaix was a count—and much military decoration, which he finds “a little off-putting, but there were compensations: the Russian connection, the sense of good family and honourable service, and even certain literary pretensions” (183).

Undoubtedly, there is an ironic, even flippant, tone to much of Dessaix's genealogical mapping. For example, Riom is, initially, provincially idyllic; but on discovering that there is nothing there for him in terms of family history, his reaction to it borders on a sort of camp bitterness: "What a depressing little *bourg* Riom had turned out to be, squatting on its plain of rye with its bogus saints and cabbage-and-lard hotpot and dead-end *petite noblesse*" (182). Despite his initial enthusiasm, there is now an air to Dessaix's prose of royal dismissal, both comic and venomous. Equally as comic is his immediate adoption—within the same paragraph—of a different storyline altogether, "Now I came to think about it [...]," which is almost sarcastic and carries with it more than a whiff of bad faith. The apparent lightness with which Dessaix moves between family histories is incongruous with the gravity of defining himself, of filling with words "the shaft of silence" he finds at the centre of his life. The suddenness with which he replaces one narrative with another reveals both desperation and playfulness in Dessaix's attitude towards the matter. On one hand, the reader feels toyed with, as though the situation is not as dire as it has been set out to be (with regard to the episode in Cairo), as though the writer is indeed engaging in a bit of legerdemain; on the other hand, Dessaix spends the entire book in search of his roots, and travels from Australia to France in order to "get to the bottom of it," suggesting that the scenario is quite serious indeed, for the alternative is silence, a fate worse than, or at least equal to, death.

In the end, it seems, Dessaix's ironic tone and the mystery of his ancestry serve to dramatise his search. These techniques are not used, however, for dramatic effect alone; or rather, the drama and humour are used to lend force to Dessaix's

notion of essential nothingness. His bad faith, therefore, can be seen to be a product of this notion, the connotation being that even if he *does* find the truth of his ancestry, there will still remain an essential absence at his core. Despite the fervency of his search, it amounts, ultimately, to little more than an earnest curiosity because the “truth” of Dessaix’s persona (i.e., his essential absence) is revealed in the searching, in the shifts between supposedly identity-affirming narratives, not in the attainment of the goal at the end of the search.

Dessaix’s curiosity thus leads him to the second Napoleonic General (from Savoy) and on to a host of “*capitaines* and *commandants*, *seigns* and *magistrats*” (184) and, at last, to yet another dead-end: “I see no evidence they have anything to do with us whatever” (184). Although he notes the allure of “valorous titles,” he also notes, again giving voice to his bad faith, that they are little more than “vain illusion” (184); however, it is unclear whether it is inherited nobility that is illusory or the notion of inheritance itself. One suspects it is the latter, for despite the effort Dessaix exerts in searching for the story of his ancestry, despite the distances he travels and the research involved, in the end he comes to no definite conclusion. Despite its relative rarity (particularly in Australia), the name “Dessaix” produces many “false leads” (20) and heterogeneous histories, including Napoleon’s general, Louis-Charles-Antoine Dessaix (one “s”) de Veygoux, the “false” (92) Yvonne Dessaix, a host of related surnames—des Aix, des Haies, des Saix and lez Aix—another Napoleonic general, Joseph-Marie Dessaix (two “s”es), which leads to more Dessaixs, Dussaixs and de Saixs, thus further dislocating the narrator from any certainty regarding his genealogy.

After finding yet another area that was once populated by families called Dessaix, and learning how these families then split into various other families of similar names, and also of the nineteenth-century mass migration from this part of the world to North Africa, America and Argentina, he is left no more certain about his roots than before:

I think my great-great-grandfather Peter or his father, impoverished carpenters or wheelwrights, probably signed up in the mid-1850s, got stuck in Ireland on the way to the New World and ended up in St Leonards in Sydney, not far from where I lived and went to school—still wheelwrights, still poor, still nobody. I think what I am is a small, tied-off bastard nodule at the end of a twig on a stick-thin branch of the utterly commonplace bush they planted here. (185–86)

The story is not only “commonplace” but also nebulous and characterised by a postmodern undecidability. There is little certainty in this version of his family’s history. The journey of his supposed ancestors is the product of chance, aimed as it “probably” was on the New World, but through force of circumstance ending in Sydney. In the end, where Dessaix comes from remains largely a mystery. *A Mother’s Disgrace* is not content with the multifaceted, heterogeneous subject with a displaced centre. Although it is true that such a subject is established by the text, this subject is one always in a state of crisis, drawn simultaneously between wholeness and abstraction. The above passage in which he rounds off the search for his ancestry is more a petering out than a decisive conclusion. By the end of the chapter in which his search takes place—given the ironic title “Full Circle”—Dessaix is still spiralling around the question of his origins. The only full circle to be

found is “a state of zero.” There is neither closure nor any sense of belonging elicited in these final revelations, which confirm little but the absence of a central, defining storyline.

With Nothing at its Core: Pure Land and Adopting “Dessaix”

As a child, long before his sojourn to France was possible, another way for Dessaix to combat his sense that “I didn’t come from where I was” (MD 33), was to inhabit what he refers to as his “Pure Land.” This island of Dessaix’s invention has a very distinct layout, features a made-up language and is divided by a mishmash of cultural constructions with, again, no central, defining feature:

It took about twenty years for me to realise that through the matrix of this imagined Motherland, unaware of what I was doing, I was working out and articulating to myself all sorts of religious, philosophical, sexual, psychological and other problems. While studying one religion, for example, in my everyday life, I was actually elaborating and entertaining other religious philosophies which flourished in my land [...] While eating meat I could debate radical vegetarianism as provincial government policy on an offshore island. As my distaste for Eastern European socialism strengthened, I could write articles defending it in my head for the Party daily newspaper in the north of my Land, where a Communist government had been in power since 1947. A fortified border cut the island (and my psyche) in two.

(29)

Not only does Dessaix describe a complex topography—with “streets and houses, rivers, lakes and mountain ranges” (28)—and diverse culture, he also describes a

language that is spoken in his Pure Land, one he admits that is not only ambitious, but “eccentric” (30): “I began to construct an Indo-European language of enormous grammatical and morphological complexity, with a history going back to pre-Roman times in Asia Minor, sound shifts, three scripts (one syllabic, thanks to the Cypriots), two main dialects and several regional variations on these dialects” (30–1).

Without a family history with which he might identify, Dessaix constructs elaborate and extensive links with the past via his Pure Land. The fabricated history he weaves is evidence of and a response to his sense of placelessness: “In some ways all I was trying to do by spending part of my life in a parallel world was to belong somewhere, to give myself a history I had some control over” (32–33). More revealingly, there is no single origin underpinning the gamut of religious and political philosophies, histories, languages and architecture (there is a “European” [25] district and, presumably, a non-European one) that characterise the island. Lacking a central, defining culture, Dessaix’s Pure Land is analogous with his inability to inscribe himself within a central storyline in terms of his genealogy and homosexuality; purely imaginative, it is a place constructed around an essential void. In it, Dessaix pledges no allegiance to any “side,” be it religious, political or otherwise. Instead, he seems equally at home anywhere and can entertain any multitude of affiliations. Sceptical of Western notions of historical linearity, sequentiality or consequence, Dessaix explains that the construction of his Pure Land emerged from his sense that “life [read: ‘self’] can be pictured, construed, made sense of in terms of a completely different geometry altogether. With nothing

at its core" (27). At the same time, however, this "pure" land retains a rhetorical purity, integrity and genesis that suggests a foundation of the self in the absent.

It might be possible, indeed desirable, to be sceptical of Dessaix's rhetoric of placelessness and alienation, to bring his work, as Rob Nixon has done with that of V. S. Naipaul, "down from the ether of detachment" (35), and to contextualise it within any number of traditions. Nixon argues that Naipaul's supposed "familial and personal displacements" and his "success in fashioning and sustaining an autobiographical persona who is accepted at face value as a permanent exile, a refugee, a homeless citizen of the world, and an extranational writer" (17–18), is little more than a thinly veiled neo-colonialism, "a rouse [...] that connect[s] Naipaul to a colonial tradition of interfering zealotry" (xvi). Nixon outlines Naipaul's "primary affiliations to metropolitan culture on the London–New York axis" (19), and focuses primarily on the way in which his free-floating persona enables him to look "back" on the Third World in a derogatory and typifying manner. In the end, Nixon views this kind of self-fashioning not only as a means of redeploying discourses of imperial representation, but also as nothing more than a fiction, and a fashionable one at that.

Without doubt, one may level these same complaints at Dessaix's autobiographical self. As I discuss in the next chapter, his cosmopolitan character enables him to deploy the stereotypes of the "homoerotic East" in North Africa without embroiling himself in the realities of the "game" of the East / West encounter. In addition to this, Dessaix's Eurocentrism is hardly politically correct though patently evident throughout his writings. Indeed, his work demonstrates a variety of entanglements and affiliations: from an Australian, postcolonial self-

consciousness and mimicry of Europe, to imperial representations of the “exotic, erotic East”; from a reliance on the mediated world of the “tourist gaze,” to the privilege of the freewheeling bourgeois cosmopolitan. As I discuss in chapter three, Dessaix’s criticism of “uncivilised” cultures (particularly Australia) is one that is largely inherited from the idealised visions of a borderless Europe first proclaimed by a class that Friedrich Nietzsche labelled “*good Europeans*.” Additionally, Dessaix’s notion of essential nothingness might even be considered fashionable in the milieu of twenty-first century late-capitalism and its trend of alienation, a trend favoured by popular contemporary authors such as Naipaul (b. 1932), W.G. Sebald (1944–2001), Paul Auster (b. 1947) and Don DeLillo (b. 1936), and the more historically distant but equally fashionable poststructuralists, Michel Foucault (1926–84), Jacques Derrida 1930–2004) and Roland Barthes (1915–80) to name a few.

It might also seem that Dessaix is “playing off” or deliberately constructing himself as an exile, another fashionable term. Although acutely aware of a sense of always belonging somewhere else, and that his sense of abandonment plays a large part in defining who he is, it would be a mistake to label Dessaix an exile, or even level a charge at him of being the beneficiary of exile throughout his work. This is because an exile harbours an acute sense of the homeland from which s / he has been removed; the exile’s anguish arises from the fact that “his or her existence is oriented towards that moment when a return to the homeland will be possible” (Nixon 22). As an orphan, Dessaix shares the sense that many exiles have, of belonging elsewhere; but precisely because of his adoption, when he was only several days old, his sense of a biological homeland can only ever be abstract at best. There are few, if any, traditions or other signs of such a sphere that he might

adopt, perform or acknowledge in order to assuage his sense of absence and provide a semblance of belonging.

I am reading with the grain of Dessaix's self-fashioning here; but I am doing so for the fruit it will bear later in the study. Dessaix's absent centre characterises a self that is always in crisis, always being interrogated, one that is sensitive to oppressive discourses and thus reveals a mode of representation that is both human and humane. Besides, as one critic of Nixon has suggested, counter-readings such as Nixon's can often strike the reader "as reductive, carping, and mean-spirited" (Guinness 414), and reveal certain limitations and agendas on the part of the commentator (413). I am less interested in dispelling Dessaix's mythmaking than I am in exploring the positive nature of his perhaps fashionable alienation counterbalanced as it is by his certainly unfashionable will to essentialism. What is most appealing about Dessaix's work is the way in which it crystallises disappearance, humanises the invisible, and attempts to cope with the distance that is always between things.

A Mother's Disgrace is undoubtedly, among other things, an example of meticulous self-fashioning and begins a rhetoric of placelessness that evolves throughout Dessaix's later work. Indeed, it is possible to pin Dessaix's freewheeling narrators down to a host of affiliations; but to do so would be less rewarding, for tracing Dessaix's mythology of his own displacement reveals a sophisticated (albeit risky, in terms of its essentialist leanings) concept of identity, not to mention an idiosyncratic identity, one that is open and posits a fluidity of boundaries and connotes a humane and sensitive interaction with and movement across the world at large. Further, Dessaix's conception of belonging, which opens the borders

between interior and exterior, between self and place, invests the travel performances of his narrators with use value and artistic value. (This is also risky, deploying as it does a liberal humanist attitude that specific kinds of travel will make one a better, more rounded person.) Via an indefinable family history and an imagined "Pure Land" comprised of "a more circular inner geometry [with] nothing at its core" (MD 27), Dessaix defines or "circles around" an area of absence at the centre of his conception of self. This absence not only motivates his travel and his writing, but it also connotes a duality or dexterity in terms of his self-fashioning. In other words, it enables a play between centre and margin, a simultaneous movement towards and away from essentialism.

This unresolved restlessness—which makes every journey two journeys, both towards and away from belonging—is best explained by something that is only mentioned briefly in *A Mother's Disgrace*: his change of name from Jones to Dessaix. This name-change is indicative of the tension throughout Dessaix's work between essentialist conceptions of the self and anti-essentialist ones; by "adopting" his birth mother's surname, Dessaix affects an ambivalent affiliation. In the early 1970s, following the respective passing of his adopting parents, Thomas Robert Jones changed his name to Robert Dessaix. "Dessaix," he says, was "a name to conjure with, a name that promised stories, not like Jones" (MD 11). This is the only mention Dessaix makes of the difference between the two surnames in *A Mother's Disgrace*. Nevertheless, it is telling. On one hand, this kind of self-fashioning reveals a desire for a definable identity via familial origins, which Dessaix performs in his genealogical search and his attempts to identify with the various narratives he discovers. In renaming himself, Dessaix thus returns to the "wildness" of his

biological origins. That is to say, he reclaims a place among his biological family. On the other hand, however, the Dessaix name is a “disgraced” one. Although he admits to having disgraced himself over the years, for a variety of reasons that revolve around his homosexuality (107), more revealingly, he claims to have a sense of being “born a disgrace” (107). In other words, disgrace is “in his blood.”

On meeting Yvonne—and despite her reminder that he comes “from Very Good Stock” (11–12)—Dessaix learns of her “disgrace” in having him out of wedlock, how she “fell” pregnant at eighteen to an airman on leave. Once mother and son have established their relationship, Yvonne tells him: “‘By having you I disgraced the family name.’ I was a bit put out. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it must have been a dreadful shock to Mother ... the war was on and the boys were gone and so forth ... I still feel that sense of guilt ... the disgrace of it has remained’” (108).

After becoming pregnant, Yvonne tells him she was banished from the army (she worked at a tailoring business with a military contract) and had nowhere else to go but “Mother’s.” There, she was “hidden from sight” by day (she had to go to her room if anyone called) and was only permitted to leave the house under the cover of night. She never saw Harry (the pilot, Dessaix’s father) again; he died in the war: “A helicopter had crashed” (111). Effectively, both parents vanished from the face of the earth. The decision to have Dessaix adopted was his grandmother’s, the dominant, ubiquitous figure in the Dessaix clan: “No one in those days appears to have thought of consulting with the mother” (112). In other words, the conditions of Dessaix’s conception and fate were chaotic, with both his mother and father completely out of control of the situation. The repetition of the word “spiralling” throughout the text here acquires a double-meaning; on one hand, there is the sense

that he is spiralling around a centre, an essence, in the form of his mother or his homosexuality without actually honing in on any of it; on the other hand, there is a sense of spiralling out of control (much like Harry's helicopter). As Dessaix says: "These are lines of guilt and blame so insidious, so intricate, someone of my generation can barely disentangle them" (113). As is often found in the work of Paul Auster (for example, *The Music of Chance*, *The New York Trilogy* and *The Invention of Solitude*), there is in *A Mother's Disgrace* an odd meeting of chaos and order that confirms a sort of universal principle of coincidence, whereby random occurrences acquire deep meaning and provide narrative thrust. The various spiralling narrative trajectories give way to a certain order or at least symmetry, and although it goes unnamed, there is an implied gravitational force that both encourages and enables the many connections Dessaix is looking for. This force, I would suggest, is the writing itself, which serves as Dessaix's attempt to gain a modicum of control over these spiralling trajectories and, given the essential nature the text affirms, serves as further evidence of his faith in narrative, in the "promise" of stories.

In adopting the name of his biological family, Dessaix might be returning to a sort of "hearth" or "heart," but he is also making a move towards ex-centricity, for the name, at least according to Yvonne, is a "disgraced" one. So while reinscribing himself within the family unit, Dessaix is simultaneously ostracised in terms of prevailing cultural mores. At once Dessaix moves toward and away from the centre. There is a parallel here between Yvonne's pregnancy and Dessaix's homosexuality, for both mother and son suppress any evidence of their "ex-centricity," Dessaix until his divorce and Yvonne until she and her son finally meet (in terms of her silence about him). In searching for evidence of his genetic inheritance, Dessaix is

often explicit about physical and character traits he shares with his family, in particular with his mother, grandmother and half-brother. However, a more subtle “family resemblance” is also found in Yvonne’s silence and invisibility, “that she was without a voice” (113) and “hidden from sight” (111). Dessaix’s mugging in Cairo, four years before he meets Yvonne, ends “not with a severed wind-pipe, but, oddly enough, with my finding a voice” (1), which suggests that until this moment, now in his forties, he too has lived much of his life without one. The “shaft of silence” that Dessaix identifies as “running up through the centre of [his] life” is something therefore that he has in common with his mother. That is to say, silence and invisibility are essential to Dessaix’s sense of identity; silence is a “wild” and natural “space.” So while he moves towards an inherited identity, or voice, by naming himself “Dessaix,” he is also moving toward a silence at the centre of himself, one that remains, particularly in terms of his homosexuality, unresolved at the close of the text. Although in Cairo, what begins with the threat of death ends with his voice, this voice does not resist mortality or the threat of silence (having his throat slashed) but rather, this voice is defined by the threat of silence. That is to say, adopting “Dessaix” is to make an absence present, to give voice to silence. Further, given the potent symbolism at play in the act of adopting the name of his birth mother, and given also the dominant themes of *A Mother’s Disgrace*, the fact that this act is not reported in the text seems a glaring omission, one that marries up identity and silence and complicates his will to essentialism.

In addition to the sense of disgrace surrounding the family name in terms of illegitimacy and homosexuality, “Dessaix” is also French and thus satisfies or even anchors Dessaix in his affiliations with European, particularly French, culture.

“Dessaix,” “a name to conjure with, a name that promised stories,” has far more potential than “Jones,” which, for the narrator, seemingly promises little more than a “primly mown buffalo at the verge on the [suburban] street” (10). For Dessaix, “Jones” is parochial and homely, perhaps even “common,” whereas “Dessaix” is, for an antipodean, exotic and foreign. This sentiment is expressed by Dessaix when he recalls working at a bookshop as a teenager:

Much more interesting than meeting my mother by then, in my mid-teens, during stolen moments in Foreign Languages [in the bookshop where he worked], was encountering Jean-Paul Sartre in French. And André Gide soon followed [...] This gave rise to a shadowy Impure Land in my head. French and France were suddenly cloaked in deviance and desire, eroticised, not just by sexuality, but more powerfully, perhaps, by being simply so deeply *knowing*. Over there they *knew*. Over there they knew things and said things (in French) no one ever seemed to know or say where I came from. (35–36; original emphasis)

The adolescent Dessaix (then Jones, of course) is therefore less interested in family connections or blood ties than he is in exploring foreign realms and knowledges during “stolen” moments in the French section. This notion of the foreignness of French and France is later confirmed when he meets Yvonne and hears her story, for that narrative, and therefore his bloodlines, are also “cloaked in deviance and desire.” All things French are wild in two senses; firstly, in that they break with young Dessaix’s sense of social order; and secondly, these things are wild in the sense that, ultimately, he finds he has more in common with them than mere curiosity, discovering a shared silence and invisibility. Adopting “Dessaix,”

therefore, while being an act of self-fashioning, and connoting an inherent, essential constructedness, and thus essential nothingness, also connotes an essence and origin. In this way, Dessaix's conception of identity is an arabesque of essentialism and anti-essentialism in its assertion of an inherent essence while maintaining the central absence that defines this essence.

A Mother's Disgrace identifies a present absence at the heart of Dessaix's autobiographical persona. By turns Dessaix's journeys affirm and dismantle his identity. While seeming to assert a homosexual or even biological essence via a spatial metaphoric that works to characterise "wild" spaces of genesis, this text often defers such assertions with competing discourses involving surrogates, silences, failed quests and immorality. Nevertheless, an essentialist discourse remains in the form of Dessaix's faith in and quests for grounding narratives, his rhetoric of centrality and unity—through the use of words and phrases such as "spiralling" and "full circle"—and his desire to fill the "shaft of silence" with words that describe an essential "state of zero." With absence as Dessaix's central unifying feature, *A Mother's Disgrace* constructs a narrator whose only certainty is being in a state of identity crisis or flux. As such, while maintaining a discourse of the centred, unified subject, it avoids the "rhetoric of presence" deployed by figures such as "the monarch-of-all-I-survey" (Pratt 201) and thus, paradoxically, renders its narrator open and unfixed. In the following chapter I remain with the theme of silence and the way in which wordlessness connotes a simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self. In particular, I investigate Dessaix's complicity with an Orientalist discourse in *Arabesques* and the ways in which his awareness of the limits of this discourse,

manifest as moments of silence, enables him to “write back” against colonialist representations of the Orient.

¹ I am using the expression “will to essentialism” in response to Gilbert Yeoh’s notion of Primo Levi’s “will to humanism” (74). In his article on Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, Yeoh discusses the ways in which Levi’s text invokes “an immanent though non-idealist concept of the human being” at the same time as it acknowledges that the ideal of “human being” has been “relinquished as an unusable concept that has broken down irredeemably” (73).

² Of course, Dessaix is in Egypt and not Europe. Nevertheless, his vision of North Africa, as I discuss in Chapter Two, is unmistakably European, given its characterisation as an exotic, erotic space for sexual liberation and homosexual awakening.

³ Dessaix also refers to this encounter in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, in discussing his (presumably) first homosexual experience: “I’d tried it once in Paris—a young Frenchman offered to help me read my street-map on the Boulevard Clichy, we had a coffee, he came back to my hotel—but I’d hated it, it nauseated me even to think about it” (156).

⁴ Dessaix’s interrogation by the Cairo police, in particular his being asked to sign a statement typed out in Arabic, is perhaps referring to a similar scene in Ken Cameron’s *Bangkok Hilton* (1989), in which Katrina Faulkner (Nicole Kidman) travels to England in search of her ever-absent English father following the death of her Australian mother. On the return journey she stops over in Bangkok where she is arrested when airport police find drugs in her camera case. Under interrogation, Katrina refuses to sign her statement which has been typed up in Thai. Like *A Mother’s Disgrace*, *Bangkok Hilton* is informed by motifs of silence, absent parents, imprisonment, false names and histories and a postcolonial quest for identity.

⁵ This scene shares similarities with one in *Bangkok Hilton*, in which Katrina Faulkner sifts through military records in search of her father’s identity; though where she finds clues and genuine leads about her family, Dessaix finds little that is concrete about his; the intertextuality of the scene is further evidence of Dessaix’s quest to install himself within a narrative.

Chapter 2

Vanishing Acts: A Journey Through "A Landscape of Forgetting"

Like *A Mother's Disgrace*, *Arabesques* begins in North Africa with an identity crisis. This time, however, it is not Dessaix's identity that is being threatened, but that of French author André Gide (1869–1951). Although there is no attempt on Gide's life as there is on Dessaix's in *A Mother's Disgrace*, both episodes feature a subject faced with his own "state of zero" and the ultimate discovery of his voice. Gide's "spiralling moment" occurs in reasonably typical fashion in terms of nineteenth-century, colonial East / West encounters in the region. In January 1895, in a café in Algiers, Gide and Oscar Wilde are,

joined by a slender young man, scarcely more than a boy, wearing those white, ballooning breeches you now see only in paintings. Olive-skinned, with the languid eyes of a hashish-smoker, Mohammed, as he was called, sat down cross-legged on a stool below them and began to play quietly on a reed flute [...] André's eyes lingered on the flute-player's supple fingers and slim, burnished legs [...] Time had evaporated. He was nowhere and everywhere, he was in a trance ... he had forgotten who he was [...].

(*Arabesques* 11)¹

It is a pivotal moment for Gide; when Wilde whispers to him, "Dear, would you like the little musician?" and Gide sighs "*oui*" in reply, "something inside him [falls] loose" (6; original emphasis). Gide's crisis is underpinned by an experience of homosexual awakening in the Orient, one that was not uncommon at the time in occidental journeys to North Africa. More importantly for the current study, Gide's

strangled “oui” emerges, like Dessaix’s voice in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, from a threat to his identity.

Following on from the previous chapter, in which I highlighted the silence or void that is essential to Dessaix’s autobiographical persona, this chapter is primarily concerned with the way in which Dessaix depicts North Africa via an aesthetic of absence. Drawing on the theories postcolonial critics Edward Saïd and Joseph A. Boone, this chapter discusses the ways in which Dessaix’s characterisation of North Africa redeploys a discourse of the homoerotic, colonial Orient that was established by travelling authors such as Gide in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Dessaix’s North Africa is populated with teams of heavy-eyed, olive-skinned boys such as Mohammad above. More than this, though, in travelling in the footsteps of Gide, Dessaix is bound up in the traditions of Orientalist economic and sexual exploitation in the region.

Despite engaging with such a discourse, however, Dessaix’s travels also reveal the limits of the East / West encounter: faced with racial and sexual Otherness, the travelling writer either resorts to the clichés of colonialist representation or remains silent. In this context, cliché functions as a kind of silence because of its reductive nature and resistance to idiosyncrasy. Dessaix redeploys the image of North Africa as a “landscape of forgetting” (31), not so much as a “rhetorical strategy of negation [that] conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death [and] establish[es] and maintain[s] colonial rule” (Spurr 92–93), but rather, as it is in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, to articulate himself through a series of silences. In so doing, Dessaix subverts Orientalist discourses, which sees Dessaix as

the overlooked figure, toyed with by the locals, invisible to them and even forgotten by them.

The Homoerotics of Orientalism

In *Arabesques*, Dessaix journeys through North Africa and France in Gide's footsteps. This text shares with *A Mother's Disgrace* a quest for identity, for "something real beneath the surface" (*Arabesques* 33). Long passages recounting the life, works and travels of Gide make it read more like a literary biography than a travelogue or autobiography. Dessaix is keen to illustrate the affinities he shares with the Frenchman, in particular their homosexual awakenings, but also their taste for the exotic in a homosexually charged North Africa. By intertwining their two lives, by telling his life *through* the life of another, Dessaix again presents a discursively constructed self, limited as it is to language and representation. Nevertheless, as in his other texts, *Arabesques* maintains faith in an essentialism that reveals itself through a rhetoric of absence and suggests that the defining characteristic of Dessaix's identity is, like death, beyond language and perhaps even knowledge.

Following in Gide's footsteps, Dessaix is bound up in the often exploitative discourse of the erotic East. Saïd has claimed that, traditionally,

the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest: Flaubert, Nerval, "Dirty Dick" Burton, and Lane are only the most notable. In the twentieth century one thinks of Gide, Conrad,

Maugham, and dozens of others. What they looked for often—correctly, I think—was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden; but even that quest, if repeated by enough people, could (and did) become as regulated and uniform as learning itself. (190)

The image of the erotic East has its origins in the nineteenth-century travels of European intellectuals and artists. Their exploits in the Orient are now the stuff of legend and many commentators have examined the conditions and ramifications of these travels (Saïd; Aldrich; Kabbani; Alloula, to name some of the more prominent figures). Rana Kabbani suggests that the nineteenth-century image of the eroticised East was foreshadowed by twelfth-century Christian renderings of a lustful Muhammad, whose “plan for sexual profligacy” (15) and doctrine of “a heaven that would permit endless sensual gratification” (16) was evidence of the faith’s moral corruption.

In the nineteenth century, however, it was Sir Richard Francis (“Dirty Dick”) Burton (1821–1890) who added another turn of the screw and introduced a male homosexual element to the “perversity” of the Orient. His infamous “Terminal Essay” not only provides particular, homoerotic “insights” into his own translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1886), but it also includes a section entitled “Pederasty” in which he labels homosexual sex “the Vice” (179) and maps an area of the globe within which “the Vice” is both “popular and endemic” (179). This region sweeps east from North-Western Africa and follows the Mediterranean into the Syrian-Arabic peninsula and beyond into Asia. Burton named it the “Sotadic Zone” after Sotades “the Obscene” (c.300BCE), an Ancient Greek writer of lewd, pederastic poetry, and the supposed inventor of the palindrome. Burton’s text revealed and

reiterated “the stereotype of Eastern ‘perversity’ that might appeal to a homosexual audience in the mid-1800s because of its homoeroticism” (Waitt and Markwell 50). Increasingly thereafter, indeed by the century’s end, North Africa occupied a particular place in the Western imagination, not only as the erotic East boasting merely a “different type of sexuality” (Saïd 190), but in particular as a landscape of “gay awakening” (Boone 101).

Commenting on the exploitative nature of homosexual interactions between Eastern and Western men in the Maghreb, Boone writes:

Whether these homoerotically charged encounters figure as voyeuristic spectacle—that is, as one more “exotic” item that the tourist views from a distance—or as a covert goal of the traveller’s journey, the fact remains that the possibility of sexual contact with and between men underwrites and at times even explains the historical appeal of orientalism as an occidental mode of male perception, appropriation, and control. (90)

Boone maintains that travellers to North Africa such as Gide sought to indulge in “a colonized Third World in which the availability of casual sex is based on an economics of boys” (99). Wilde’s solicitation of the “little musician” is typical of this “tradition of gay occidental tourism” (101) in North Africa. Boone’s analysis of the trope of casting North Africa as a landscape of homosexual desire suggests that the tradition is grounded not only in economic exploitation, but also that it fails to subvert sexual norms and reveals a closeted homophobia: “In narratives where the occidental traveler by virtue of his homosexuality is already the other, the presumed *equivalence* of Eastern homosexuality and occidental personal liberation

may disguise the spectre of colonial privilege and exploitation encoded in the hierarchy white man / brown boy" (104; original emphasis).

While acknowledging that the homoeroticism of the Orient is grounded in colonial, exploitative regimes of value and representation, one should not underestimate the importance of these locations in enabling the affirmation of gay identities when such affirmations were impossible at home in the West. Indeed, regardless of the level of privilege they enjoyed, these communities and their travel traditions generated identifications that were resistant to dominant colonial notions of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, it is equally important to note, as Boone has, that "[t]he intersection of this 'sanctuary' for gay men with certain historical and economic factors of Western colonialism allowed a level of exploitation potentially as objectionable as the experience of marginalization and harassment that sent these voyagers abroad in the first place" (100). In Orientalist traditions, stereotypical colonialist tropes such as boys "Olive-skinned, with the languid eyes of a hashish-smoker [sitting] cross-legged on a stool [and playing] quietly on a reed flute" (*Arabesques* 11) have characterised the exotic East as an object of desire. These tropes, which abound in *Arabesques*, project onto the East an "otherness that mirrors Western psychosexual needs [and confirms] the phenomenon that Saïd calls 'Orientalism'" (Boone 89).

The appeal of Orientalism for Dessaix is the promise / threat of oblivion that accompanies such representations. Although his "landscape of forgetting" connotes a fair deal of remembering, its status as a place that courts oblivion, that threatens traveller with a "state of zero," a falling away of established identity, provides Dessaix with a discourse of disappearance. Undoubtedly, *Arabesques* embroils itself

in an Orientalist discourse. But, as cultural criticism, it redecorates the already garlanded East in an ironic manner, for its self-consciousness of the politics of Orientalism is instrumental in depicting the encounter between East and West.

Increasingly aware of the imperial ground on which it walks, *Arabesques* domesticates the Maghreb via a vocabulary of the staged and the exotic that both renders the Orient picturesque and at the same time deflates the potential for an experience of the “Other,” limited as it is to colonialist discourse. To quote David LeHardy Sweet discussing the writings of Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, Gide and Jean Cocteau on the Maghreb, *Arabesques* strategically turns Orientalist discourse against itself via a “denuding of the imperial armature” that is “*exhibitionist*” in its cultural criticism as opposed to non-repressive and non-manipulative (LeHardy Sweet 210). This strategic “exhibitionism” of Orientalist discourse affects a kind of flattening out of the landscape by which the only mode of understanding available to the Western traveller is that of cliché, of North Africa as a “sign of itself” (Culler 155). The implication here is that an experience of the exoticised “Other” is available either through mediated stereotype or through other knowledges that, for the Western traveller, are ungraspable. All that is left for the travel writer is to either fall silent or redescribe the already described, which effectively amounts to the same thing.

Dessaix's Gide and the “Landscape of Forgetting”

There are three primary ways in which *Arabesques* is complicit in an Orientalist discourse: the layout and presentation of various editions of the text; Dessaix's attitude to the “game” (20) of Oriental travel; and his representation of Gide. Firstly,

the visual appeal of *Arabesques*, or in Gerard Genette's terms its "paratextual value" (16), is reliant on and perpetuates the eroticisation of the Orient; secondly, Dessaix's notion that the interaction between East and West is a "game" implies a level of privilege enjoyed by the moneyed tourist who is not forced to identify through such encounters (or if he is, he is also free to leave); and lastly, his construction of Gide, although sophisticated and nuanced, is grounded in a history of economic and sexual exploitation. These elements of the text characterise Dessaix as a ghostly reminder of the stereotypes and forms of oppression that have traditionally defined the region. In so doing, they establish parameters for the East / West encounter.

Arabesques is divided into ten sections: an Introduction followed by nine chapters. Eight of these chapters are named after the places in which much of the action occurs (although there are often diversions, such as chapter two, "Blidah," which features the digression, "The Caterpillar and the Castle," set in northern France; and chapter four, "Anduze," which contains the story of Dessaix's "Small Epiphany In Oporto"). As with many of Dessaix's works, each chapter is episodic, and the chapter sequence non-linear. In both the original hardcover and the subsequent trade paperback, *Arabesques* has the appearance of an art or coffee-table book decorated as it is with over seventy images, most in full-colour: photographs of statues, cafés, the casbah in Algiers, Gide's headstone, together with train tickets, illustrated maps, phrases scribbled in Arabic and translated into French and English, paintings of Algiers and Morocco and portraits and sketches of Gide at various stages of his life. Dennis Porter, commenting on the visual appeal of Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, notes that "[t]he quality of the paper and of the illustrations, as well as their quantity, oblige the reader to hesitate in assigning

priority to the printed text or to the images" (292). So it is with *Arabesques*, whose form suggests equity between word and image and reveals the stereotyping capacities of both.

Genette has noted that the selection and arrangement of images in a text "cannot fail to generate inferences (intended or not) about meaning" (30). The format of a text, its "look," usually a collaboration between the author and his / her publisher, reveals an attempt to position the text within a certain cultural context. *Arabesques* has been given a particular look with its exotic packaging. The hardcover edition features, on the front, a photograph of a pair of traditional babouche slippers: the wearer is visible only from the ankles down and stands on a Moroccan mosaic tiled floor. Both paperback editions (trade and B-format), feature a fez-wearing dark-skinned boy "with the languid eyes of a hashish-smoker." Laid over the sepia-toned image, beside the boy, is an illustrated orchid in rich pinks, oranges and blues, wilting ardently and depriving the shot (and the boy) of any innocence. One cannot help but notice the image's suggestion of boys "in the flower of their youth" (85).²

Undoubtedly the packaging of the texts is playing off an established image of the Orient that is commercially viable and often exploited, one that is well-recognised and widely disseminated. This image has its foundations in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century travels of "well-known homosexual artists, actors, and other celebrities, [who] no doubt played a part in constructing these destinations as locations in which, if one had the financial and cultural resources, one could lead a fulfilling, sexually liberated, and often, it seemed, glamorous life" (Waite and Markwell 44). None more so, as several commentators have noted, than

Gide (Saïd 190; Boone 90; LeHardy Sweet 203; Waitt and Markwell 51). Thus, even before the opening sentence, *Arabesques* displays complicity with an image of the Orient and “Oriental sex” (Saïd 190) that has its origins in the colonial expeditions of homosexual travellers of the nineteenth-century.

In addition to the cover images of the three editions of *Arabesques*, the hardcover features a double-page spread that separates the “Introduction” from the first chapter, “Algiers,” which contains a map of Algiers and a postcard image in sepia of Nelson Square within the same city. Postcards, “the [world’s] most widely disseminated tourist icon” (Yüksel 714), are often synonymous with stereotype, trading as they do on a particular image of a place; they also connote the commodification and simplification of a place, for the possession of a postcard “fulfil[s] the ‘appropriation’ of the visited destination” (717). Susan Stewart suggests that the postcard “reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, or into the two-dimensional representation, that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of the individual subject” (137–38). The postcard flattens out the three-dimensional and works to create and maintain stereotypical images. In particular, as Malek Alloula notes, it is instrumental in deploying colonialist discourses, and typifies the impoverished mindset of colonialism:

The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist. It is at once their poetry and their glory captured for the ages; it is also their pseudoknowledge of the colony. It produces stereotypes in the manner of great seabirds producing guano. It is the fertilizer of the colonial vision. (4)

In *Arabesques*, the image that bridges the introduction and the first chapter — the map and the postcard (the images are contiguous) — implies such a Eurocentric perspective. The map is taken from *Handbook for Travellers in Algeria and Tunis*, by Sir R. Lambert Playfair, published in London by John Murray in 1895. The postcard features an arcaded square, surrounded by colonnaded hotels built in the colonial style. Balconies open onto the square, and the empty bench in the bottom right completes the suggestion that this is a place for observing. The square itself is an intricately ordered space, reminiscent of a Parisian park with fine, earthy gravel covering the ground; street lamps such as would be found in parks and squares throughout Europe stand equidistant from and either side of the bench. Within the square there are tall, carefully pruned palm and citrus trees; an ionic column stands alone in the middle of the square on a small plinth two-steps high. With one foot on the top of the plinth and one on the only step between it and the gravel path, a young Algerian man also stands alone at a distance looking directly into the camera. He seems uninterested in the camera's presence (his expression is difficult to read due to his distance from the camera), and the framing of the shot suggests that the camera is no more interested in him than in the rest of the scene. (Incidentally, such is the case also with the boy on the covers of both paperback editions.) Despite his pose, one foot on the plinth and one on the step, he is frozen, neither ascending nor descending, as still as the column he is dwarfed by. His inertia speaks to the essentialising powers of the postcard; the stereotype of exotic Algiers is here distilled in black-and-white.

As a cultural artifact, Dessaix's text exhibits the visual tropes of colonialist discourse, perpetuating an image of the exotic East via stereotypical representations

of North African places and its inhabitants. The positioning of both the boy beside the orchid and the young Algerian man in Nelson Square exemplify the tropology of colonial renderings; the former alludes to North Africa's "economics of boys" (Boone 99), whereas the latter reveals the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Saïd 3). In particular, these images also allude to "an imagined terrain of male desire that has specific geographic coordinates" (Boone 91). The careful positioning of the lush orchid beside the dark-skinned boy is typical of the way colonial representations position the Orient as a land of "sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire [and] deep generative energies" (Saïd 188). Phallic symbolism of the ionic column aside, not only is the young man in the postcard image objectified by the framing of the shot (that is, he is not of any greater importance or relevance than anything else in the frame), he is also made an object of desire by his positioning within an exotic setting (like the boy). Both images suggest, or impose, an air of male licentiousness and typify the way in which "[t]he homoeroticism of Orientalism is sustained by colonial discourses about brown skin, bathhouses, harems, slave markets, desert heat, and tented caravans, with an abundance of veils, robes, cushions, and youthful men" (Waït and Markwell 51).

Dessaix is not oblivious to this. In Algeria he is put in touch with Yacoub by his friend, Zaïda (whose name is more than a little allusive). When Yacoub, an Algerian, asks him "why are you *really* here in Algeria?" Dessaix is defensive:

Was he a spy or something? Was that why he was so *silky*? Or, having read Edward Saïd, did he just suspect that I was there for some disreputable Orientalist reason—to salivate over the exotic Arab "Other," for instance,

ravish it and then jet off home? Saïd's views are looking pretty one-sided, not to say wrong-headed, these days where I come from [...] (60; original emphasis)

Dessaix's justification is that travel to the Orient is an enterprise that involves "Mutual exploitation of a very North African kind" (214).

Shortly before meeting Yacoub, Dessaix recounts some of his own experiences in Tunisia. In each case it is *he* who is pursued by the locals: "[I] let the men take me by the arm and coax me to make a purchase, just to pass the time ... 'A handbag for your wife ... A dab of this just *here* and you'll feel young again for hours ... No wife? No friend? Let me be your friend'" (19). Earlier, in a café in Kairouan, Abdul, a slipper-merchant, "[d]eftly switching roles and using more or less the same words as Oscar Wilde had in Algiers, [...] offered me the waiter" (19). Abdul then proceeds to offer Dessaix a "lad in [an] electric blue djellaba lolling by the window" (19). In each of these encounters it is Dessaix who is sought, as though he has become the prey, the object of desire. Nevertheless, he does not take it to heart: "it *was* just a game. Abdul was simply amusing himself during his lunch break. The idea was that I should lose and pay up" (20; original emphasis).

Such is the response of the traveller for whom this "game" is not a way of life. Dessaix is free to shrug off these advances, to accept them as part of the "game," because, as he later explains, "there was one thing I was particularly careful not to misplace: my ticket home" (226). Although he is here objectified, apparently a mere vehicle for local amusement and profit, he is not forced to identify as such, for he has the advantage and privilege of mobility; he can leave whenever he likes. At best, this "game" is one of mutual exploitation in the sense

that “one can afford the gift giving and the other requires the gift giving to sustain a desired lifestyle” (Ryan and Hall 60). Thus it is a game stacked toward the privileged, who have greater power to determine whether or not to “play.” Dessaix’s justification is in keeping with the notion that “[t]he sex tourist wishes to engage in a belief that the act is a voluntary one, or if not voluntary, one that is permitted by local value systems” (Ryan and Hall 56). There very well may be more than a grain of truth to Dessaix’s observation; even still, there remains in it an undercurrent of the erotic and economic power dynamics that have traditionally characterised the Maghreb. Regardless of who “plays” predator or prey, the image of the “erotic East” is affirmed in *Arabesques*. Even if one can find in North Africa enclaves of men and boys who freely take pleasure in being paid for sex, it remains that the East is the West’s sexual Other. In the end it is a game played by imperial rules.

As the opening scene in *Arabesques* suggests, by following in Gide’s footsteps, Dessaix evokes the tradition of occidental homosexual self-realisation. Despite his idiosyncratic rendering of Gide, one that differs from the image of the Frenchman put forth by many commentators, it remains that Gide represents a mode of travel that is radical in some respects but also exploitative and imperious in many others. Numerous critics have commented on Gide’s experiences in and writing about North Africa. Jonathan Dollimore and Robert Aldrich highlight the significance of Gide’s erotic encounters in affirming, legitimising and naturalising homosexuality. Dollimore suggests that “Gide’s experience in Africa is one of the most significant modern narratives of homosexual liberation” (*Sexual Dissidence* 12). Saïd notes that Gide was one of the pioneers of “Oriental sex,” while LeHardy

Sweet argues that Gide's "touristic nullification of depth" (210) of colonial stereotypes essentially renders him a dissociated figure thus avoiding the traps of Orientalist regimes of representation. In contrast, Lawrence R. Schehr denounces Gide's experiences; he claims that "even when Gide is telling the truth about a sexual encounter in the blazing sands of North Africa, this truth is the truth of capitalism and imperialism" (118). Writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Michael Lucey agrees with Dollimore and Aldrich that North Africa enables a sexual awakening for Gide and adds that his journey serves as a means of escape from Oedipal family dynamics. Citing the line in Gide's *L'immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*)—"It is impossible to make any mental effort [in North Africa]; pleasure follows so closely on the heels of desire" (123)—Boone identifies "the unconscious colonialism involved in Gide's projection of a narrative of gay awakening onto the Near East" (101). And Waitt and Markwell claim that Gide was instrumental in affirming the reputation of North Africa and Southern Italy as destinations for gay tourism (46; 51). Regardless of whether he is portrayed as being complicit with or opposed to the colonial enterprise, commentators cannot avoid discussion of Gide's erotic encounters in North Africa. And although his journeys might have been an "emblematic flight from the religious and social demands of Europe (even tolerant and naughty *fin de siècle* Paris) to search overseas for health, warm climates, enchanting landscapes and cultures, and some sort of self-realisation" (Aldrich 337), a cloud remains over the politics involved in such realisations.

Dessaix's image of Gide, however, verges away from many of these readings. To begin with, Dessaix seems to resist even identifying Gide as gay, claiming that "his views on sex were so austere, so 'Greek,' that he would have

recoiled with distaste from men like myself, dismissing me as a 'sodomite.' Men who not only love men, but have relationships with men, struck him as disgusting. There was nothing 'gay' about André Gide" (281). Dessaix has a proclivity for avoiding definitions that goes beyond linguistic pedantry. Each of his book-length publications endeavours to affirm a triangulated or "between" position that is "neither one nor the other" or "both at once." Examples abound within each text: *A Mother's Disgrace* analyses Dessaix's identity in the face of tensions between cultural construction and biological inheritance; *Night Letters* traverses the uncanny space between lost and found; in *Corfu* the narrator occupies the house of expatriate-Australian Kester Berwick, a space that is somewhere between settlement and drifting; and *Twilight of Love* characterises the love affair between Ivan Turgenev and Pauline Viardot as inhabiting the "unplotted space between family happiness at the one extreme and unbridled licentiousness at the other" (100). Even the generic features of Dessaix's texts speak to his resistance to definition and tendency toward the between. Never solely fiction, autobiography, biography, essay or travelogue, his texts move along and straddle the boundaries of these genres.

Dessaix's reluctance to define Gide as gay in *Arabesques* stands contra to much commentary on Gide, his work and travels. For Dessaix, Gide is a married libertine, liberated Protestant, cosmopolitan Frenchman, somewhere between hetero- and homosexuality whose erotic encounters in North Africa bordered on (but never entered, according to Dessaix) pederasty (his "boys were not adults [but] they weren't children, either" [75]). Although these encounters were paid for they were "not furtive" (205); nor apparently were they carnally possessive. In

recounting Gide's first erotic episode with a Maghrebi boy, Dessaix highlights the politics of carnal positioning:

[Gide] makes it plain that the boy propositioned him "sweetly, caressingly," that as they sat looking at each other he, André, was almost burning with curiosity about what was going to happen [...] André throws him down, the boy takes a knife and cuts the cords on his trousers so that they fall to the ground and André murmurs in his ear: "Do you want me to fu.. you?" [...] Ali says: "If you like" and takes up the sort of position on the sand which makes it clear that he means what he said. "I actually took no advantage of this," Gide tells us [...] And so presumably they lost themselves in pleasuring each other with their hands. (206–7)

Dessaix's Gide does not penetrate this boy, or any of them, for that matter; that is, "he wasn't troubled by a desire for this one or that, but floated pleasurably on a cloud of sensual awareness in their company" (219). This conception of Gide (if resiting penetration absolves the traveller from any accusations of possession or oppression) is in subtle contrast to the writings of other commentators on the subject of Gide. Aldrich, analysing the same scene, ends his reading with: "The two coupled" (336), suggesting what took place was more than mutual masturbation. Like Dessaix, Naomi Segal has noted that "Gide was famously intolerant of any homosexual practices that involved penetration" (148), but argues that this is due to Gide's reluctance to engage with effeminate "inverts" (148; Gide's term). Segal explains, also like Dessaix, that Gide distinguishes between pederasts (which he proclaimed to be [148]), sodomites and inverts. According to Segal, Gide's reluctance to engage in anal sex is misogynistic. Whereas Dessaix attributes Gide's

preference for masturbation to a certain free-floating aesthetic sensibility, one that suggests a colonial self-consciousness, Segal notes Gide's resistance to anything "excessively feminine" (147). Aldrich, discussing Gide's encounter with Ali preceding the episode above, claims that his refusal to engage in penetrative sex with the boy was due to his "fretting" (333) that the money he carried on him may be stolen by the boy's companion, thus breathing the chilly air of pragmatism into Gide's landscape of desire.

Positional politics aside, perhaps more than any other commentator (although both Dollimore and LeHardy Sweet broach the subject), what is of primary concern to Dessaix is not Gide's homosexuality, nor the erasure of one self and the emergence of another, but the way in which Gide's episode with Wilde in the Algerian casbah signalled an inherent duality at the heart of Gide's character. According to Dollimore, Gide's gay awakening in North Africa saw him "reconstitut[e] himself as an essentially new self [...] understood in terms of a pre-social, individuated essence, nature, and identity" (*Sexual Dissidence* 13). Dollimore shows how through liberated desire, subjects (Gide in particular) disidentified from repressive social orders and realised homosexual identities, which were in turn reinscribed within dominant society as acts of dissidence thus occupying both a central and marginal space within that society. This simultaneous marginality and centrality is no doubt appealing to Dessaix, given his gravitation towards "betweenness" or notions of being "both at once." But Dessaix's portrayal of Gide posits not so much the death of one self and the birth of another, but the cleaving of one self in two. For Dessaix, the "essentially new self" that Gide reveals in North Africa is divided, both at once. As such, the ontologically stable, secure and centred

self of the Occidental traveller is thrown off balance. Additionally, the key to or focal element of his identity is always somewhere else.

Like Dollimore, Dessaix claims that the path to Gide's self-awakening lay in liberated desire. In acting on this desire Gide affirmed who he had supposedly been all along:

Gide, [...] with his Protestant taste for duality in general, liked to play at feeling riven, but the dualities he had in mind were not chiefly sexual. He liked to claim to be both a northerner and a southerner (his mother being from Normandy, and his father from the Huguenot south), to have both Catholic and Protestant roots (his mother's family having once been Catholic) and on one occasion, mischievously, to have been born "between two stars," Scorpio and Sagittarius. (121–22)

His point, in contradistinction to Dollimore, is that Gide was never one thing or the other. What his encounter in the casbah in Algiers confirms is "not so much the insincerity as the thinness [of one self] and the stirring of another self" (32).

Dessaix's portrayal of Gide as a "riven" character coincides with Dessaix's own sense of placelessness and eccentricity, his sense that "everything about me comes from somewhere else" (*TL* ii). In fact, although he claims to have not had a "casbah" incident *à la* Gide, the opening scene of *A Mother's Disgrace*, in which Dessaix has a knife held to his throat, bears significant similarities. In both *Arabesques* and *A Mother's Disgrace*, North Africa is threatening. The waiter at Groppi's, for instance, is "sharp as a knife" (*MD* 2); and the casbah of Algiers is, in *Arabesques*, "a tight tangle of grubby streets and steps jammed between ancient walls on a sharp ridge, knifing up from the port" (10). Not only is the Orient

threatening in Dessaix's texts, it is, in particular, knife-like and thus capable of severing one in two. When, in the opening scene of *A Mother's Disgrace*, the three Cairenes hold Dessaix at knifepoint, they rip the chain from around his neck, roughly remove his wrist watch and order him to take off his clothes.

Throughout Dessaix's work, luggage and clothing work as signifiers for one's attachment to home. Characters, such as Professor Eschenbaum in *Night Letters* and Dessaix himself in *Arabesques*, arrive at their destinations without their luggage, indicating a loss of (or at least an attempt to lose) "cultural baggage." Also in *Night Letters*, the narrator, R., lugs his cumbersome suitcase across Italy in search of lodgings, which in this case suggests an inability to shed his domestic acculturation. (I also note, in chapter five, that as a reminder of home, his baggage is a reminder of death). At knifepoint in Cairo, Dessaix is severed from what chains him to his sense of himself. Like Gide's casbah encounter, he is detached from himself (signified by the cutting of the chain) and, losing his wrist watch, he loses his sense of time. His description of Gide's casbah experience—"Time had evaporated. He was nowhere and everywhere, he was in a trance ... he had forgotten who he was" (*Arabesques* 11)—could also be applied to Dessaix's in Cairo. Whereas Gide's encounter ends in "self-discovery" (13), Dessaix's ends similarly in his "finding a voice" (*MD* 1). Dessaix frames Gide's travels in the Maghreb, and the identity work of these travels, in a manner that enables him to further articulate his own aesthetic—which he has already established in his earlier texts—in terms of inner dissolution. Gide is Dessaix's particular creation, perhaps not outright, but certainly in terms of those elements of Gide's character that provide a model for Dessaix to elaborate his notion of simultaneous crisis / affirmation of identity.

In looking at North Africa through the “lens” of Gide, Dessaix creates a “landscape of forgetting” in which he might dramatise his articulation of self. This is not to say, however, that this journey is a search for the authentic (in the form of an authentic “Gide”) within a mediated system such as that of John Urry’s “tourist gaze” (1).³ Instead, the discovery Dessaix looks to make is that of himself, thus bypassing any notion of touristic authenticity. As Saïd has noted, travel to the Orient for “the fulfilment of some deeply felt and urgent project” has at its centre the “play of a personal—or at least non-Orientalist—consciousness” (158). This is true of Dessaix; although his image of the Orient is bound up in an Orientalist discourse, his experiences in the region, as I discuss below, demonstrate the limitations of Orientalist representations and partly absolve his complicity in imperial modes of representation. That is to say, he is also “both at once”: Orientalist and anti-Orientalist.

Dessaix’s journey through North Africa is a trip through a hall of mirrors. It is important to note, however, that the self with which he identifies is one that has been constructed around the notion of the homoerotics of Oriental discourse. Undoubtedly, the Gide that Dessaix pursues through *Arabesques* is peculiar to Dessaix’s idiosyncratic mythmaking, which raises the question (all innuendo aside) who came first, Dessaix or Gide? It remains, though, that despite the idiosyncrasy of Dessaix’s “personal project,” despite it being in effect a “self-authenticating” tour (in both senses), the figure that Dessaix deploys in order to mythologise himself is complicit in modes of identification that support imperial representation. A vision of “colonial privilege” and “occidental personal liberation” is evident in *Arabesques*, not only in the opening scene of carnal solicitation involving Wilde and Gide, but

also via its layout and presentation. In its depiction of travellers journeying to the Orient in order to identify as “other,” *Arabesques* confirms the East as a space in which “the Vice is popular and endemic” (Burton 179) and maintains colonial binaries, not only in terms of the sexual exploitation of Maghrebi boys, but also in terms of maintaining the otherness of homosexuality.

Cliché, Silence and the Self-in-Crisis

If the opening scene in *Arabesques*, involving Wilde and Gide, is indicative of both the colonial power dynamics of “the occidental trade in boys” (Boone 103) and the occidental otherness of homosexuality, it is also indicative of another trope of imperial representations of North Africa: internal dissolution. The Orient is attractive for Dessaix because it has traditionally been a place in which the drama of the self-in-crisis has been enacted. Such subjective disorientations, or the threat thereof, are endemic in travel writing. Indeed, as noted by John Zilcosky, one of the major tropes of European travel writing is the problem of “gaining a sense of orientation in a foreign land” (“The Writer as Nomad?” 230), which, when successful, often reinforces colonial representations. Not only does this apply to physical orientations, but also to inner orientations, for “in the *travel* memoir, [a] sense of fragmentation—of psychic dislocation—is reinforced by physical distance and the experience of estrangement” (Holland and Huggan 14; original emphasis). Travel narratives often align landscape with psyche either by confirming or creating a sense of subjectivity that is hybrid and discontinuous in the realm of the foreign. This has been the case for many travellers to North Africa, which has served traditionally as a destination for the emancipation from the cultural (or at least

moral) straightjacket of home. Often, however, abandoning some cultural attachments or constructions entails the retention of others. Such was the case with Gide, whose travels to the Maghreb enabled him to realise his homosexuality, and thus radically alter his conception of himself, while at the same time these exploits maintained many of the cultural stereotypes he sought to outrun. Despite this, the otherness of the Orient has traditionally served as a setting in which to explore “other” regions of the traveller’s psyche. Hence it is often represented as a landscape for the fulfilment of repressed desires. This promise always comes loaded with threat, as Dessaix’s experience in *A Mother’s Disgrace* illustrates. The threat, of course, is death, read here as the complete loss of self, of one’s identity, for better or worse.

In *Arabesques*, as in *A Mother’s Disgrace*, this threat revolves around the motif of silence. In the final section of this chapter, I examine several of Dessaix’s encounters in North Africa and suggest that they are united by silence as an alternative to cliché. In a text concerned primarily with the nature of the author’s identity, these silences stand together and inform an identity, or a form of consciousness, that is extra-linguistic. Additionally, they perform a critique of the colonialist discourse with which Dessaix has mapped the region.

Without doubt, Dessaix romanticises the Orient, filling the pages of *Arabesques* with colonial tropes such as olive-skinned boys playing reed flutes, palm trees, cannas, cordylines and vines—Dessaix literally lists them—“Paris by the sea, but chaotic, a tumult of colour and sound, thronged with merchants and shoppers, overflowing with shoes, silver, spices, perfumes, djellabas, glassware, crockery, croissants, oranges, aubergines, bangles, brassware” (31; see also 11, 126–27, 189,

193, 216). In this way, he presents the East as a “jigsaw of images” (31). Working with the visual appeal of the book, these lists of objects evoke and reinforce an imperial conception of the overcoded, exoticised Orient. Although after describing this scene in central Algiers, Dessaix remarks that it is “the landscape of forgetting” (31), there is something curiously familiar about it. Being swept away in North Africa by images of “an enchanted labyrinth of secret high-walled gardens and hidden courtyards, crumbling away here and there, as they still do, to let [in] the lush, sweet-smelling green of the palm groves” (216) connotes, rather than forgetting, a certain sort of remembering. This “landscape of forgetting,” in terms of both its topography and its supposed capacity to enable self-realignment, is a landscape of literary cliché.

Noting the way in which the East has been used as a stage for the enactment of personal revolutions, Rana Kabbani has suggested:

The Orient becomes a pretext for self-dramatisation and differentness; it is the malleable theatrical space in which can be played out the egocentric fantasies of Romanticism. It affords endless material for the imagination, and endless potential for the Occidental self. That self was many-faceted in the Orient; it could be omnipotent like Napoleon, aggressively patriotic like Kinglake, pedantically studious like Lane, fiercely outrageous like Burton, or unabashedly licentious like Gide. (11)

The forgetting of the culturally bound self in the Orient has become as much a cliché as the stereotypes which the subversive traveller wishes to shuck in journeying to the Orient. Moreover, by the twenty-first century there are a plethora of identities to adopt in the Orient by travelling in the footsteps of anyone from

Napoleon to Gide. But even if a traveller were to eschew these identities in favour of one that is perhaps more idiosyncratic, characterising the Maghreb as a “theatrical space” for “self-dramatisation” nevertheless follows the formalities of an established discourse.

Having said this, *Arabesques* presents the image of a stereotypical East in order to explore the limits of such a discourse, for it is by pushing these representations to their limits, and even subverting them, that Dessaix might identify himself via the kind of oblivion this region promises. In his travels, despite following in Gide’s footsteps, Dessaix does not necessarily adopt a particular persona in the manner suggested by Kabbani above; his interactions with the locals are decidedly chaste and uneventful and far from omnipotent, patriotic, studious or licentious. Instead, what he adopts, or what he searches for (as I discuss below), is the evacuation of self. The narrative of Dessaix’s “self-dramatisation” is not a story of the reinvention of identity, but one of its absence. These “vanishing acts” are facilitated by Dessaix’s awareness of the limits of Orientalist discourse, the limits of its language, which, for a narrator, represent the limits of existence and therefore connotes an awareness of death.

Dessaix illustrates the limits of Orientalist discourse, the loss of self promised by journeys to the East, when he revisits an encounter between Gide and Wilde that occurred a few days prior to Gide’s self-affirming casbah encounter in 1895. Gide is leaving the Grand Hôtel d’Orient in Blidah, bags packed and piled onto the waiting carriage, when he sees, on a chalkboard, a list of names announcing the hotel’s recent arrivals, Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas among them:

On an impulse Gide quickly sponged his own name off the blackboard before setting off for the station. To be fair to André, it *was* 1895, the Marquess of Queensbury was closing in, and Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred were not the kind of company one openly courted any more. Once at the station, however, about to get in the train, he had a fit of conscience. What if his old friends—and they *were* his old friends, he had to admit, even if he hadn't seen them for three years, unless you counted running across them briefly in Florence—what if they had seen his own name on the blackboard and now wondered why he'd left without knocking on their door? It would look crass. So he had his baggage put back in the omnibus and returned to the hotel. Since Oscar and Bosie were out, he sat down in the entrance hall to wait for them, his head in a volume of Dickens (*Barnaby Rudge*, of all things) [...]. (41)

Erasing his name from the blackboard, Gide symbolically performs the erasure of self that the Orient threatens / promises. In a way, it pre-empts Gide's later self-discovery in the casbah in Algiers. In particular, though, it recapitulates (or helps produce) the primary trope of internal dissolution in travel writings about the Orient. Indeed, Dollimore's influential text *Sexual Dissidence* opens with this very scene, undoubtedly because of its symbolic potency and its suggestion of cultural and (ultimately) homosexual liberation. But Dessaix develops this notion of erasure and reveals a sensitivity to the limitations of Orientalist representations. Although Gide's erasure of his name in Blidah speaks to the colonial trope of North Africa as a space for the liberation of self, the fact that he also carries his "loaded" bags with him to the station and subsequently decides—because "[i]t would look crass"—

against boarding the train suggests a profound *inability* to break the cultural mould. Despite his attempt to discard cultural accoutrements in order to discover, as Dollimore suggests he does, a “real self” (13) beneath the surface, Dessaix’s Gide is weighed down by and thus unable to offload his cultural baggage.

Gide’s act of erasing his name from the blackboard is symbolic of yet another limitation imposed by his own culture, that of language and the threat to one’s voice. Like the opening scene of *A Mother’s Disgrace*, Gide’s erasure of text symbolises the threat that the Orient poses to language. Within either scene there is the danger of being silenced, one via a cut throat and the other via a blank blackboard. Each protagonist is faced with wordlessness. Boone has written on the threat of silence in the Orient. Investigating Gustave Flaubert’s and Lawrence Durrell’s accounts of the Maghreb, Boone claims that both project a fantasy of sexual otherness onto North Africa which “eventually occasions a crisis of writing, of narrative authority” (95). According to Boone, a “fear of sodomy” underwrites their exploration of foreign otherness, which duly generates for these heterosexually identifying writers a simultaneous “homosexual desire and panic” and “triggers an uneasiness about what it means to be a writer and a man” (96). These crises of writing and authority, these moments of potential or actual silence, translate as crises of self. Boone argues that the homoerotics of Orientalism strangle literary output (or at least threaten to) and suggest an underlying “occidental homophobia” (96). In the end, though, these moments of “panic” produced Durrell’s famous tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60) and Flaubert’s *Flaubert in Egypt* (1887). Like Dessaix, these writers found a voice with which to assert their presence in North Africa.

Drawing on this tradition of existential panic, *Arabesques* establishes the following dichotomy regarding North African encounters: in the face of the foreign, the traveller is either silenced or forced to resort to his or her own acculturation. On the verge of erasure, Gide returns from the train station, bags in tow, to the Grand Hôtel d'Orient, where he is found reading (of all figures of acculturation, and thus arguably to aggravate Wilde) Charles Dickens.⁴ That is, on the verge of being wordless, Gide retains those words whose form is familiar. This experience of Gide's is a model by which *Arabesques* constructs the Orient, and it perhaps justifies, at least in part, its complicity in an Orientalist discourse. Indeed, Dessaix's experiences in North Africa suggest an underlying postcolonial self-consciousness. These encounters characterise the Maghreb as a place that both attracts and repels Dessaix, and one that is inaccessible to the Western traveller beyond the domesticated image s / he projects onto it.

Such is the case when Dessaix describes his journey to the ruin of a colosseum in El Jem, Tunisia. Catching sight of it, Dessaix is "stunned": "It could hardly be real, it was so out of scale, so astonishingly intact and quite deserted, as if I'd conjured it up in a trance" (196–97). The trance, however, is short-lived:

Once inside, though, with my guide striding out ahead of me, directing a stream of information at me over her shoulder in rapid-fire French, the trance melted away. Phoenicians, Romans, emperors, proconsuls, revolts, sieges, Arab conquerors, wars ... I couldn't take it all in, I couldn't anchor it all in any grid of stories lying deep inside me. Corinthian columns, Doric columns, pilasters, voussoirs and archivolts—it all began to blur [...] I found

it difficult to connect what I was seeing and hearing with any living web of thought or experience inside me. (197)

Unable to form a connection with the *mise en scene*, so foreign is it to him, Dessaix grows bored: “my mind turned to lunch” (198). Dining alone at a nearby café, gazing back “rather vacantly” towards the colosseum, a young waiter calls out to him: “*Ça va?*” which, according to Dessaix, “could mean anything.” Although he expects the predictable performance—“Here we go, I thought. Where is your wife? Where is your friend? Why are you alone? Would you like me to be your friend?”—the waiter “surprise[s]” Dessaix by asking if he is happy and then by telling him what he thinks happiness is: “All you need to be happy is work, girls and a glass of beer.” Despite his cynicism, Dessaix is reinvigorated: “Now, this was a moment well worth coming to El Jem for. I felt a tiny detonation of warm pleasure deep inside [...] I was elated. I set off for the museum across town with a new spring in my step” (198–99).

Although Dessaix is here suggesting the limited value in visiting hallowed sites simply “because everyone else feels obliged to” (195–96),⁵ this passage is revealing in terms of how he constructs the encounter between East and West. The trajectory or arc of his experience at El Jem follows a similar pattern to that of Gide’s experience in Blidah. Where Gide erases his name, signifying a disturbing distance between the cultures of East and West, Dessaix, experiencing a similar distance, unable to “anchor it all in any grid of stories lying deep inside me,” grows bored. In other words, El Jem does not “speak” to him; it “leav[es] few traces” (198). While sitting in the café, his act of gazing “vacantly” back at the amphitheatre suggests that an inner hollowness or silence has befallen him; like Gide he is left wordless. It

is not until the idle waiter asks him if he is “a happy man” (199) that he is reinvigorated, albeit with a certain ironic tone. More than this, his momentary interaction with the waiter is indicative of his sustained, unshakable acculturation. And it also, importantly, suggests the limited scope of the East / West cultural encounter.

This becomes apparent much later in *Arabesques*, in its final pages, when Dessaix is in Paris dining with several of his travel companions, Zaïda, Miriam and Yacoub, and the conversation turns to the topic of happiness. Yacoub, the Algerian, interjects: “You Westerners [...] seem fixated on the idea of happiness. You chase it everywhere, yet you never seem to catch hold of it. I understand pleasure, comfort, beauty, passion, peace, love [...] but I don’t understand what you mean by ‘happiness’” (286). *Arabesques* thus characterises the vague notion of existential happiness as a peculiar Western construction. Dessaix’s pleasure in being asked if he is happy is ironic, even self-deprecating, but it is also revealing, for it highlights a certain performance by the waiter who obviously knows how to interact with Westerners.

If Yacoub is anything to go by, the waiter’s question is essentially as vacant as the look Dessaix casts across to the colosseum. It means little to him, just as Dessaix’s experience of the colosseum means little to him. More to the point, the waiter’s notion of happiness—work, beer and girls—can hardly be said to coincide with Dessaix’s, given that the latter is gay, teetotal and holidaying. The two men have no common ground whatsoever; they have no common language other than that of cultural stereotype. If not for resorting to this kind of language (or these kinds of assumptions), the encounter between East and West would produce

nothing but silence. Thus, “the vitalities of unmediated Otherness that might emerge through a more personal investigation [...] are deflated [and] transformed into clichés” (LeHardy Sweet 210). With this in mind, Dessaix’s response to the whole episode seems to add another element of cliché: a typical exchange with the locals leaves him feeling “elated,” and he sets off for another museum with a “spring in [his] step.” Even his joy seems hollow, and although this might characterise him as a “post-tourist” (Urry 90; see chapter four), it is also evidence of the motif of silence in Dessaix’s work and its disposition towards the absent.

In this encounter, the cliché is shown to be a substitute for and interchangeable with silence; it is a way of talking about silence without talking about it, a stand-in. If we take Dessaix’s response at face value, there is the suggestion of the accomplishment of some goal: “Now this was a moment well worth coming to El Jem for.” And given that the East is characterised by Dessaix as a “landscape of forgetting,” the accomplishment is the “forgetting” or evacuation of discourse / self. For Dessaix, it is “worth coming to El Jem” because it is here that he might orchestrate his own disappearance and reiterate the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self that appears throughout his work.

Dessaix’s encounters in the erotic East, rather than leading him to an inner revelation, almost always fall flat, truncated as they are by an ironic lack of romance and a gravitation toward silence. Although he romanticises the Orient—that is, although *Arabesques* maintains a romantic image of the Orient—when it comes to his actual interactions with the people, his experiences are vacuous, often emphasising the discursive limitations of such interactions. Shortly before his

journey to El Jem, while staying in Sousse, Dessaix reflects on the beauty and foreignness of the Arab men:

To watch these men is like letting your eyes rest on an ancient carpet, densely woven, intricately patterned, mostly indecipherable and, miraculously, despite centuries of wear, still glowing brightly as if fresh from the loom.

After days in the medina I still can't work out what the patterns on this carpet mean. Yes, this is a rose, this a camel's foot and this seems to be a fountain, but what does it all mean? I don't understand what is shameful and what is perfectly good manners here, what is forbidden and what is harmless play, what is deference and what is gentle mockery. I don't know, in short, what it means to be a man here, dealing with other men.

Sometimes, opening my mouth to speak, I hear a voice I barely recognise saying things I only imagined myself saying before. In the flurry of teasing exchanges that accompany me up the street, who is courting whom? [...] Further along the street, just for a fraction of a second, I feel I should be plying this gazelle-eyed youth, who has taken me by the elbow to entice me into buying one of his finely sewn djellabas, with a many-versed *ghazel* about perfumed gardens and nightingales. But my Mastercard will probably do. (192–93)

As in the above episodes, the traveller moves from disorientation or dislocation to silence and stereotype. In this case, Dessaix acknowledges that he has become foreign to himself, emitting a voice he “barely recognise[s].” Not only is he disoriented internally, but his “other” voice remains silent on the page; Dessaix

provides no examples of the kinds of phrases this voice speaks. That is to say, “otherness” is silenced; once again language stops, and the passage alludes to different, unknowable, extra-linguistic knowledges that, like death, threaten the traveller’s subjectivity. Further, when he considers speaking again, by quoting an Islamic lyric poem (a *ghazel*) to the “gazelle-eyed youth,” he is silenced by the thought that instead of reciting poetry he could simply use (and the boy would be just as satisfied with) his credit card.

Not only is the credit card a substitute for his voice — “my Mastercard will probably do” — but it becomes a symbol of silence. Even if one accepts that quoting Islamic poetry in order to woo young North African men is itself clichéd, the fact that the credit card causes him to refrain from speaking at all further deflates the encounter and emphasises the absence of iteration. In replacing the utterance of Islamic poetry — itself a metaphor for the romanticisation of the region — the credit card, as a metaphor for economic imperialism, is not only a substitute for a substitute, but also it reveals that the traveller’s experience in North Africa is limited to a choice of discourses and any unmediated encounter impossible. In this case the two discourses are the romanticised or the commercialised vision of the East. There is nothing but the discourse of homoerotic Orientalism — in particular the region’s “economics of boys” — and silence. When Dessaix suggests that the young man would be more interested in his Mastercard than him, he further articulates his sense of oblivion, how these clichés of Oriental travel cause him to vanish from the scene entirely. In this way, the credit card is not only a symbol of silence; it also stands in for Dessaix himself, thus aligning him with the absence of voice via the globetrotting image of commercial imperialism (see chapter three).

In each of these interactions, Dessaix makes a point of being the almost passive object of an Oriental gaze that views Western tourists as a means to earning a living. At El Jem he is “the only customer” (198) in the café where the waiter asks him if he is happy (a question undoubtedly designed for the tourist); and in Sousse, as he is being led by the elbow by a young merchant, despite his confusion about “who is courting whom,” there is one thing about which he is “reasonably certain”: “I am the one about to be duped” (193). In the “game” of the East / West exchange, Dessaix portrays himself, or his custom, as the goal, the object of desire. Even if this is so, it is a state of affairs that has its roots in colonialist economic, racial and sexual exploitation. Dessaix is right to emphasise the stereotypical nature of these moments, for they have been occurring for centuries. Although the shoe might now be on the other foot, it is a scenario grounded in the experiences of the downtrodden. In describing himself as little more than a source of economic interest, Dessaix can effectively vanish from the scene in terms of the unavailability of any idiosyncratic connection or identification with the people and place; this is possible, of course, because he maintains the economic discourse of buyer and seller. Nevertheless, he is a reminder of the region’s history of economic exploitation.

It is not until Dessaix abandons the economic discourse entirely that, in a way, he can represent himself as being absent, at least in the minds of the people he encounters. When he recounts his first trip to Morocco in 1966—to visit Ahmed, whom he had met in Europe—his presence is barely acknowledged. This time, instead of being lost to cliché or economic imperialism, Dessaix is left literally without a word:

When I first arrived, all my luggage was sent on by mistake to Senegal, so I arrived in downtown Rabat from the airport not just stripped of my everyday self, but stripped of everything. Then I discovered that nobody could make sense of Ahmed's address, which I'd jotted down on a scrap of paper. Nobody at all—nobody I accosted in the teeming streets, not even the taxi drivers who in principle were willing to take me anywhere. I may have been unconsciously ready to leap into a vacuum, but this was too abrupt, too all-engulfing. "The seething street does not become *unreal* to me exactly," I wrote about that moment thirty years later, "it becomes in the blink of an eye more what I'd call *relatively* real [...] There's a meshing in the offing, I can feel it in my bones."

So I walk out into the street and set off, following my nose [...] (128–29)

The "meshing" occurs when Dessaix asks a man in the crowd if he knows the address: "'Yes, of course I know it and I know that house because Ahmed is my nephew. I'll take you there now'" (129). At Ahmed's house, however, Dessaix becomes nothing more than "a curiosity, a plaything Ahmed had picked up in Europe" (128), and "after a few days [Ahmed and his friends] tired of me, leaving me to my own devices. In the end I went off to the bus station without even saying goodbye [...] I never heard from Ahmed again. I wonder if in the intervening years I've ever even crossed his mind" (128).

Dessaix's arrival in Morocco minus his luggage not only continues the trope of losing / retaining cultural baggage, but his sense of being "stripped" of everything re-establishes a sense of the erotic via the suggestion of nudity. (Also,

threatened with a “vacuum,” he resorts, as always, to writing: “The seething street [...]”) Of course, now the tables are turned because it is the traveller who is naked and vulnerable, not the locals. In any case, despite the erotic potential of the East, it fails to produce any of the kinds of connections it promises. In fact, it fails here to produce connections of any kind. Undoubtedly, this episode begins with a stereotypical image of the mystical East, in terms of Dessaix’s chance meeting with Ahmed’s uncle, which characterises the Orient as a place for transcendent experience (the uncanny coincidence of their meeting) and hints at other knowledges for which the region is renowned. In a place where no one can read his writing—he is unable to find anyone who can decipher Ahmed’s address as he has written it—he becomes swept up in otherworldliness and inexplicably runs into the uncle who takes him where he needs to go. And despite the erotic and mystical potential of all he is confronted with on first arriving in Rabat, once at Ahmed’s house he finds nothing but silence: he is left to his own devices and leaves a few days later “without even saying goodbye.” The encounter is characterised by silence, both sides being left without a word.

In addition to there being no goodbyes or revealing, enlightening exchanges, Dessaix’s suggestion that Ahmed forgets him completely gives the impression that this landscape is not only one in which he may forget himself, but one in which he is forgotten by others as well. That is to say, without the economic and homoerotic discourses of Orientalism, Dessaix fails to exist (or to have existed) in the minds of the locals. Minus the clichés of colonialist modes of behaviour, the traveller becomes absent, lost to oblivion. Dessaix’s North Africa, then, is a landscape of linguistic oblivion.

Humanising the Orient

In his essay “Orientalism,” Dessaix examines several representations of the Orient by French colonial artists. He looks at three paintings in particular: Jean Léon Gérôme’s *The Snake Charmer* (c.1870) and *The Bath* (c.1880–85), and Henri Regnault’s *Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of Grenada* (1870). Dessaix claims that “[c]olour is one of the reasons the Orient drew artists like a magnet” (208) and suggests that these perhaps stereotypical renderings of the Orient, the “colourful” Orient (though he deigns to patronise the place as such), “draws the eye to the humanity in any scene” (210). The colours in these representations of the Orient distinguish vividly the human figures from their often colourless surroundings (the desert and the buildings of mud and stone). Noting the erotic nature of these paintings, and of representations of the East in general, Dessaix argues that through “the eroticisation of the East, something real was also evoked” (201). One is reminded of the way in which colour is used on the cover art for the paperback editions of *Arabesques*, in which pinks, blues and oranges coalesce and subtly (or not so subtly) eroticise the sepia image of the dark-skinned boy. In this instance, colour draws the eye to the stereotype of the homoerotics of Orientalism. Throughout *Arabesques*, the “colourful Orient” —in terms of the lists of images Dessaix provides, together with the visual appeal of the book—highlights the fundamental gulf that exists between East and West. That is to say, the stereotype exemplifies the text’s motif of silence that in turn connotes a crisis of self.

Dessaix’s notion of the “humanising” qualities of colour can also be applied to his particular style of narration, one that is itself colourful. Throughout

Arabesques there exists a constant tension between Dessaix's aesthetic of absence and the obvious presence of his identifiable narrative voice. There is a slippage, as there is in *A Mother's Disgrace*, between voice and self; where the self is described as being absent the voice is always present. Like the colourful orchid on the cover of the text, Dessaix's voice highlights the space between voice and self and asserts the simultaneous presence / absence of the narrator. In this way, the narrative voice, like the stereotypes of colonial travel writing, is a substitute for self. Together with Dessaix's inability (or unwillingness) to assert his presence in the Orient, in a landscape that traditionally enables self-realisation, the colourful prose spirals around and draws the reader's attention to an essential absence of self and the gap between voice and identity. His ontological insecurity causes Orientalist tropes to become devoid of their power.

The "humanity" of Dessaix's colourful and threatening Orient, therefore, is found in the ways in which his sensitivity to discursive limits and the nature of his prose translates as an awareness of mortality. In continually returning to scenes of cliché and silence, Dessaix's narrator defines himself through scenes of potential personal oblivion. The very act of writing is, for Dessaix, a response to the threat of annihilation; vibrant against a dark backdrop, his narrative voice therefore disseminates an awareness of death throughout every page of his work. In subverting the tropes of Orientalist travel and portraying himself as overlooked, ignored and forgotten by the locals in North Africa, in a narrative style that is unmistakably his own, Dessaix asserts his present absence in the Orient and reaffirms absence as a primary trope in the writings of his identity.

The first two chapters of this thesis have examined the rhetorical strategies Dessaix uses in the construction of his textual self. My focus has been to show that rather than favouring a sort of postmodern undecidability, the narrating voice is one that affirms an essential “whatness” (Fuss xi) to its being, but it is one that is always absent and beyond language. In this way the narrating voice can speak of being minus a self without deconstructing entirely the concept of self. The voice coils around absence, for it is absence *through* which it defines itself while at the same time it is the threat of absence that *motivates* or brings this voice into being in the first place. In speaking about silence, and about being subject to oblivion, Dessaix’s narrators make themselves present. The following section of this thesis deals with the ways Dessaix represents himself spatially, how his engagement with the world of tourism reveals his journeys as both statements of detachment and quests for meaning and authenticity.

In the next chapter I discuss Dessaix’s journeys in the footsteps of Ivan Turgenev in *Twilight of Love*. Like his journeys with Gide, Dessaix’s journeys with Turgenev align him with particular ideologies and traditions of travel. Whereas in the opening two chapters my focus has been on the essential absence at the core of Dessaix’s conception of self, the following two chapters are concerned with the ways in which Dessaix asserts his sense of “placelessness.” In particular, his encounter with one of Turgenev’s former dwellings, at Courtavenel in rural France, exemplifies this position: where Turgenev once felt “he had come home at last” (TL 126) Dessaix finds “nothing there” (125) at all. Courtavenel’s present absence is pivotal in terms of affirming Dessaix’s sense of placelessness and his preoccupation with the vanished.

¹ All page references to *Arabesques* are to the 2010 B-format paperback unless otherwise stated.

² The image of the flower alone also speaks to the identity concerns of *Arabesques*, which characterises North Africa as a space in which certain travellers might affirm repressed identifications—homosexuality in particular. Placed beside the image of the boy the flower works as a *double entendre* aligning the concepts of the erotic East with burgeoning identity and alluding to the text's predominant theme of self-realisation through liberated desire.

³ I will investigate Dessaix's complicity in the world of the tourist gaze in chapter four.

⁴ To this end, Elleke Boehmer has noted that "Dickens's novels [...] participated in organizing and reinforcing perceptions of Britain as a dominant world power" (2–3). Obviously, Gide is not British, but his reading Dickens in North Africa nevertheless stands as evidence of an inability to abandon completely his position as a colonialist.

⁵ An example of his "touristic shame" which I discuss in chapter four.

PART TWO: PLACELESSNESS

Chapter 3

"I could have been anywhere": Barbarism, Civilisation and the Death of History in Twilight of Love

Dessaix's travel writing, as a quest for narrative, is also a quest for a history. His mode of writing, whereby his autobiography is informed by the biographies of André Gide, Ivan Turgenev, Kester Berwick, Thomas Mann, Laurence Sterne etcetera, reiterates his concern with surrogates, not only in terms of technique (telling one life through the story of another), but also in terms of how he "places" himself in the world via the histories of other people. As he writes in his lecture "Pushing Against the Dark": "Large numbers of us float placelessly above the world's nation-states, cocooned in our own private memories, allegiances, and dreams. At least in the West. And so crave to record our own private lives instead" (36). Lacking a sense of shared history, with either family or nation, Dessaix embarks on his journeys in order to map out his own place in the world. The lives of other writers, together with their literary output, inform a kind of homeland for Dessaix. In *Twilight of Love*, as in *A Mother's Disgrace*, he is concerned with finding a language through which he might describe his place in the world. To this end, he deploys the "language" of the lives of other authors; via their histories he is able to make himself present. In *Twilight of Love*, Dessaix elaborates on his faith in narrative via his concept of what it means for an individual and a nation to be "civilised." In so doing, he maps out his philosophy of "home," one that is liberated from fixity and that collapses the home / away binary.

This chapter analyses the ways in which Dessaix "maps" Europe as a "non-place," one that reveals its detachment from history via the homogenising forces of

globalisation. This landscape of late-capitalist detachment is contrasted by his affiliations with the figure of Russian author Ivan Turgenev (1818–83). Dessaix's evocation of Turgenev is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's figure of the "*good European*" and its hopes for the future in the form of "mobility, progress, and rationality and the aspirations implied by transnationality, such as heterogeneous identities and global citizenship" (Bauer 235). Dessaix's revival of Nietzsche's cosmopolitan figure is not nostalgic; rather, he presents it as a contrast to his own position in the twenty-first century. Although he harbours many of the same ideals as the "*good European*," he is devoid of this figure's optimism for the future. Instead of a thriving, unified entity, Dessaix's contemporary Europe is the epitome of what Marc Augé terms a "non-place" (86)—that is, the globalised, commercialised, ahistorical spaces of supermodernity, lacking idiosyncrasy and thus resistant to Dessaix's attempts at identifying with this space.

Despite the fact that Dessaix aligns himself with Turgenev throughout the text, the primary difference between the two is that where Turgenev once found a home Dessaix does not. At Courtavenel in rural France, where Turgenev is said to have "come home at last," Dessaix finds "nothing there" (125) at all; Turgenev's former castle is now nothing but an empty patch of grass. The absence of the castle serves as a metaphor for, on one hand, the death of history in Dessaix's late-capitalist Europe and, on the other, for the absence of a sense of home as a fixed place. Further, the castle as an expression of Dessaix's placelessness reiterates Dean MacCannell's observation that contemporary travel is both an enactment of alienation and a search for meaning (15).

Belonging Somewhere Else: A Civilised Homecoming

In *Twilight of Love*, Dessaix travels to the many sites and federation homes in Germany, France and Russia that commemorate the life of Turgenev. As its title suggests, this text is primarily a meditation on love and friendship, which is informed by Dessaix's retelling (amid the travelling) of Turgenev's somewhat unconventional, forty-year relationship with French mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot conducted on the fringes of her marriage to Louis Viardot. Like Dessaix's other works, *Twilight of Love* shifts between literary biography, essay, autobiography and travelogue and highlights the ways in which Dessaix's life and concept of intimacy intersect with the life and output of the literary figure in whose footsteps he follows. While concerned mainly with questions of love and intimacy, this book also explores how Turgenev identified his "home," and what it means to be "civilised." It is with these latter questions that this chapter is concerned.

Standing on an old stone bridge that spans a dusty moat, Dessaix looks out across an empty mown square. Where he once would have seen a place simmering with activity, "more like a busy village than a mere castle" (TL 125), he now sees little but a patch of grass lined by a few bushes and trees. Presumably the bridge is all that remains, linking one grassy bank to another. Having been sold off by Pauline Viardot in 1884 following the respective deaths of her husband Louis and her "lover" Turgenev (Waddington 352), the Viardots' country residence in Seine-et-Marne, "Courtavenel," retains none of its former grandeur. According to Patrick Waddington, Courtavenel's foundations still exist however, "massive in their medieval blocks," but these are hidden beyond a "deep expanse of ferns and stinging nettles" (352). With the immediate grounds overgrown and decrepit,

almost every trace of the “fairytale castle” (TL 125) has vanished. Although the surrounding acreage has been transformed into a farm, “prosperous and well-kept” (Waddington 352), where the *château* once stood there is nothing at all, barely even a ruin. Any sign of its illustrious, celebrated former residents is gone.

Gazing into the “sunlit emptiness” (TL 125), despite the vacant *mise-en-scene* before him, Dessaix senses a profound connection to the life Turgenev lived here at Courtavenel in the nineteenth century. It is not, as he says, that he is able “to imagine even more vividly than before the life the young Turgenev had once lived there” (126). He does not picture the Russian “dancing at one of the parties in the banquet hall [or] telling stories to the family in the evening as they sewed and knitted” (126) any more than he has done before when writing his monograph, *Turgenev: The Quest for Faith* (1980), or translating *The Mysterious Tales of Ivan Turgenev* (1979). As he explains in the introduction to *Twilight of Love* (i–iv), to date, as he stands on the bridge above the empty moat, Dessaix has spent almost forty years reading, researching, teaching and writing about Turgenev.

Twilight of Love brings to bear Dessaix’s substantial knowledge of the Russian author, which foregrounds and informs his journeys in the text. The focus of these travels, as again Dessaix writes in the introduction, is not to seek out Turgenev’s ghost, but rather to better understand his sense of “kinship” (iv) with Turgenev. He is looking to discover where he and Turgenev intersect, and to explore their affinities, as he sees them. This might seem an easy and perhaps effective way for Dessaix to glamorise his literary persona. But in the context of his research into and publications on Turgenev prior to *Twilight of Love*, the comparisons Dessaix draws between himself and the Russian are made in order to

answer the question of what prompted his forty-year commitment to Turgenev. His is a personal project that looks to compare ideologies and modes of identification as opposed to literary output.

Staring out at the grassy square edged by shrubs and trees, Dessaix comes “alive” (TL 125; 126) to perhaps the most important point at which he and Turgenev intersect. At Courtavenel, despite there being nothing there at all, “no plaques or busts or ruins or painstaking restorations” (125), and despite being separated from Turgenev’s first journey to Courtavenel by over a century-and-a-half, he can sense why, “when [Turgenev] arrived here for the first time as a young man in 1845, he must have felt both that *he had come home at last, yet at the same time belonged not here, but somewhere else*. And this contradiction coloured every syllable he later wrote [...] Civilisation,” he continues, “here it was at last!” (126; original emphasis).

For Dessaix, the concept of homecoming is interwoven with his notion of what it means to be civilised. Dessaix’s civilised subject never feels completely at home, and is therefore, more often than not, in motion. However, when this subject does sense that he or she has “come home” (which is only ever a temporary emotion), it is to a place which enables one to live a civilised existence. A sense of homecoming is not a response to the physical environment as such, although that might be part of it. Instead, for Dessaix’s civilised subject, homecoming is a response to an ideology. Further, this notion of civilisation is not diametrically opposed to barbarism. In fact, the most civilised subjects, according to Dessaix, are always aware of their barbarous roots. In order to characterise this ideology, I will examine an early episode of *Twilight of Love* in which Dessaix recounts a famous quarrel between Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the German spa-town of

Baden-Baden. For it is here that the parameters of the debate between civilisation and barbarism, as Dessaix sees it, are set out.

Civilised Barbarians: Dessaix and Turgenev

In describing this clash between Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, in Turgenev's villa in July 1867, Dessaix defines the make-up of his civilised subject and establishes the attitude of his text as a whole. In this altercation with Dostoyevsky, who is the personification of patriotism, Dessaix (through Turgenev) gives expression to the idea that the civilised individual is one who detaches him- or herself from ideologies regarding nationhood, sexuality, gender, religion, class, marriage or any other kind of social engineering which involves conformity to inherited tropes or forms of coded behaviour. Turgenev, as the personification of civilisation, takes "exception to the idea that one's 'fatherland' had to mean 'a certain piece of land traced out on a map and separated from others by a red or blue line'" (TL 39–40). Rather, Dessaix's Turgenev defines himself "according to what he loved, rather than where he had been born, according to where his allegiances lay'" (40). In other words, Dessaix's civilised human being is self-fashioned.

In Baden-Baden, Dostoyevsky arrives at Turgenev's villa, where the latter lives at close quarters with the Viardots, in order to "vent his contempt in person for both Turgenev and his work" (35). At issue, for Dostoyevsky, are Turgenev's opinions regarding Russian culture and identity. Interrupting Turgenev's lunch, the "scruffy ex-convict, inveterate gambler and religious fanatic" (36) barges into the "peaceful, sunlit apartment" (36) and launches into a philippic about Turgenev's latest novel *Smoke* (1867). Written and set in Baden-Baden, *Smoke* is Turgenev's

“most anti-Russian novel [...] with its portrayal of crass and stupid high Russian bureaucrats living abroad in Baden-Baden, its depiction of wild-eyed and pointless Russian radicals also residing outside Russia, and the expression [...] of very pro-European and anti-Russian sentiments by the author’s spokesman, Potugin” (Moser 60–61). It seems no one is spared in *Smoke*, neither the Russians living abroad, nor Russian culture itself. At the heart of the novel’s declamations is Potugin, a secondary character, but one who nevertheless represents the text’s ideologies. And it is likely that his proclamations bring Dostoyevsky to Turgenev’s villa in Baden-Baden.

Prone to lengthy monologues, Potugin delivers to the novel’s protagonist, Litvinov, the following polemic:

“You asked me what I think of Europe,” [Potugin] began again. “I admire it and am wholly devoted to its principles [...] Yes, I am a Westernizer and am devoted to Europe—or, rather, I am devoted to culture, to that very culture which is now the subject of such charming jokes among us, to civilization—yes, that’s a better word—I love it with all my heart and believe in it. I have no other faith and never shall have. That word, ci-vi-li-za-tion” (Potugin laid emphasis on every syllable as he said it) “is intelligible, and pure and holy, while all other [sic]—nationality, glory, and the rest of it, smell of blood ... better leave them alone!” (Turgenev, *Smoke* 42–43)

Potugin places his faith in Western Europe in general and no country in particular. For it is only through “a selective borrowing from the very best that Western Europe has to offer” (Knowles) that Russian culture might enrich itself. Potugin desires a shared value regime, one that crosses borders and cultures; this, for him, is

civilisation. Later, Potugin curses the “home-grown” (Turgenev, *Smoke* 118), “self-taught” (120) Russian patriots: “Oh, poor silly barbarians, who don’t understand what tradition in art means and who imagine that artists are something like the strong man Rappo: ‘A foreigner,’ they say, ‘can lift only thirteen stone with one hand, and our man lifts twenty-six!’” (118).¹ What Potugin objects to is Russia’s insularity and its apparent bogus claims to originality and identity. In his mind, Russia rejects the foreign and celebrates the domestic as though Russia’s achievements have been developed within a cultural vacuum. In conversation with Litvinov, he explains: “Our old inventions made their way to us from the East, and the new ones we’ve managed as as [sic] best we could to drag over from the West—and still we go on talking about independent Russian art!” (119). It is not that Potugin sees Russia as completely uncivilised, for he observes that Russian culture is already in debt to civilisation: “even the samovar, the bast shoes, and the knout—those famous articles of ours—were not invented by us” (118). He goes even further: “I do believe, my dear sir [...] that not only are we indebted to civilization for knowledge, art, law, but that the very feeling for beauty and poetry grows and develops under its influence; the so-called popular, naïve, unconscious art is sheer nonsense” (122–23).

Potugin’s point is not that Russia is uncivilised in and of itself. Rather, he contends that Russians do not value the foreign traditions from which Russian inventions and artistic movements have evolved. It is the system of values that Potugin attacks, not the actual products of Russian culture. His devotion to Europe and “its principles,” to civilisation, is to a culture of hybridity and transnationality, one that prizes and learns from other nations and cultures. Also, in devoting

himself to civilisation he is devoting himself to history, to an understanding of the narrative of one's culture. The very essence of civilisation, for Potugin and Dessaix, is history. In other words, in order to belong in the present, one must understand the past. And, with a shared understanding of the past, one can hope for a unified civilisation of the future. These are hopes shared by Nietzsche's *good Europeans*:

We who are homeless.— Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who are entitled to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense: it is to them that I especially commend my secret wisdom and *gaya scienza* [...] We feel disfavor for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition [...] [W]e are not nearly 'German' enough, in the sense in which the word 'German' is constantly being used nowadays, to advocate nationalism and race hatred and to be able to take pleasure in the national scabies of the heart and blood poisoning that now leads the nations of Europe to delimit and barricade themselves against each other as if it were a matter of quarantine. For that we are too openminded, too malicious, too spoiled, also too well informed, too "traveled": we prefer to live on mountains, apart, "untimely," in past or future centuries [...] We who are homeless are too manifold and mixed racially [...] We are, in one word—and let this be our word of honor—*good Europeans*, [the] overly obligated heirs of thousands of years of European spirit. (338–40; original emphasis)

The longing for cultural unity and freedom from the limits of nationalism is a defining characteristic of the *good European*. This figure is cosmopolitan by nature, well-versed in the history of his / her culture and vehemently against patriotism,

patriarchy and racism. Discussing the relevance of this notion to the work of W.G. Sebald, Karin Bauer has noted: “The *good Europeans* are very much a construct of a possible future in the vein of the ‘free spirits,’ who are working toward liberating themselves from the constraints of their acculturation, are struck by a suspicion of home and the familiar, and feel a rebellious and volcanically erupting desire for travel and strange places” (242). This effort of working toward liberation “from the constraints of acculturation,” is precisely what is appealing for Dessaix about Turgenev. It is an effort he sees Turgenev making in favouring his cultural allegiances over the place where he was born. Writing “through” Turgenev, Dessaix is thus illustrating his own cosmopolitan universal allegiances and, at the same time, articulating a feeling of placelessness.

In his description of the *good European* Nietzsche advocates a transnational and hybrid value regime, a subject who rises above imposed or inherited codes of behaviour and identification while remaining grounded in “thousands of years of European spirit.” In this way he defines a subject with no stable identity or homeland, who will not tolerate ideals that preach unity in a “broken time.” Therefore the *good European* is a subversive figure that threatens established ideologies of nationhood and belonging. As a collective, the *good Europeans* are connected by their sense of non-belonging, of homelessness (read: placelessness). This homelessness, however, in Nietzsche’s view, leads to an interconnectedness that ignores race and national boundaries. He sees this collective as “fuller of future” (331) and “[l]ike trees we grow—this is hard to understand, as is all of life—not in one place only but everywhere, not in one direction but equally upward and outward and inward and downward [...] we are no longer free to do only one

particular thing, to *be* only one particular thing" (332; original emphasis). Not without roots, the hope of the *good European*, a hope shared by Turgenev's nineteenth-century cosmopolitans, is for a united Europe and a shared system of values that celebrates hybridity, heterogeneity and, most importantly, history.

When Dostoyevsky, who "saw himself above all [as] a national prophet" (Kohn 386), barges into Turgenev's apartment and interrupts his lunch, he is "incensed by the lines in [*Smoke*] about Russia's barbarism" (TL 36). Dessaix casts Dostoyevsky as "scruffy" (36) and "badly dressed, his beard in a tangle" (34). He places Turgenev in stark contrast; where Dostoyevsky is unkempt and penniless, Turgenev is dressed in "foppish attire" (34) taking a "delicious, leisurely lunch" (34) comprised of a cutlet and a Bordeaux, which his servant clears away as the two men kick up a row. Given that, according to Dessaix, the civilised individual is self-fashioned, Dostoyevsky's lack of "styling" suggests a passivity to the way in which he defines himself. His impoverished appearance translates as an impoverished ideology with regard to self-definition and to civilisation and suggests he is not selective when it comes to his self-fashioning. It also implies that the pool from which he has to choose how to define or present himself is limited or impoverished.

Obviously there are issues relating to class here. On one side of the debate stands Dostoyevsky who "had been denied quite a lot" (35) in his life, while on the other side stands Turgenev, "superbly handsome, rich, intelligent, educated" (35). As Dessaix points out: "While Dostoyevsky had been serving his sentence of four years' hard labour in Siberia, followed by forced military service, Turgenev had either been flitting around Europe having affairs with God know who—or else maundering about his vast estate at Spasskoye, tossing off the odd well-mannered

novel about nothing in particular" (35). Economically, the two men could not be further removed. In fact, Dessaix claims that Dostoyevsky arrives at Turgenev's apartment in Baden-Baden under the pretext of repaying a small sum he had borrowed from the "Great Writer" (35). Taken figuratively, the difference in economic capital between the pair symbolises the difference, as Dessaix sees it, in cultural capital between them. Dostoyevsky's impoverishment, his debt to Turgenev, is indicative of Russia's debt to civilisation, a debt Dostoyevsky ultimately refuses to honour. When Dessaix refers to Dostoyevsky as an "ex-convict" and "religious fanatic" (36), he is suggesting that the Russian is "imprisoned" within penal (connoting the national and the bureaucratic) and religious modes of identification, the very forces the *good European* resists. Dostoyevsky is defined by institutions that demand conformity and involve modes of belonging that are predicated on strict codes of behaviour. Culturally, he represents the "poor silly barbarians" that Potugin laments, those patriots with a very keen sense of what belongs and what does not belong within the walls of their culture.

Until Dostoyevsky arrives, Turgenev's "rooms" (34) are the picture of bourgeois ease and idle contentment. The fact that Dostoyevsky interrupts the "peaceful, sunlit" (36) atmosphere is also suggestive of uncivilised behaviour. Given the differences between the two men, it is not surprising that Dostoyevsky takes exception to Turgenev's latest novel *Smoke*. Disregarding courtesy or manners, he releases a tirade on Turgenev, telling him: "You should get yourself a telescope [...] Because Russia is such a long way from here [...] Train your telescope on Russia, why don't you, and then you mightn't find it so hard to see us" (37). Dostoyevsky is

enraged by the novel's claim: "If Russia were to sink without trace [...] taking everything Russians had ever invented with her, the rest of humanity wouldn't miss a thing—not a nail or a pin" (37). Dessaix is paraphrasing Potugin (Turgenev, *Smoke* 118), whose lengthy harangue suggests a dislike for his home country, as does Turgenev's remark to Dostoyevsky when the latter leaves the villa in disgust: "You must realise that I have settled [in Baden-Baden] for good, that I regard myself as a German, not a Russian, and that I'm proud of it" (37).

But it is not that Turgenev and Potugin are against Russia. When, in *Smoke*, Litvinov asks Potugin if he loves Russia he responds: "I love it passionately, and hate it passionately too [...] I have left Russia and enjoy being here very much, but I feel I shall soon go back. Garden soil is fine ... but it's not the soil for cranberries!" (43–44). Turgenev too, according to Dessaix, was,

profoundly Russian, obviously, not German at all. Even the way he conducted his altercation with Dostoyevsky strikes me as utterly Russian [...] Every book he wrote (in his incomparably rich Russian) was rooted in Russian landscapes, characters, obsessions and ways of thinking, from his *Hunter's Notes*, set in the countryside south of Moscow where he grew up, to his final supernatural tales. (*TL* 41–42)

At issue is Turgenev's relationship with Russia. Not only does Dostoyevsky take exception to the fact that *Smoke* expresses dissatisfaction with Russian culture, and suggests its debt to the rest of Europe, but also he is affronted by the fact that Turgenev expresses these opinions from Baden-Baden, at a great remove from Russia itself.

But such detachment, according to Dessaix, is necessary for the civilised subject. Like the *good European*, Turgenev is “manifold and mixed racially” (Nietzsche 338), living in Germany, supposedly identifying as German and living on the fringes of the marriage of a French couple. It is important to note that the *good European* is not intent on homelessness and belonging nowhere. Rather, this figure is one who hopes to weave a sense of belonging from a sense of placelessness, through a shared uprootedness, possessing the capacity to “borrow” from other races and cultures in order to be self-fashioned. Turgenev does not wish to renounce his Russianness (despite his final remark to Dostoyevsky), but rather he wishes to make it more nuanced by acknowledging Russia’s place within the context of Western Europe, by understanding the history of its acculturation. In this way, for the *good European*, civilisation is a *balance* between the domestic and the foreign. It is not simply a denial of the barbarism of the national. Instead, it is the desire for a worldliness that will ensure the relevance of one’s national culture in a global context. In this way, the *good European* hopes for a united Europe, and it is in this way that a civilised existence produces simultaneous feelings of belonging and non-belonging.

In the end there are no winners or losers in the altercation, for Dostoyevsky storms off amid Turgenev’s inflammatory remarks regarding his avowed Germanness. Most important for *Twilight of Love* and Dessaix is the contrast between the pair. What impresses Dessaix is Turgenev’s ability and willingness to live according to his tastes, which means, given his views about cultural values, living detached from Russia. A Russian living abroad—either in Germany or France—in close proximity with the Viardots (figureheads of nineteenth-century

French culture) and receiving guests such as Gustave Flaubert, Charles Gounod, Johannes Brahms or Franz Liszt, is, for Dessaix, the epitome of civilisation. In this way Turgenev lives throughout Western Europe feeling both at home “*yet at the same time [that he] belong[s] not here, but somewhere else*” (TL 126). Turgenev belongs in this company because he shares their core values in terms of art, mobility, economics, leisure, even, so it seems, love. In these places, among these people, he can live a life of his own choosing, from Russia to France to Germany. Yet at the same time, this sense of home is tainted by an awareness of national belonging, of coming from somewhere else, of being “profoundly Russian.” Just as important as belonging, for the civilised subject, is non-belonging.

Dessaix’s subjects, both his narrators and the literary figures in whose footsteps he follows, are never completely at home, for they carry with them a sense of non-belonging. Gide felt constrained by French bourgeois culture and fled repeatedly to Africa; Berwick did the same from Australia to Europe, and Turgenev also from Russia to Western Europe. In *A Mother’s Disgrace*, Dessaix travels to Africa, Russia and France in search of his origins, aware that he is not “an archetypally Australian male” (55). And the narrator of *Night Letters*, R., equates home (or anything familiar) with death after being diagnosed terminally ill (see chapter five). Almost every character in Dessaix’s texts can empathise with his statement in *A Mother’s Disgrace*: “I’d known ever since I could know anything that I didn’t come from where I was” (33). As an adoptee, Dessaix’s sense of home, even as he was growing up on Sydney’s lower North Shore, was infused with a sense of non-belonging. In an interview with Caroline Jones published in (*And So Forth*), Dessaix explains his experience of adoption as feeling “very much as if I had sort of

fallen ‘splat’ out of the sky and landed in [my parents’] laps” (405). It is unsurprising therefore that his conceptualisations of home and homecoming throughout his texts follow suit. For Dessaix’s civilised subject, existence is always characterised by a feeling of non-belonging. In a sense, this subject is an intruder and an impostor. Turgenev, living on the fringes of the Viardots’ marriage, “in a highly irregular triangular sort of arrangement” (TL 14), in Germany and France, claiming to be German, is, for Dessaix, an impostor of the highest order. And this is because he knows, like Dessaix, that even though he lives among those with whom he shares common cultural values he nevertheless “belong[s] somewhere else” (136).

At Courtavenel, standing on the bridge and staring at the empty mown square where the Viardot / Turgenev *château* once stood, Dessaix describes himself as coming “alive to Turgenev” (125), which translates to a shared sense of this contradictory homecoming. Coming as it does at the very heart of the text, and given Dessaix’s project to better understand his kinship with Turgenev (iv), this “tacit accord between two barbarians” (136), as he later calls it, highlights Dessaix’s contradictory senses of attachment and detachment. Most obviously, in looking backward to the nineteenth century, and identifying with it, Dessaix is oddly out of synch with the twenty-first century. His “accord” with Turgenev permits a view through to Dessaix’s own sense of alienation and detachment that can only be “bridged” via an apparent nostalgia for Turgenev’s nineteenth-century ideology of civilisation. Standing on the bridge at Courtavenel, Dessaix claims an understanding of, and thus an element of belonging to, an aristocratic, nineteenth-century cosmopolitan sensibility. Of course, he can never belong at all with the

nineteenth-century aristocracy, not only because of the temporal and economic distance between himself and Turgenev, but also because he is Australian. Turgenev's notion of civilisation appeals to Dessaix because it enables him to be included in civilised society, even though he is from a part of the world he considers barbarous. Like the "double movement" Dessaix performs in arriving at an essential identity by way of anti-essentialism (as discussed in chapter one), he is always attached to and detached from both Europe and Australia, and thus never entirely at home in one or the other. His sense of belonging in Europe is always qualified by his sense that he "belong[s] somewhere else," and his sense of belonging in Australia is always qualified by his affinities with Europe.

For Dessaix, "[y]ou may have to be antipodean, or at least Russian—from beyond the boundary stones of the civilised world, at any rate—to feel this very contradiction in your bones" (TL 127). The contradiction he refers to is the simultaneous sense of homecoming and non-belonging. Obviously the "civilised world" here is Western Europe; anything beyond its "boundary stones" is therefore classified as barbarous, hence the "accord between two barbarians," a Russian and an Australian. Throughout *Twilight of Love*, Dessaix characterises Australia in much the same way that he characterises Russia. In fact, he often uses Russian thinkers in order to describe the Australia he fled as a twenty-year-old. After noting the temporal proximity of Australia's "nomadic past" (129) he quotes a nineteenth-century philosopher, the Russian Pyotr Chaadayev, to make his point:

We [Russians] all have the appearance of a people on the move ... We have no sense of hearth and home, there's nothing to attach us to anything ... In our houses we live as if we were billeting, in our own families we seem like

people from somewhere else, while in our towns we are even more like nomads than the nomads themselves, grazing their flocks on our steppes, because they are more closely bound to their wilderness than we are to our cities. (TL 130)

Not only is Chaadayev's characterisation of Russian city dwellers strikingly reminiscent of Nietzsche's notion of the *good European*, but it pre-empt's Dessaix's vision of contemporary Australia. Compare the above passage to this from (*And So Forth*):

In an Australian bus I know no such thing [as being at home together]. On the contrary, late at night on a Coburg tram, I can be fairly confident that almost no value is shared (and not just by me), no common language beyond platitudes easy to find. I can be almost certain, as I cast my eye around the carriage, that no idea of right and wrong, love, duty, beauty, friendship, labour, family, history, kindness, justice, humour, privacy, truthfulness, discretion, hospitality, masculinity, God, taste, death, fun or grief (let's leave it there) is likely to be held by the passengers in common. And it's not a wholly comfortable feeling. It's not a very *civilised* feeling. (379; my emphasis)

In other words, Dessaix laments that Australia lacks a shared set of values, which he equates to lacking civilisation.

Although in *Twilight of Love* Dessaix claims to have not felt like "a complete alien in my own land" (135), he nevertheless provides little evidence of any sense of belonging. In Australia, "if you had any pretensions to civilised thought, you were usually seen by those around you as a misfit—an ugly duckling, a fop, an effete

poseur, someone with ideas above his station" (133). The difference when he gets to Europe is that it is a homecoming of sorts for the "misfit." Although he is aware of belonging (or at least coming from) somewhere else, Dessaix constructs Europe in order to articulate his notion of what it means to belong. In Europe Dessaix finds "all the transplanted things I'd taught myself to love" (137) back in Australia. Although he does not provide specific examples of these "transplanted things," given Dessaix's immersion in European literature and philosophy, and given that throughout his books he uses authors such as Gide and Turgenev as a means of articulating himself, it is not difficult to understand what he means.

It is no surprise, then, that Dessaix establishes an "accord" with Turgenev at Courtavenel. His sense that Turgenev had "*come home at last, yet at the same time belonged not here but somewhere else*" is indicative of the constant ambiguity at the heart of his sense of home. That he identifies with Turgenev, who claims to have "settled" in Baden-Baden for good, and who considers himself German not Russian, in taking umbrage when Dostoyevsky begrudges him his detachment and distance, is also indicative of the appeal that Dessaix makes to other cultures. If, as *Twilight of Love* suggests, Russia's, like Australia's, contributions to civilisation were "invented by somebody else" (36–37), an understanding of the narrative of the origins of these "inventions," these "transplanted things," is crucial for the civilised subject. Again, Dessaix's journeys reveal themselves as quests for narrative. For him, these stories in turn reveal a simultaneous belonging and belonging somewhere else. A sense of the absence of home is interwoven with a sense of homecoming. This connotes that a sense of belonging is always unfixed and interrogated. In the end, Dessaix appeals to a sense of unity and shared values synonymous with Nietzsche's *good European*,

one he claims to have found in Europe when he first touched down in Paris in the 1960s. Despite his suggestion that both Australia and Russia are “beyond the boundary stones of civilisation” (132), both are shown in *Twilight of Love* to be quite civilised in Dessaix’s terms, given that each has inherited much from other cultures. In this way, for Dessaix, both cultures oscillate unresolvedly between the foreign and the familiar.

In the next section I investigate the European landscape Dessaix moves through in following in Turgenev’s footsteps. Instead of an ideological homeland, he describes a place that is, as the *good Europeans* hoped, unified, but this Europe is also ahistorical, commercialised and even eroticised. Instead of a spiritual homecoming, Dessaix describes contemporary Europe as a place in which he does not and cannot belong.

“Stranded in the middle of nowhere”: Dessaix’s Europe as Non-Place

Twilight of Love produces an image of contemporary Europe as a region interconnected not by the shared cultural values of the *good European*, but by the forces of “supermodernity” (Augé 78), capitalism, and mass tourism. Although this Europe is borderless, consistent with the hopes of the nineteenth-century cosmopolitans, it is a Europe connected by a series of what Marc Augé terms “non-places.” Effectively, non-places are the ephemeral, solitary spaces of transit: “The traveller’s space may [...] be the archetype of *non-place*” (86; original emphasis). The world of non-places is ahistorical and not “concerned with identity” (78), meaning that these places are not identity-forming because the individual is never “fully present” (84–85) in them. Non-places are used by travellers as a means, to be passed

through, and not as an end or destination in themselves. For Augé, these places could be mapped—he uses the term “quantified” (79)—

by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called “means of transport” (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself. (79)

Augé defines the territorial permeations of globalisation, or supermodernity, the routes that communications and marketing have used for their “invasion” (110) of particular places with generalised non-place. Taking the wide-spread adoption of the English language as an indication of this invasion, Augé claims that “it is less a question of the triumph of one language over the others than the invasion of all languages by a universal vocabulary” (110). Like that of the cosmopolitan, the “universal vocabulary” of the world of non-places connotes that “people are always, and never, at home” (109); the language is one they recognise, but it cannot define them in the sense that they cannot identify with it because it is universal and resists idiosyncrasy.

In *Twilight of Love*, the Europe through which Dessaix travels is defined by non-places such as trains and train stations, motor cars and highways, and hotels and cities bedecked in multinational branding. This Europe is not civilised and diverse, but globalised and uniform. Placed in contrast with the hopes and values of the nineteenth-century *good European*, Dessaix’s contemporary Europe reveals the absence of these ideals, the absence of an awareness “of time’s sweep and

convolutions" (TL 131), which equates to the absence of civilisation. What he encounters is a place in which the type of utopian nomadic existence Nietzsche predicted and hoped for has given way to a multinational dystopia in which each region is indistinguishable from the next. Moving effortlessly from one city to another, Dessaix reveals a vision of Europe connected not by rootedness in culture but by the inhumanity (i.e., the "un-humanness") of globalisation, of the non-place. In short, the distinction between Dessaix's notions of civilisation and globalisation is that where the former is grounded in an awareness of history the latter is characterised by the death of history.

The ahistorical nature of Dessaix's contemporary Europe is evident in his account of arriving into Baden-Baden on the very first page. Baden-Baden is first seen from a train on which he arrives in order to, ironically, "smell old Russia" (TL 4). The prose style is staccatoed, which alludes to the fragmented, episodic form of the book itself, and also to the incommensurable cultural signifiers collected under the banner of Baden-Baden:

BADEN-BADEN. Gliding into the station. BADEN-BADEN. Snack-bar. Lady with lapdog. Hardly a soul about. A Hugo Boss billboard sliding by. BADEN-BADEN. The hills to the east hazy, heating up. Paragliders—one, two, three. Boss again—so sleek. Another brief glimpse of the blue-green hills. We jolt to a standstill with a screech. I stare at the sign on the platform outside.

BADEN-BADEN. (3)

This account of Dessaix's arrival reads like a prose poem (in response, perhaps, to Turgenev's collection *Dream Tales and Prose Poems*), which gives the space a dreamlike character. The image of the town is infiltrated by the rapid,

unencumbered movement of modern travel and draped in the late-capitalist garb of chic global branding. Descriptions of the paragliders and the use of words such as “gliding” and “sliding” to illustrate the motion of the modern train highlight the “suppression of distance by speed and mobility” (Kaplan 156). Jean Baudrillard writes that speed “cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself” (6). In this way, speed flattens out time and space, defining one region in the same terms as another and thus characterising an “uncultivated” “triumph of forgetting over memory” (6). Baudrillard’s conception of speed is helpful here, for it not only observes the nullification of borders, but also the way in which speed encourages an “uncultivated” forgetting of history. And the forgetting of history connotes a blindness to time and thus mortality, or, in other words, a denial of being subject to “the end of the line.”

Augé’s “quantification” of non-places suggests that these are places of high speed: highways, train-lines and channels of mass communication. Although it is now slowing into the station, the earlier speed of Dessaix’s train (there is no mention of where this journey originated) has “cancel[led] out” fixity and spatial-bound objects of identification; sliding by, they have all merged and become a patchwork of fragments. The train itself signifies perpetual movement, for arrivals and departures are always temporary states and never final destinations. So too the train station, being a point of both arrival and departure. Dessaix’s Baden-Baden is therefore characterised by signifiers that imply transition instead of destination, temporariness instead of permanence and simultaneity instead of polarity. The overall impression is that of movement and transition, not of origins or destinations, and a dissolution of history.

Ease of travel combined with proximity (via speed) destabilises the binary of domestic / foreign by effectively annulling national, even regional, borders.

Dessaix's train belongs everywhere and nowhere and is not defined or inhibited by national boundaries. At the end of *Smoke*, following a failed love affair, Litvinov leaves Baden-Baden by train for Russia. As he stares out the carriage window he is overcome by a sense of nihilism: "He gazed and gazed, and suddenly a strange reflection came into his mind [...] 'Smoke, smoke,' he repeated several times: and it suddenly seemed to him that everything was smoke: everything—his own life, Russian life, everything human, especially everything Russian" (225). In particular, as the train moves through the Black Forest, Litvinov laments the annihilation of history:

"Here," he thought, "there are over a hundred Russian students at Heidelberg; they are all learning physics, chemistry, physiology, and won't hear of anything else ... but in another five or six years not fifteen will listen to the same renowned professors ... the wind will change, the smoke will blow in another direction ... smoke ... smoke ... smoke!" (228)

As the train runs "on and on" (226) Litvinov sees all history, "everything Russian," go up in smoke. Aboard this train, history and borders are reduced to an indefinite haze.

Likewise, as Dessaix arrives in Baden-Baden, his vision is of an ahistorical, globalised place. In this opening account of Baden-Baden, "hazy" describes the smoke-like, placeless characteristics of multinational brands such as Hugo Boss and transcontinental railways, which function, to cite Iain Chambers on contemporary travel, as a "collective metaphor of cosmopolitan existence where the pleasure of

travel is not only to arrive, but also not to be in any particular place [...] to be simultaneously everywhere" (*Border Dialogues* 57–58). Like smoke, modes of transport and international brands are not bound by borders; they infiltrate nations and cities and undermine the very notions of nation and national identity through their "absence of origins" (Barthes, *Mythologies* 88). As Dessaix observes on leaving Baden-Baden, there are "[n]o border controls these days, I could have been anywhere" (*TL* 70). As a non-place, Baden-Baden simultaneously signifies mobility ("sliding" and "gliding") on one hand, and arrival ("we jolt to a standstill") on the other. It is an ill-defined place of transition. Deploying the images of the train and Hugo Boss in order to characterise Baden-Baden, Dessaix renders it as a place that is not restricted by borders on a map; rather, these descriptions suggest that the town has an inherent "absence of origin" and has undergone a cancelling out of its history. This description echoes Litvinov's concerns and suggests that the cosmopolitan ideals of the *good European* have, by the twenty-first century, gone up in smoke.

It is important to here address an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, through the figure of Turgenev, Dessaix resists ideologies that promote the forces of acculturation and national belonging. Like Turgenev in his altercation with Dostoyevsky, *Twilight of Love* challenges ideas of the nation as independent from the rest of the world. Although not completely denying national belonging, the figure of the *good European* hopes for an idiosyncratic blend of cultures and an understanding of the evolution of one's own culture. In effect, the figures at the centre of *Twilight of Love* prescribe a kind of civilised, "open" nationalism, a permeability of borders and a simultaneous retention of a sense of national

belonging. On the other hand, when he arrives in Baden-Baden, although he encounters a place whose borders are certainly permeable, Dessaix defines it as decidedly uncivilised. When he writes that there are “[n]o border controls these days, I could have been anywhere,” there is the suggestion that the hopes of the *good Europeans* have been realised, that the Dostoyevskys of the world have vanished and citizens are now free to be travellers, to live according to their tastes and define themselves according to what they love. Seemingly this Europe is the Europe of the future, in which the barbaric forces of nationalism have given way to the enlightened forces of civilisation.

However, Dessaix’s observation, “I could have been anywhere,” does not signal the triumph of the *good Europeans*. Instead, it suggests the absence of an awareness of history, diversity and cultural idiosyncrasy; it describes a vision of a landscape without origin, detached from the narrative of its own history. In Dessaix’s commercialised Europe of the twenty-first century there is the threat of the death of history. This is not a Europe united by civilisation, but rather a Europe united by globalism as a form of barbarism, what Paul Fussell describes as the “vapid non-allusive [...] replacements” (44) that characterise commercialised society. Although Fussell was writing about the period between the Wars, he was citing a phenomenon that has practically taken over Dessaix’s twenty-first-century Europe.

In Dessaix’s opening description of Baden-Baden, repetitions of “Hugo Boss” and “Baden-Baden” not only align the two, but they also invest the latter with a sense of hyperreality, which is characterised by “copying, falsity, imitation, illusion, and reproduction” (Caesar). The alignment of the place with the fashion

label alludes to the branding of the tourist destination, and the network of these kinds of cities that now characterise Europe as a whole. The fact that “Baden-Baden” is a repetition within or mirroring of itself further suggests multiplicity and hyperreality; the repeated object undermines authenticity because it signifies the original without actually constituting it. Baden-Baden takes on a meaning that is little more than a sign on the platform, a “banal utopia” (Augé 95) identifiable only through touristic clichés. Jeff Malpas writes that:

the city brand involves an image of the city that may well be completely removed from any actual engagement with the city as such—an image that often depends heavily on visual and narrative representations of the city that have a broad, rather than individual appeal, and that are often severed from particular and concrete modes of attachment or activity.

(“Cosmopolitanism” 195)

Through its association with brand names, Baden-Baden is portrayed as “removed” and “severed” from origins or any sort of identifiable cultural heritage, that is, “from any actual engagement with the city.” As an idealised image, detached from the realities of place, the brand is less susceptible to change—in fact it positively resists it—and therefore reveals a blindness to mortality. Given that it does not belong anywhere in particular, the multinational fashion label functions within a discourse of non-belonging, or of belonging everywhere and nowhere.

Through its carefully maintained image, Dessaix is able to experience “old Russia” (*TL* 4) in Baden-Baden. The town as branded is, like Disneyland, authentic and unauthentic; it is a version of Turgenev’s Baden-Baden, which Dessaix likens to “old Russia,” thus even further obscuring a sense of fixity and definability. As

Susan Roberson notes: “When we visit not Bavarian castles but Disney’s version of them (or Euro-Disney’s version of Disneyland), we are traveling in the unauthentic (the simulated) which is nonetheless real (or hyperreal) and provides for us a real experience” (xxi). Dessaix’s primary motivation (irrespective of the authenticity of the place) is for a real experience of Turgenev. Indeed, he is there because, in the nineteenth century, “dropping into Baden-Baden was a very Russian thing to do” (TL 5). Over a century before Dessaix’s journey, Baden-Baden meant “tak[ing] the cure [in the medicinal spas], hobnob[bing] with the fashionable set, or try[ing] your luck at the tables before crossing over into France” (5). When Dessaix arrives early in the twenty-first century, all it seems to mean now is “cakes, expensive perfumes, freshly dry-cleaned jackets, and now and again something faintly nose-pinching” (5).

After leaving the train platform and heading up into the town proper, he and his fellow passengers “emerged, like lost children in a storybook, in an enchanted village a hundred years earlier — perhaps even two hundred, depending on where your glance fell” (4). In the context of his arrival, the Baden-Baden he encounters is curiously, suspiciously perfect:

For those first few moments, left standing with my suitcase on the cobbles in the sunny quiet, I’d felt locked in a spell. Empty, crooked streets. A castle on a crag. A clock striking twelve, then silence. For just a fraction of a second I would not have been in the least astonished if Dostoyevsky himself had bolted out of a side-street, unshaven and smelling of onions, on his way to the pawnbroker’s with one of his wife’s rings. It had felt curiously like *déjà vu* — I’d never been there in my life. (4)

Déjà vu is a defining characteristic of the experience of non-places; this is because they are primarily “imaginary places” (Augé 95). The spectacle of the non-place is so steeped in “allusive texts” (104), so certain is the image of the place “established through the mediation of words” (94), that the visitor, on arriving, cannot help but feel that he or she has been here before. The place in which Dessaix finds himself is textual because it is only through other texts that he has previously “visited” the famous spa-town. In this way Baden-Baden comes to signify itself, or rather a “storybook,” fairytale version of itself. Although Baden-Baden is here seemingly immersed in history, with its cobbled streets, castles and clanging clock towers, it is a history that has been preserved for the tourist and is unable to create singular identity. As Augé explains: “There is no room [in the non-place] for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle” (103). Despite being ahistorical—or only concerned with history in terms of how it might be turned into an exhibition—the non-place lends itself to an image of the past created by “allusive texts.” Indeed, non-places come to exist “only through the words that evoke them” (95). Thus they are constructed around (and maintained by) an idealised, mythologised image, that may or may not relate to the realities of the past.²

In keeping with Dessaix’s first impressions of the place as he looks at it through the window of a train, the “storybook” version of Baden-Baden is a kind of brand, which, rather than being defined by a particular place, is defined by an idealised image, in this case “old Russia.” To make matters worse, as Dessaix stands enraptured in a vision of old Baden-Baden, his sense of *déjà vu* is shattered when “a young man talking Turkish into a mobile phone had come striding round the corner and my head had cleared” (4). Although the landscape around him may allude to or

contain some semblance of history, Dessaix's illusion, or rather his experience, is lost in the milieu of globalisation. Before he has even checked into his hotel, Dessaix discovers a Europe whose ties with the past are threatened, if not severed, even if the past to which it alludes is a "storybook" version. In other words, as he arrives in Baden-Baden, Dessaix finds a Europe interconnected by barbarism, its history turning to smoke.

Later in *Twilight of Love*, when Dessaix gets to Moscow, the description of his arrival is strikingly similar to that of his arrival in Baden-Baden:

The city that had stood still for most of my life had suddenly taken off like an express train, leaving me stranded in the middle of nowhere [...]

McDonald's! Coca-Cola! Gucci! a gigantic Hugo Boss banner strung up where once ... "Look at that! Hugo Boss! Can you believe it? Remember the old Party banners everywhere?" Yes, I remember: GLORY TO THE SOVIET UNION! THE PEOPLE AND THE PARTY ARE UNITED! "Cappuccino? Espresso? What do you feel like?" [...] Whole traffic-jams of Mercedes-Benzes, gleaming new apartment blocks for the elite, automatic teller machines (dispensing US dollars, if you want them), getaway tours to Spain (dirt cheap), bowling alleys, internet cafés, half the street on the mobile phone. I can't believe my eyes [...] It's Pyongyang made over to look like Dallas. (187–88; original emphasis)

As it is in Baden-Baden, Dessaix's arrival in Moscow is characterised by images of modern transport and international branding. Recalling Litvinov's despondency that all had turned to smoke, Dessaix's vision of Moscow is no different. Like Litvinov, Moscow itself has "taken off like an express train," its ideologies and cultural values in tow. Russia has become a non-place, with the result that Dessaix

is left with a sense of being “stranded in the middle of nowhere.” The past he seeks, even his student days at Moscow State University in the 1960s and 1970s, has been overwritten by the forces of globalisation. The ideologies of the old Party, like a palimpsest, are now the ideologies of late-capitalism, and they spread beyond “Mother Russia.” Image has replaced belief. Moscow has become a late-capitalist chimera indistinguishable from other European (even American or Korean) cities.

When he “escape[s]” Moscow for a friend’s house in the “southern dacha belt beyond Moscow’s outer ring road” (TL 204), Dessaix unburdens himself of his grievances toward Russia. He tells his friend, Irina (who curiously shares the name of Turgenev’s heroine in *Smoke*), that he is “overjoyed” to see that she is,

“living normally” [...] What I meant was: I’m delighted that you can go to Austria for your summer holidays, surf the internet, dress like a Charlottenburg matron and offer me mango juice, camembert on French bread and Finnish yogurt for lunch—borrow like us at last, in other words, joining our comfortable world of mass-produced mediocrity. (208)

Regardless of Dessaix’s joy, or perhaps checking his joy, is his sense that this mass-produced mediocrity undermines a semblance of culture. Although Dessaix shares with Irina certain cultural ideals, a relationship he would call civilised, he does not share her enthusiasm for the changes post-Soviet Russia has undergone. He does not share her “loyal[ty]” (205). Irina possesses a “rootedness to her existence,” which Dessaix “can only envy” (205). ““Don’t tell me you’re nostalgic for the old days,”” says Irina, a “common come-back when Russians sense that you are less than stunned by the changes.” ““No,”” he replies, ““I’m not nostalgic for anything [...] Or if I *am* nostalgic, it’s for something that might have been, not something that

was''' (209; original emphasis). What Dessaix is nostalgic for are the ideologies, the hopes, of the *good European* who foresaw a united Europe of the future.

Although Moscow and Baden-Baden might be considered civilised in the late-capitalist, supermodernist, sense of the word, free to "borrow," as Dessaix puts it, from other cultures, the civilisation predicted and hoped for by the *good European* has failed to come to fruition. Despite being a very cosmopolitan world Dessaix encounters throughout *Twilight of Love*, a world seemingly unencumbered by the problems of nationalism, a world whose borders have been obliterated, it is not the kind of cosmopolitan world the *good Europeans* hoped for. What Dessaix is nostalgic for is a sense of hope that the world of supermodernity fails to provide him with. In this way he is nostalgic for a better future, one grounded in the civilising narratives of history.

Travelling through Germany, France and Russia, Dessaix presents neither the utopian nomad Nietzsche predicted, nor the postmodern nomad at one with his abstract identity and cultural hybridity. Instead, exemplifying Dean MacCannell's image of the contemporary tourist, he is a figure "alienated" (15) by the forces of supermodernity, of late-capitalist cosmopolitanism, unable to come to terms with the contemporary world and harbouring feelings of being left stranded in the middle of nowhere. Encountering a network of non-places, in which history has been either annihilated completely or maintained as spectacle, Dessaix is detached from a sense of home (in terms of a fixed place), history and from the hopes of the *good European*. Alienating the traveller from the sweep of history, these spaces also alienate him / her from vulnerability and atrophy and thus keep an awareness of time, and thus mortality, at arm's length.

Even in Paris, where forty years earlier he felt as though he had “come home” (TL 137), he finds nothing but “[a] vast sexorama, peep-shows, porno cinemas, erotic supermarkets, shopwindows overflowing with sex videos, sex dolls, sexy underwear, leather and latex contraptions for every orifice, as well as a sleazy pinball parlour or two, a tattoo artist’s squalid studio, and (*naturellement*) McDonald’s” (104). His Parisian friend, Daniel (young, Buddhist, employed by the Louvre as a computer technician), with whom he travels to various sites around France, is perhaps less than civilised, often missing the point of their visits to each destination (particularly at Courtavenel). Ilse, too, who accompanies Dessaix through Baden-Baden, and who, apparently, Flaubert would have found “very civilised indeed” (42), seems often to be little more than a sounding-board for the narrator’s ideas (for example, when she berates the staff at the Hotel Europaicher for the plaque stating that characters from *Smoke* actually lodged there [17]).

Dessaix’s quest for history in *Twilight of Love*, for the hopes of the *good European*, are often thwarted by the intrusion of globalisation, such as the moment in Baden-Baden when the “spell” of the castles and cobbled streets is broken by a young Turkish man talking into his mobile phone, or later, as I discuss in the following chapter, when he is thrust “back into the here and now” (10) on coming across a commemorative statue of Turgenev. His attempts to court death are continually interrupted by the “deathless,” the “immortality” and uniformity of supermodernity. The placelessness of the *good European* was once a hopeful condition, for it anticipated liberation from acculturation and threatened the “orderly status quo of the nation, the city, and the intellect” (Bauer 243); it promised the “freedom to re-create” (TL 39) one’s identity “according to where his [or her]

alliances lay" (40). In short, for Dessaix, placelessness once promised civilisation; it was, in Nietzsche's words, "distinctive and honourable" (338). Now, in the globalised world, homelessness offers no such promise; the hopes of old Europe have turned to smoke, leaving Dessaix's narrator stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Given his attitude toward European metropolitan centres, it is not surprising that Dessaix gains his deepest insight into Turgenev's defining characteristic at Courtavenel. In southern France, not serviced by public transport ("you couldn't get to Courtavenel without [a car]" [TL 110]), where there is "nothing left at all, no plaques or busts or ruins or painstaking restorations" (125), Courtavenel is as removed from supermodernity as Dessaix gets in *Twilight of Love*.

Standing on the bridge over the dusty moat, looking out across the empty space where the Viardots' *château* once stood, Dessaix sees his sense of placelessness affirmed. However, despite the many affinities between Turgenev and Dessaix, there is one glaring disparity: where Turgenev had once found a home, there is none for Dessaix. Europe is a place of speed, oblivious to borders and the limits of existence. As little but an empty square, Courtavenel stands as the loss of history and as the absence of a sense of home as a fixed place. Through this empty space Dessaix moves like a spectre from one of Turgenev's ghost stories, a spectre of the hopes of civilisation, coming home at last, yet feeling at the same time that he belongs not here but somewhere (somewhen) else. By showing how and where Turgenev came home, in visiting Turgenev's many homes, Dessaix reveals his own anxieties regarding home, history and belonging. The value Dessaix places on history is analogous to the value he places on narrative, as I discussed in chapter

one. The absence of grounding narratives in his own autobiography both motivates his journeys and explains why he scaffolds his life with the lives of others.

Collapsing the binary of self and other, his mode of travel also collapses the home / away binary, hence the civilised homecoming always involves the foreign and a sense of belonging elsewhere. The civilised culture is always open and vulnerable to “contamination” from foreign cultures.

Throughout Dessaix’s work there is also a tension between confirming an idiosyncratic identity while cultivating lasting bonds and belonging, between civilisation and barbarism. This tension is at its most explicit in *Twilight of Love*, from the altercation between Turgenev and Dostoyevsky to the passages that recount Dessaix’s original journeys from Australia to Europe and Russia. In contrast with his youthful hopes regarding civilisation, and those of the *good Europeans*, Dessaix’s globalised Europe is a “non-place” that resists such hopes. Standing between two banks that now border nothing but an empty moat, he is stranded in the middle of nowhere. The unity he finds throughout his travels is one not of civilisation but of globalisation, not historical but mercantile. However, the hope the text generates is in its architecture; the intertwining of present and past, the continuity between Dessaix and Turgenev and the contiguity of text and landscape all harmonise and suggest the persistence of the past in the present. Like the foundations of Courtavenel, seemingly lost beyond the unchecked progress of wild ferns and stinging nettles, but still “massive in their medieval blocks” (Waddington 352), narratives of the past are not so easily forgotten; their remnants resurface time and again in modern texts and travel traditions, themselves impostors, which in

turn lend meaning and value to place and charge it with the capacity to form identity.

In the next chapter I remain with *Twilight of Love* and the notion of placelessness in order to analyse the meaning that arises from Dessaix's travel performance itself. In a postmodern sense, this "performance" alternates between the self-consciousness and playfulness of the "post-tourist" (Urry 90) and an unselfconscious search for "an authentic domain of being" (Frow 129). While the current chapter has mapped out Dessaix's "barbarous" Europe, and the way in which Dessaix finds himself alienated by the forces of capitalism, the following chapter shows how his quests are not melancholic but a positive quest for meaning and authenticity. The site of Courtavenel remains important; the passage that describes Dessaix's encounter here is perhaps one of the most important in his entire body of work in terms of highlighting the way in which absence is a key concept in his sense of self.

¹ Here Potugin refers to the nineteenth-century strongman juggler Carl Rappo (1800–1854). Rappo was intrigued by juggling practices from the East and integrated the traditional strongman style of pantomime with that of Indian juggling. And although he was born in Austria, he moved to Russia. Rappo is therefore precisely the kind of artist Potugin is valorising. What Potugin is objecting to in this passage is the "barbarians'" use of the term "our man" to claim Rappo as their own, thus ignoring or denying the interweaving of cultures and the history of Russian culture itself.

² Augé's notion of "allusive texts" is synonymous with John Frow's notion of "poetic thematization" (123) as a generating principle of a destination's "auratic value" (123). I will investigate the way in which *Twilight of Love* treats tourist destinations in chapter four with reference to Frow's concept of "auratic value" and John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze."

Chapter 4

The Absence of Authenticity and the Authenticity of Absence in Twilight of Love

When Dessaix arrives at the Hotel Europäischer in Baden-Baden, he finds himself staring at a plaque in the hotel's forecourt that reads: "Among many other high-ranking guests staying here in the summer of 1862 was Irina Ratmirova, heroine of the novel *Smoke* by Ivan S. Turgenev 1818–1883" (16). The plaque is "mischievous" to Dessaix's mind, for it "conjur[es] up images of an actual guest from Russia called Irina Ratmirova alighting from carriages at the entrance, walking up and down the grand staircase and even appearing from time to time on one of the geranium-garlanded balconies overlooking the river" (16). His travelling companion, Ilse, is immediately sceptical, feeling the whole establishment "a sham" (17). But Dessaix, despite his friend's protestations, "couldn't resist":

The staircase, for instance, which the hero and heroine of *Smoke* had flown up and down, half-crazed with guilty passion, was just along the corridor to the right. No, there had never been any Irina Ratmirova, nor any Grigory Litvinov, for that matter, to fly up or down anything, or to have trysts in the suite on the second floor, not to mention the luggage room opposite (where scandalously inappropriate fumbblings had taken place while Irina's husband was dressing for dinner ... "Do as you wish ... I am yours ... I will do anything")—I knew that. All the same, I clearly had to see the staircase. (17)

Once on the staircase, Dessaix stands "transported" into the world of *Smoke*: "I could see the lace, the shawls, the gloves, the modish shoes peeping out from under

long satin dresses [...] Standing there, I could understand—or at least begin to—why Irina and Grigory talked and behaved in the extraordinary way they did” (18).

In this chapter I remain with *Twilight of Love* in order to examine the way in which Dessaix’s travel performance generates meaning. Drawing on the writings of tourism theorists Dean MacCannell, John Frow and John Urry, this chapter analyses Dessaix’s navigation of commercialised, commodified Europe and his attempts to “see through” the veil of supermodernity to something more meaningful in terms of both Turgenev’s identity and his own. In particular, I am interested in the meaning that arises through Dessaix’s interaction with carefully maintained spaces such as museums and federation homes and commemorative objects such as statues and plaques. Dessaix’s touristic performance reveals itself as a quest for authenticity on two counts: firstly, his “touristic shame” (Frow 146)—i.e., his desire not to be “duped” by the tourism industry and to see things as they “really are”—reveals a scepticism of the authenticity of the various sites he visits; and secondly, the absence of authenticity becomes, ironically, authentic in terms of the way in which Dessaix defines himself via absence.

So while Dessaix is sceptical of the “truth” of the Hotel Europäischer and its “mischievous” plaque, his experience there is still meaningful and identity-forming both in terms of affirming his travels as quests for narrative (which restates the absence of grounding narratives in his own life story) and as the spatial expression of the central absence around which his life is constructed (symbolised by the “presence” of characters that never existed and the “void” of the [perhaps “spiral”] staircase). The absences and silences he encounters throughout the text are authentic in the way they inform the identities of both Dessaix and Turgenev.

Authenticity and the Tourist Gaze

Frow has noted that the concept of authenticity is a modern vision of late-capitalist society, one that stands in “diachronic opposition to an organicist category of the premodern and traditional” (129). For the tourist in the world of late-capitalism, the authentic is characterised by an absence of design and “of calculation or of interested self-awareness” (129). This conception of authenticity supposedly places the authentic object “outside the circuit of commodity relations and exchange values” as an “Other of modernity” (129). Lacking premeditation at the level of its commodity value, and thus lacking the need or consciousness of having to “live up” to an established ideal, the authentic object apparently reveals the realities and truths of the context in which it was produced. As MacCannell has observed, many tourists seek out the authentic, motivated as they are “by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives” (94). Going “off the beaten track,” the tourist often attempts to “see through” the over-commodified, over-determined world of tourism to the “Other of modernity,” the flipside of his / her commercialised, commodified existence. This attempt characterises tourism as both a symbol of the tourist’s alienation in the late-capitalist milieu and as a resulting “quest for an authentic domain of being” (Frow 129).

In favouring and valuing the authentic, tourism is structured around the concept of “touristic shame.” Searching for a “real” experience, the individual tourist often looks to dissociate him- / herself from the cohort of tourists and deny his / her status as a tourist. If one were to conceive oneself as a tourist, one would inscribe him- / herself into the over-commodified, commercialised world of tourism,

thus homogenising his / her experience. Hence the effort to detach oneself from the world of tourism and the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1), which is constructed, developed and maintained by professional experts within the business of tourism. In the words of MacCannell: “The touristic critique of tourism is based on a desire to go beyond the other ‘mere’ tourists to a more profound appreciation of society and culture [...] All tourists desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their motivation to travel” (10). For Frow, the phenomenon of touristic shame “is built into almost every discourse and almost every practice of tourism” (146). In this way, tourists look to resist the world of the tourist gaze; they search for a different world to the one in which they live, and a hybrid, heterogeneous experience.

Thus the experience of tourism involves an inherent bad faith: in the quest for authenticity one must deny his / her part in the business of tourism while, at the same time, the very quest for authenticity is a, perhaps *the*, motivating principle of tourism. In the end, touristic shame, while looking to detach the tourist from the world of tourism, reveals his / her involvement in tourism and sustained faith in the concept of authenticity.

Further, because of the far-reaching scope of the tourist gaze, attempts to surpass or see through it may not be so simple: “What might be taken to be real might, in fact, be a show that is based on the structure of reality” (MacCannell 95). Aware that the desire for the authentic is a key motivation for the tourist, professionals within the industry often construct settings in which tourists might “recapture virginal sensations of discovery, or childlike feelings of being half-in and half-out of society, their faces pressed up against the glass” (99). This is the world of

“staged authenticity,” which is characterised by an “aura of superficiality, albeit a superficiality not always perceived as such by the tourist” (98). Destinations and artifacts in the world of tourism thus come to stand as signs for themselves (Frow 125; Culler 127). Like that of non-places, the world of the tourist gaze is a world of *déjà vu*, one constructed around “poetic thematization” (Frow 123; synonymous with Augé’s notion of “allusive texts” [104]), and one, like the cobbled streets of Baden-Baden, that is maintained according to its ideal image or essence and therefore detached from change, vulnerability and death.

Dessaix is aware of such constructions of tourist sites. When he arrives in Baden-Baden to “smell old Russia” (4), he is looking for the old Russia of the works of Turgenev, as opposed to any other image of the town, or even an experience of the town itself. He has come to *recognise* in the place the traces of its “poetic thematization” in the works of the Russian, as opposed to *discovering* anything new. In recognising Turgenev’s world, he hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the Russian, and, by extension, himself.

But the contradiction at the heart of touristic shame—the desire to dissociate oneself from other tourists that underpins the whole touristic establishment—is bound up with the contradiction at the heart of authenticity. If the authentic is characterised primarily by a condition of being unmediated, the act of categorising something *as* authentic implies an act of mediation. As Jonathan Culler has noted: “The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself and hence not authentic in the sense of unspoiled” (137). The authentic

is always already mediated, just as touristic shame is always already inscribed into the touristic experience.

This chapter shows that while Dessaix is aware of the manufactured nature of authenticity, and the contradictions involved in his touristic shame, he nevertheless maintains faith in the ability of his travel / writing to provide an actual experience of Turgenev that is consistent with his understanding of the Russian. Although he travels through the highly mediated world of the tourist gaze—one that threatens to undermine his quest for truth—he nevertheless plays the “game” of tourism in a way that is reminiscent of Urry’s “post-tourist” who “knows that he or she is a tourist and that tourism is a series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience” (91). As an extension of postmodernism (90), the post-tourist engages playfully with tourist destinations, effecting a “cool and role-distanced” (92) performance, undisturbed by (in fact rejoicing in) the absence of origin and the mediated nature of the supposed authentic.

But whereas the post-tourist remains “cool and role-distanced,” Dessaix’s travels retain a degree of gravity. His “role” as a post-tourist is exactly that: a performance, for whereas the post-tourist is defined by playfulness and a celebration of superficiality, Dessaix, despite his performance, maintains a commitment to depth and meaning. *Twilight of Love* focuses primarily on four centres: Baden-Baden in Germany, Spasskoye in southern Russia, and “*Les Frênes*” and “*Courtavenel*” in France. Whereas in the introduction to the text he claims to “fix [his] sights on Turgenev” (iv), Dessaix’s musings on the life of the Russian inevitably give way to his own autobiography; the prose is mobile, constantly shifting between the respective lives of author and subject. His travel / writing in

this text reiterates the absence of authenticity in the world of tourism. In so doing, he gives shape to his own life while outlining the absence of authenticity of the tourist world. His journeys are thus self-authenticating and restate absence as key to his formation of self, which in turn reinscribes him within the world of tourism and recasts his journey as a quest for authenticity in the globalised, commercialised, “barbarous” world of tourism.

Lifeless: Tourism and the Absence of Authenticity

MacCannell has noted that “touristic shame is not based on being a tourist but on not being tourist enough, on a failure to see everything the way it ‘ought’ to be seen” (10). Seeking a more authentic experience, the tourist is often conscious of viewing destinations in the “right” light, of not betraying his / her ignorance with regard to the importance (historic, literary or otherwise) of the places s / he visits. Grounded in a proper understanding of the narratives surrounding tourist sites, the tourist is better equipped to have a “real” experience of the place and thus appreciate what the site “means.” Authenticity is therefore bound up in the “poetic thematization” of objects and places; the tourist’s experience is relative to his / her awareness of the narrative context of these objects and places.

When Dessaix ventures into Baden-Baden in the second chapter of *Twilight of Love*, after arriving into the train station, he describes the town in its “ideal form,” via the opening lines of Turgenev’s novel *Smoke*. This chapter does not open with Dessaix’s impressions of or experiences in the place, but rather with the first paragraph of *Smoke* itself: “On 10th August 1862, at four in the afternoon, in Baden-Baden, in front of the famous casino, a large crowd of people had gathered” (8).

Dessaix here speaks along with the voice of Turgenev, or rather *through* Turgenev, and the image that is presented is not the Baden-Baden of the present day, nor is it that of 1862, but rather, the Baden-Baden as it has been thematised in *Smoke*: “It was delightful weather and everything round about—the green trees, the brightly coloured houses of the cosy town, the gently rolling hills—everything lay spread out in the balmy sunshine brimful with festive feelings ... Smiles hovered on people’s faces, old and young” (8). The reader is thus ushered, not into the world of Dessaix’s travelogue, but into the poeticised world of Turgenev’s Baden-Baden. Travelling in the footsteps of the Russian, these opening sentences reveal a consciousness on Dessaix’s part of viewing or setting Baden-Baden the way it “ought” to be seen.

After introducing Baden-Baden through the opening lines of *Smoke*, Dessaix ventures forth into the town itself. Deploying a playful, “civilised” entwinement of past and present, history and fiction, he depicts several different views of the same place. Firstly, he describes Baden-Baden as Turgenev describes it in *Smoke*, the orchestra playing in front of the casino, and the crowd “on that particular afternoon in 1862,” comprised of “foppishly dressed landowners from the provinces, [...] writers, of course, and government clerks on the make” (8). Then, drawing out of the world of Turgenev’s novel, Dessaix shifts the focus to Turgenev himself, situating the reader in an odd “in-between” position from which to observe Turgenev observing a scene from his own book, highlighting the way in which Turgenev “saw” the scene before him: “Turgenev’s eye then drifted with the dispersing crowd along the nearby Lichtentaler Allee—still one of Europe’s most beautiful promenades, in its setting of meadow-like parklands dotted with oaks,

liquidambar, beech and huge magnolias along the banks of the mud-free Oos" (8–9). The point of view settles momentarily with Turgenev before making its third and final temporal and generic shift, from nineteenth-century novel, to the eye of Turgenev, then to the eye of Dessaix himself. After having "drifted with [Turgenev] through the park" (9), the sweep of history and genre returns to the present when Dessaix is thrust "back into the here and now" (10) by a commemorative bust of the Russian in the middle of the Lichtentaler Allee. In so doing, Dessaix establishes a hierarchy of points-of-view, one that favours the historical, literary ways of seeing the park—and thus focusing on what is absent—as opposed to the more immediate, "here and now" impressions often favoured by the tourist gaze.

For Dessaix, the Turgenev statue not only works to diminish the "auratic value" (Frow 123) of the destination—by taking him out of the world of *Smoke*—but it also stands as a metaphor for the mediation of the tourist gaze by professional experts in the tourism industry:

What brought me up short [...] was abruptly finding myself face to face with a bust of the great writer himself. It had quite recently been placed on a waist-high plinth near the old *arbre russe* by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. His handsome, bearded face, now dull green, was staring with unseeing eyes at Brenner's Park-Hotel and Spa across the river, lifeless as a stuffed moose. Ivan Turgenev / 1818–1883 / Baden-Baden / 1863–1870. (10)

In contrast to the poeticised image of Baden-Baden two pages earlier, in which smiles, sunshine and brightly coloured houses abound, the image of the bust is one of artificiality and taxidermy ("stuffed moose"), with connotations of preparation

and preservation, where colours are suppressed, or even deathly (“lifeless” and “dull green”), and where its “unseeing eyes” stare at Brenner’s, a luxury spa-hotel. The blinded or inanimate eyes of the statue are reminiscent of MacCannell’s suggestion that touristic shame is based on “a failure to see everything the way it ‘ought’ to be seen.” Dessaix’s hierarchy of points-of-view descend from the narrator of *Smoke*, to Turgenev, to Dessaix himself and, finally, to the eyes of the statue. With its impoverished view—the lowest of the low—the bust stares blindly at the luxury hotel.

By aligning a touristic marker with the sight of Brenner’s, Dessaix is not only critiquing the world of luxury travel, but also equating this world with the maintenance and manufacture of cultural signifiers by agencies or government bodies. His touristic shame is revealed by his critique of the mode of looking, and travel, that is blind to such mediation. The bust stands as a metaphor for the mediated world of tourism, in the way that it has been manipulated by tourism experts, in this case the Ministry of Culture and the hoteliers across the river. The desired author-object of the literary pilgrim is therefore cast in a light of repetition (as this will not be the only commemorative monument Dessaix encounters), manufacture and preservation, deploying the funereal and commemorative language of the tombstone (“Ivan Turgenev / 1818–1883”) in order to characterise a certain mode of looking and moving that is determined by the guided tour and the industry of literary travel. This reminder of death is not, for Dessaix, a positive one, for it connotes the death of history that is synonymous with the world of supermodernity.

The day following his encounter with the statue, Dessaix and Ilse set out for the villa in which for three years Turgenev lived next door to the Viardots. Firstly, they happen across another mischievous plaque that marks the place they are looking for. Dessaix “admit[s] to a bolt of irrational excitement” (55) as he tries to get a view of the house; the word “irrational” here suggesting that he ought to know better than to get excited by a “mere” plaque. This plaque, however, is slightly misleading, for after asking a local for directions, Dessaix and Ilse are told that the actual villa is up the road: “These were the stables” (55). Then, when they find the house proper, the plaque outside the villa allows no admission:

VILLA TURGENJEW: KEIN ZUTRITT. No entrance. I looked at it from across the street, I stood on my toes and looked at it over the hedge, I looked at it from the open gateway, and I peered through my zoom lens across the banks of roses into the sunlit, terraced garden falling away at the back. Imposing, severe, symmetrical. A bijou château. Perfect. And at that moment disappointingly closed off and lifeless. (60)

Dessaix’s strenuous effort to gaze upon the house is evident in the repetitions of the word “looked” and the act of “peer[ing]” through his camera lens. The description of his attempt to see inside the villa is no doubt ironic, bordering on pantomime. While the overblown image of his various attempts to catch a glimpse inside the villa might be seen to be a critique of the tourist and evidence of further touristic shame, it is also symbolic of the fact that such a critique is itself a key aspect of the tourist experience. Not only are strenuous efforts to “look” overtly touristic, but so are ironic descriptions that attempt to set the traveller off from the cohort of other tourists (even when it is the traveller himself being described), for they are

underpinned by the assumption that there is a way in which these settings “ought” to be seen. (This description also suggests that Dessaix is merely performing the role of the tourist; I will come back to this point shortly.)

Nevertheless, Dessaix is still reliant on the tourist gaze to keep his narrative moving. Despite being a highly organised space (“Imposing, severe, symmetrical. A bijou château. Perfect”), the villa does not permit a deeper understanding of its former inhabitant or his literary output. This is, at least in part, because it is occupied by “wealthy industrialist[s]” (61), permits no access and thus reiterates the way in which the spread of capitalism intrudes upon his efforts to view Baden-Baden the way it “ought” to be viewed. Whereas Dessaix provides a large amount of detail at the Hotel Europäischer with regards to its former structure and the way in which it is used in *Smoke* (i.e., what the place *means*), here, at the Villa Turgenev, the above is the only description of the house; there are no comparisons or recognitions, the villa has no meaning other than to show that Dessaix is indebted to the very structures of tourism his touristic shame looks to detach him from. The place is not made familiar, cannot, arguably, be made familiar because, regardless of how hard he looks, he is unable to become involved with it. Thus he is “disappoint[ed],” not, however, because of any disparity between site and its marker, but because of the site’s resistance to his gaze. Like the bust of Turgenev, the Villa is also described as “lifeless”; his inability to bring these objects “to life” suggests that Dessaix is somewhat reliant on the construction and maintenance of the literary site, in the form of a house-museum, in order to make the connections and authenticate the literary objects he desires. His disappointment suggests that

despite the touristic shame established in the earlier scene with the Turgenev bust, he is still intent on discovering the authentic Turgenev.

Both the bust and the villa are disappointing also because they resist the narrative for which Dessaix searches; that is, they do not enable Dessaix to articulate himself. In this way they are unable to authenticate his journey, for there is no intersection between himself and Turgenev. All these “relics” do is interrupt Dessaix’s story of the apparent connections he shares with the Russian. He describes them as “lifeless” because, in resisting the narrative of himself, he can say nothing of them. They are silent. In their resistance to identity, to his voice, the bust and the villa are further symbols of Europe as a “non-place” (Augé 78), for they close off Dessaix to a sense of history, both his and Turgenev’s. That is, they thrust him “back into the here and now” (*TL* 10).

Of course, as Frow points out with reference to Hans Magnus Enzensberger, touristic shame is only ever a “fantasized dissociation” (146) from other tourists. As a “structural moment of tourism” it reveals its own bad faith: “The disillusionment with which the critic reacts to [tourism] corresponds to the illusions that he shares with tourism” (146). In other words, this “rhetoric of moral superiority” (MacCannell 9) is a “process of authentication” (Frow 144) by which the self-conscious tourist seeks to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic, connoting a sustained faith in the authentic. But there is an important distinction between this concept of authenticity and the one with which Dessaix is working. Given that Dessaix’s travels are self-authenticating, his interests in various destinations and objects lie not in the things in themselves, but in the way in which they enable him to give voice to his own history, his own narrative. The stories

behind these sites and objects are what matters—in this case, Turgenev’s biography and his literary output. For example, the staircase at the Hotel Europäischer enables him to “understand” (18) the passionate behaviour of the leading players in *Smoke*, which gives way to an understanding of Turgenev’s love affair with Pauline Viardot “in the unplotted space between family happiness at the one extreme and unbridled licentiousness at the other” (100). These sites become authentic when they enable Dessaix to deploy his own rhetoric—here it is the rhetoric of “betweenness,” which ultimately gives way to that of “civilisation.”

This is not to say that, for Dessaix, the authentic is unmediated; he mediates the Turgenev tour based on his own expertise and the way in which this expertise in and knowledge of Turgenev’s life and works informs his own identity. In *Twilight of Love* Dessaix returns to the life and work of Turgenev after having translated a collection of the Russian’s short stories, *The Mysterious Tales of Ivan Turgenev* (1979), and authoring a monograph entitled *Turgenev: The Quest for Faith* (1980), the latter emerging from Dessaix’s doctoral thesis, *Transcendental Themes in the Works of I. S. Turgenev* (1974). Given the time he has devoted to the Russian author, spending many years “reading almost every word he wrote, right down to his laundry lists,” and spending most of 1970 at Moscow University “delving into every old journal and critical work I could lay my hands on” (TL iii), his journeys can hardly be considered those of the idle traveller or even of the enthusiast.

Dessaix’s touristic shame does not so much distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic, in terms of finding the “real” or “institutional *back stage*” (MacCannell 99; original emphasis) region of a site, but rather between those places and objects that enable a degree of self-realisation (the Hotel Europäischer)

and those that do not (the Villa Turgenev). This is always bound up in his readings of the lives and works of the authors in whose footsteps he travels. The staircase at the Hotel Europäischer not only enables him to express his ideas about civilisation, but also it enables him to express the absence that is central to his construction of self. In this way, there is no “real” Baden-Baden at all, only the one that exists as Dessaix’s interpretation. At stake is not a knowledge or experience of the “genuine” Turgenev or the “actual” nineteenth century, but the nature of Dessaix’s autobiographical persona.

The dilemma here is the same, however, as that of labelling the authentic as such; for to articulate the nature of his persona, Dessaix is obviously mediating or fashioning it. His touristic shame exemplifies such fashioning, which suggests that just as there is no “real” Ivan Turgenev, nor is there a “real” Robert Dessaix. Voice is all there is, as a sign of the self, a self that is always elsewhere. Dessaix’s travels acknowledge this gap in that they reveal an awareness of the constructed nature of the world of tourism, and yet they do not resist this world in the articulation of self. At heart Dessaix is a tourist in search of self-affirming authenticity. In revealing the ways in which the tourist industry constructs truth and authenticity, *Twilight of Love* also reveals the absence of any objective authenticity or underlying truth. The next section of this chapter investigates the ways in which, through his travels, Dessaix “plays” with the various “signs” of Turgenev, for it is by them that he can sustain the narrative of himself, one which spirals around absence and asserts the gap between voice and self.

Commemorating Nothing: The Post-Tourist

Drawing on Maxine Feifer's notion of the "post-tourist," Urry observes that this type of traveller is:

freed from the constraints of "high culture" on the one hand, and the untrammelled pursuit of the "pleasure principle" on the other [...] The world is a stage and the post-tourist can delight in the multitude of games to be played. When the miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower is purchased, it can be simultaneously enjoyed as a piece of kitsch, an exercise in geometric formalism and as a socially revealing artefact. There is no need to make a fetish out of the correct interpretation since the post-tourist can enjoy playing at being all three. (91)

Central to the post-touristic experience is an emphasis on "playfulness" (92), a celebration of the "multitude of choice" (91) and a self-consciousness of touristic performance and the production and consumption of the tourist industry. One of the defining "games" the post-tourist plays is that of "playing at being a tourist" (91), an act that indulges and delights in the absence of meaning in the form of a "single, authentic experience" (91).

Dessaix's touristic performance is undoubtedly playful. He opens the second section of *Twilight of Love*, "France," with an account of arriving into Paris and being confronted with another mischievous Turgenev plaque (73). This then leads into a discussion of Paris as a place "plastered with plaques" (75) in which Dessaix cites the occasion of a Parisian erecting plaques "commemorating nothing":

Karima Bentiffa, civil servant, lived in this building from 1984 to 1989, one such plaque reads in the rue Saint-Sauveur, for example. Here on April 17, 1976,

nothing happened, announces another. And, in a stab at distilling the absurdity of the whole plaque enterprise—possibly the idea of significance of any kind—he’s even put up one which says: *This plaque was put up on December 19, 1953*. This sort of playfulness is dangerous: it suggests that the lives of the great and good are as devoid of meaning as ours are. Or that the lives you or I are presently leading are just as meaningful as the lives of the great and good. I’m surprised the authorities haven’t had it stamped out.

(75; original emphases)

What is interesting about these plaques is not only how they align the tourist with the subject of the plaque in a flattening out of social hierarchy (that is, aligning the lives of the “great and good”—the “plaque-worthy”—with those of the “ordinary”). Also, like the plaque at the Hotel Europäischer, they reveal a scepticism toward the tourist industry and a mode of looking (the tourist gaze) that takes these markers at face value.

Nevertheless, despite his awareness of the “danger” of plaques, Dessaix still plays the “game.” Not long after contemplating the subversive Parisian plaque artist, he discusses a plaque in Hobart, which says nothing but “*Malolo Cottage, circa 1850*”:

In the blink of an eye, as if zapped by that little plaque, I felt I’d turned into a bridge between that land of monsters at the end of the world [i.e., Hobart, circa 1850] and the crowds of leisured coffee-drinkers lounging in their designer clothes from Milan and New York at tables outside the chic cafés and delis beyond the park. (77)

Exactly why he is transported to Milan and New York by such a plaque in Hobart is debatable; this perhaps connotes the idea that travel often instils a sense of history in the traveller, enabling a place (and a traveller) to be considered in its wider, more worldly, context; in other words it is a civilising process. On one hand, he is clearly moved by the plaque: “as if I’d been stood on my head for no reason at all, everything suddenly looked different when I read that National Trust plaque” (76); it causes him to consider life in Hobart and the wider world in the nineteenth century, to contemplate “what sort of people might once have lived like this” (76). On the other hand, that the plaque works to “bridge” Hobart with the “crowds of leisured coffee-drinkers” in two of the world’s most cosmopolitan centres, also suggests that plaques are somehow superficial, little more than a fashion that exists as a symptom of the commodification of travel. Like the post-tourist, Dessaix maintains a certain faith in the usefulness of these touristic markers while remaining “cool and role-distanced” (Urry 92).

Les Frênes: *Journeys Through What Isn’t*

But despite his playfulness, Dessaix’s travel performance is not completely aloof and does not deny the possibility of deeper meaning / understanding at tourist sites. Rather, his journeys merge his reading of Turgenev with the physical presence of the site. In his search for an authentic experience of Turgenev, one which will produce a defining image of the Russian, Dessaix arrives at *Les Frênes*, in Bougival, just outside Paris—which he describes as a “miniature Swiss chalet” (157)—with his now customary scepticism in tow:

The reason for my apprehension was simple: I knew that *Les Frênes* would turn out to be what Russians call a “*dom-muzei*.” Part shrine, part exhibition space, the typical Russian *dom-muzei* is a cleaned-up version of some famous person’s house (that being the *dom* part), with memorabilia displayed in glass cases around the walls of certain rooms (that being the *muzei* part) [...] What I see [in these places] is the mummification of a lived life — with relics. (158)

“At the same time,” he says, “I had to see it. I wanted to see with my own eyes what the words ‘*Les Frênes*’ and ‘*Bougival*,’ so often met with in books about Turgenev, meant” (158). His bad faith is explicit: although he acknowledges the high mediation of these places, he also acknowledges that he must engage with this space in order to find out what it might “mean.” The place itself has been restored and maintained by a curator and decorated with sacred objects or “relics”: Turgenev’s original writing desk, his piano, the bed he died in and portraits of the woman he loved. Despite Dessaix’s efforts to detach himself from other tourists and touristic sites, it is in this “*dom-muzei*” that he is able to imagine Turgenev’s life.

Downstairs, even though it is “ostensibly covered with ‘traces’ of Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev” (161), he finds very little to interest him. He is not “transported” by — i.e., he does not find any meaning in — the “former kitchen (now a small vestibule), dining room and music room.” Nor is he moved by looking at rare first editions of Turgenev’s works or their French translations, the piano brought from Baden-Baden or the letters “written in the great writer’s own hand under glass around the wall.” “My gaze kept wandering to the windows at the end of the room” (162), he says, suggesting “a view within a definite frame and limited

perspective, mediated and refracted" (Stewart 79) through the lens of the tourist gaze.

Upstairs at *Les Frênes* Dessaix describes "see[ing] through to" (169), Turgenev. This experience occurs in two locations: the study and the bedroom—the place in which he wrote, and the place in which he died in 1883. Like the image of "The Diver" that opened this project, the upper storey of *Les Frênes* reiterates the proximity in Dessaix's work of art to death. In this case the spatial metaphors also highlights the proximity of narrative voice to mortality, of writing to death. Situated across the landing from each other, Dessaix enters the study first:

The desk is there—his *actual* desk, the desk he really once sat at, finishing off *Virgin Soil*, dreaming up "Klara Milich," "Song of Triumphant Love" and one or two other dark, yet glittering, fantastic tales from his last years. Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev once sat at this very table, slitting open letters from Russia and scribbling notes to friends all over Europe. It's tiny. (163)

Despite being restored and full of replicas, the study enables him to pass beyond Turgenev's "shell" to his very "quick" (166), and the many images he has of the author "all [begin] to shake down into a single, intricate pattern" (167). In the face of the "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 98) of Turgenev's house, Dessaix describes himself as "see[ing] through" (169) to the heart of Turgenev's character: "All these Turgenevs [...] now appeared to me to be variations on this single theme [...]: I love you, yet we must die" (167). What his journey "shakes down to" is an awareness of mortality, or, as Dessaix has it, the theme of "mortal love" (167). The authenticity of the study, the "reality" beyond the superficiality of the *dom-muzei*, is in its capacity to remind Dessaix of the mortal condition, to enable a discussion of death.

This moment of “seeing through” is not so much a revelation for Dessaix, but a reminder. He has written of the theme of mortal love in the works of Turgenev before, in an article published almost thirty years prior to the publication of *Twilight of Love*: “He [Turgenev] seems to have hoped that he might find [in the occult] some hint of the possibility of life beyond death, a sense of love and beauty not subject to the claims of mortality” (“Beautiful Genius” 62). Before he gets to *Les Frênes*, Dessaix is aware of Turgenev’s “immobilising sense of cosmic emptiness and the pointlessness of all human activities in the face of annihilation” (62). Standing in Turgenev’s restored study, he is returned to his own readings and writings on the Russian and thus returns him to a part, perhaps the *defining* part, of himself: mortality as the present absence at the centre of his work.

An awareness of mortality is not immediately apparent in Turgenev’s bedroom. Standing there, Dessaix he admits to finding “no trace at all of the last terrible months—[...] of the desperate attempts to fend off death with miracle cures” (181). All the same, mortality does find its way in when he describes the scene via a series of absences. The room is characterised by a sense of “Ivan Sergeyevich having just stepped out for an hour or two” (181), and the air on the balcony just outside the bedroom is tinted with “woodsmoke” (181; suggesting a process of combustion and disappearance). The name of the house itself, *Les Frênes* (French for “The Ashes”), is also symbolically rich in terms of the absences it evokes. Firstly, the name refers to the surrounding ash trees, whose leaves are often found in “whorls” of threes and whose seed buds, when they drop from the branches, fall in a “helicopter” or spiralling motion (calling to mind the fate of Dessaix’s ever-absent natural father, Harry: “a helicopter had crashed” [MD 111]). Additionally, the name

of Turgenev's former residence, in the context of Dessaix's travels, alludes to, not so much to "what remains," but "what isn't." The remnants of the life of Turgenev housed at *Les Frênes* not only recall the Russian, but also, and significantly, they signify his absence and serve as a reminder of his mortality.

Amid these "absences" Dessaix describes himself as coming "alive to the man dying in the bed behind me":

When I turned to say a word or two (I hardly knew which ones) to my companions, I found I was completely alone. In the blink of an eye both my guide and Daniel [with whom he travels around France] seemed to have abracadabra'd themselves into thin air. What bliss! At that moment, if I'd known how to, I'd have cast some spell and evaporated without a word to anybody as well. (184)

Emphasising the way in which life is bound to death (and not opposed to it), Dessaix "comes alive" in the context of Turgenev's "dying." Further, the presence of death in this scene is analogous with the presence of wordlessness; not only have his travelling companions vanished, but Dessaix himself expresses a wish to evaporate "without a word," to experience the absence he finds around him—i.e., to enact another, as in *Arabesques*, journey to oblivion. The silence and solitude he finds here is not melancholic—"What bliss!"—but affirming. So while death represents an extra-linguistic state, and thus a crisis of self for the narrator, it is also the point of Dessaix's journeys and the means by which he might articulate himself textually. His awareness of mortality represents the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self. As in *A Mother's Disgrace* and *Arabesques*, the silence of the scene beside Turgenev's deathbed is the present absence around which Dessaix's travel /

writing revolves. The authenticity of these two rooms is in their ability to return him to his primary themes and thus lend his travel / writing meaning. Although these spaces may speak to themes in Turgenev's works, there is always the deeper issue of how these themes and works inform Dessaix's persona. In this way, his journeys are self-authenticating, which reiterates the post-tourist's playful mindset that there is no *single* authentic experience, while maintaining a more traditional conception of tourism as a "quest for an authentic domain of being" (Frow 129) and thus capable of producing meaning.

Frow has noted that touristic shame is often a "snobbish [...] fantasized dissociation" (146) not only because the "shameful" tourist claims to possess deeper insight than others into the world of tourism, but also because the very act of looking to go deeper and travel further is a fundamental element in the production of the tourist gaze. But he also suggests that touristic shame can be "politically radical" (146). In turning the tourist gaze on itself—symbolised by the bust of Turgenev facing Brenner's Park-Hotel—Dessaix's travel performance undoubtedly claims a deeper understanding of the machinations of the tourist industry than many "mere" tourists. At the same time, his strenuous efforts to gaze upon the Villa Turgenjew show that he is no less touristic than anyone else. But while his touristic performance might be considered elitist and contradictory, it might also be considered radical and innovative on several counts: the episodes involving the Turgenev bust and Villa suggest a deflation of the distinction between tourist and traveller, for both are shown to be ineluctably reliant on the tourist industry; his playful engagement with various plaques lays bare the ways in which meaning and so-called authenticity are mediated, which in turn alludes to the ways in which the

tourist industry exploits not only local cultures but also the tourists whose business they court; and, finally, his experience at *Les Frênes* suggests that despite the mediated nature of tourist destinations, the tourist / traveller can nevertheless access an “authentic and demystified experience” (MacCannell 94) of these places in terms of the way in which this experience invests Dessaix’s journeys with meaning and informs his conception of self. In the end, Dessaix’s travels through the homogenised spaces of the tourist industry, while remaining critical of the spread of “non-allusive” (Fussell 44) “non-places,” reveal the ways in which the discourse of tourism can be self-authenticating. In this way, Dessaix’s mode of travel is analogous with Judith Adler’s concept of travel as artform and as a means of “grounding unique forms of subjectivity” (1385). Through an awareness of mortality, Dessaix revalues the concept of authenticity and reveals the ways in which elements of the tourist industry can produce meaning.

“There was indeed nothing there”: Courtavenel and the Authenticity of Absence

I have, until now, provided an analysis of Dessaix’s mode of travel in order to show that despite his touristic shame and post-touristic tendencies, at the heart of his text lies a desire for wholeness and authenticity. This desire extends not only to Turgenev, but also to Dessaix himself. Whereas he seems to focus on finding Turgenev’s “quick” (TL 166), in so doing he also conducts a more veiled search for his own, which inevitably returns him to themes of silence and absence.

Throughout the text Dessaix makes countless comparisons between himself and the Russian—their upbringings, countries of birth, desire to travel and concepts of civilisation, patriotism, parochialism and love, to name the primary ones. Often he

interrupts passages recounting the life and works of Turgenev in order to illuminate the ways in which his life bears similarities (42; 61; 76; and long sections of the last part of the text, "Russia"). He even goes as far as to suggest that Spasskoye, Russia, where Turgenev spent his childhood, was "where I came from" (184). The more one reads of Dessaix's travels, it seems, the more one gets the sense of a story of homecoming, at least an ideological one. This is consistent with Erik Cohen's notion of the "existential mode" (101) of travel via which the traveller "comes home" to an adopted culture. His / her quest is for an unmediated, "authentic domain." But if Dessaix's travel performance in *Twilight of Love* is a search for origins, for places that might enable him to give an account of his self and "where he is coming from," the destinations that carry the most meaning, that return him to himself, reveal the absence of such origins. None more so than at Courtavenel. Like his experience at *Les Frênes*, when he encounters the empty square at Courtavenel, it is the absence of the structure that stands as a reminder of the absence of home, or of absence *as* home.

While in chapter three I focused on the importance of Courtavenel in terms of symbolising the death of history in globalised Europe, I return to it now from a different perspective. Dessaix's experience at Courtavenel is very significant, not only in terms of its position within *Twilight of Love*, but also in terms of its relation to his intellectual and artistic project as a whole. Standing on the bridge at Courtavenel not only reflects his attempts to span territories, temporalities and identities, not only is it symbolic of his attempts to bring these things together, both rhetorically and through narrative technique and structure, but also his position on the bridge signifies his attempts at detaching himself from established tropes, genres, modes of

identification and codes of behaviour. Bridges join, but they also separate; they are places of double movement, simultaneously away and toward. Standing between either bank not only symbolises a suspended state between iteration and silence (as I discussed in chapter one), but also between many other polarising phenomena that Dessaix addresses in his work, such as essentialism and anti-essentialism, civilisation and barbarism, recognition and discovery, arrival and departure, text and landscape, lost and found and absence and presence. In the context of Dessaix's journeys as homecoming, the absence of the castle reiterates absence as the key feature through which he makes himself present on the page. His position on the bridge is emblematic of the simultaneity of presence and absence throughout his work.

Dessaix depicts Courtavenel as being off the tourist map: "you couldn't get to Courtavenel without [a car]" (110). He does not travel to the site as part of a tour group as he has done (and will do) to other sites; he meets Daniel in Paris and they drive south. Because of the lack of signs to Courtavenel and its absence from any map, the pair soon become lost and are forced to ask for directions on several occasions (113). When eventually they arrive, the owner of the site is surprised: "To tell you the truth, hardly anyone gets this far" (139). It is another mark of Dessaix's touristic shame that arguably the most significant event in the text occurs here, at Courtavenel, a place no one else gets to, one that is largely missing from the Turgenev tour, and one that thus detaches him from the cohort of Turgenev tourists. At the same time, it reiterates the importance of absence to his journeys.

Ironically, though, when they arrive at Courtavenel, Dessaix and Daniel have to "play-up" being tourists in order to gain access to the site. Daniel does the

talking, explaining: “that we were simply wondering if there was anything to see of the old Viardot *château* ... we were both *amateurs* of the Russian novel, adored *Tourguéniev*, had seen the sign to Courtavenel and been quite unable to resist the temptation to intrude” (123). While Daniel negotiates with the owner, Dessaix “smile[s] and nod[s] in the background, trying to look as unlike a roving axe-murderer as [he] possibly [can]” (123). Although his self-consciousness suggests his sensitivity to the intrusive and exploitative nature of tourism, and a hesitancy to intrude on a private space not intended for tourism, it also reveals his bad faith: feeling like an “axe-murderer” and playing at being an “*amateur*” while aligning himself with the tourist. Dessaix plays the part, however, as at *Les Frênes*, in order to have a “real” experience of Turgenev. The “performance” is not elitist or self-aggrandising, but necessary and self-authenticating.

Once inside the grounds, Dessaix finds that not only does the site differ greatly from the one he expected, but that “There was indeed nothing there”:

Instead of the fairytale castle I knew from Pauline’s sketch, instead of elegant sixteenth-century turrets and conical spires, a grand entrance and drawbridge on the northern side (the “noble” side, as Pauline called it) and respectable country estate façade to the south (the “bourgeois,” “good-natured” side), there was nothing at all. In an even earlier sketch I’d seen of Courtavenel it had actually looked more like a busy village than a mere castle. All that remains is an empty mown square with bushes and trees around the edges, lining what was left of the old moat. We all stood on the old stone bridge over the moat (a dry ditch now), thinking our own thoughts

and staring into the sunlit emptiness. Then, abruptly, I wanted to laugh.

(125)

The ideological heart of the book (and the physical heart, practically midway through), this episode complicates a reading of Dessaix's travel performance as a quest for home as an "authentic domain of being." Although "[a]ll that remains is an empty mown square," it is significant:

It was here, not in Baden-Baden or [Paris], but here, where there was nothing left at all, no plaques or busts or ruins or painstaking restorations, that I felt—*at last really felt*—and here I must tread very carefully to avoid the minefield of necromantic gobbledygook—that I was alive to Turgenev. *He* had not come alive—I had. And so I laughed. (125; original emphasis)

Whereas Dessaix finds little in the bust or villa in Baden-Baden—which he describes as "lifeless"—at Courtavenel, like at *Les Frênes*, he "come[s] alive." This empty space becomes "an authentic domain of being" in terms of the void at the centre of Dessaix's writing. His laughter at the sight of the empty square is one of surprised discovery / recognition; simultaneously, the scene is unexpected and familiar. Like the Orient in *Arabesques*, Courtavenel is a reminder of oblivion, and it is the threat / promise of oblivion above all else that gives rise to his (exultant) voice, in this case his laughter. As a site of homecoming, the "sunlit emptiness" returns him once again to his central theme of absence and his state of simultaneous crisis / affirmation.

In the introduction to *Twilight of Love*, Dessaix outlines briefly his experience with Russian language, literature and culture. Despite the large portion of his life devoted to all things Russian, he notes "I've remained irredeemably un-Russian," to

which he adds: “everything about me comes from somewhere else” [ii]. One might assume Dessaix is suggesting that despite his immersion in Russian culture he has remained “irredeemably” Australian—perhaps connoting a thinly veiled cultural cringe. But in light of the episode at Courtavenel, this statement is indicative of a perpetually deferred sense of home. In being characterised by absence, home for Dessaix, where he “comes from,” is always “somewhere else,” connoting an ideology of home that is not fixed to place and open to change, but one that is, at the same time, contingent on present absences such as reminders of Turgenev or other places and objects that call to mind the writers in whose footsteps Dessaix travels. His travel performance itself, like his narrative performance, is another present absence, for playing the tourist—as he does at *Les Frênes* and Courtavenel—leads him to an affirmation of absence and self-in-crisis, which in turn accentuates the gap between a voice (or a performance) and a self that is always “somewhere else.” Dessaix’s journey to Courtavenel is thus a self-authenticating performance that restates the essential void at the centre of his textual persona. In the next chapter I discuss the ways in which this void manifests itself in *Night Letters* through reminders of death and decay, which reveals Dessaix’s “horror of home.”

PART THREE: ABSENCE

Chapter 5

The Horror of Home: Repetition and Uncanny Returns in Night Letters

While an awareness of mortality pervades all works under discussion in this project, it is *Night Letters* that deals most explicitly with the inevitability of death and how to cope with the mortal condition. In Dessaix's other works mortality is often refracted through any number of literary devices and / or through the authors in whose footsteps his narrators travel: in *Twilight of Love* his narrator recognises the theme of mortality as central to Turgenev's life and work as well as his own; *Arabesques* depicts North Africa as a place where Occidental discourse is dismantled and the self faced with annihilation; and Dessaix's life is threatened briefly in *A Mother's Disgrace*. In the opening pages of *Night Letters*, however, the mortal condition is confronted directly when Dessaix's narrator, R., is diagnosed with a terminal illness. His subsequent journey is a direct response to this diagnosis, and his encounters along the way reveal that death is never far from his mind. In travelling to Italy and Switzerland as a reaction to the news, R. establishes a model of travel that equates home with death and movement as a means of deferring death.

Night Letters is an epistolary novel featuring twenty letters and one postcard, edited by the fictitious Igor Miazmov and written by R. in a room at the Hotel Arcadia in Venice to his "correspondent" in Melbourne. Divided into three sections—"Locarno Letters," "Vicenza Letters" and "Padua Letters"—the text not only documents R.'s travels through these regions, but also features many digressions in the form of stories told by other travellers, in particular Rachel Berg

(in Part One) and Professor Eschenbaum (in Part Two). Given its emphasis on wandering—thematically, stylistically and generically—*Night Letters* is a meditation on travel, travel writing, time, reading and life in the face of death. Following John Zilcosky's work on "lostness" in the novels of W.G. Sebald, this chapter explores R.'s attempts to "lose himself" (i.e., escape his fate) in the European landscape. Investigating the themes of death and decay, it shows that despite trying to lose himself on his journey, reminders of death—in the form of silence, intertextual repetition and certain objects he encounters—intrude on R.'s European "escape," return him to himself and reveal his "horror of home." Drawing on Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny," I illustrate the ways in which these attempts at getting lost are always counterbalanced by both physical *and* textual returns that produce feelings in the traveller of uncanniness, dread and guilt. The constant reminder of death means that, in a sense, R. does not go anywhere, and thus the Romantic notion of a revitalised return (as discussed by Zilcosky) is impossible. R.'s ineluctable awareness of mortality characterises the world through which he travels and gives voice to his finite position within it. Like the experience of Dessaix's narrator at *Les Frênes*, these encounters return R. to himself in a way that sustains the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self at the centre of Dessaix's work.

This chapter begins the final section of the thesis. Having in the first two sections analysed the ways in which absence, particularly the absence of voice, connotes a simultaneous threat to and affirmation of Dessaix's textual persona, and the ways in which the absence of grounding, originary narratives prompts his self-authenticating quests for narrative, the last section is particularly concerned with reminders of home in Dessaix's novels: *Night Letters* and *Corfu*. Throughout these

texts, recognition of the familiar almost always produces in Dessaix's narrators feelings of claustrophobia and often accompanies images of death and decay. Although these feelings and images produce an urge to move on, to flee, ultimately they denote a homecoming for these narrators. My primary concern in the final part of this project are the ways in which Dessaix's narrators live with their horror of home, not by resisting or escaping it, but by incorporating an awareness of death and vulnerability into their everyday lives thus defining themselves through, rather than opposing their lives to, their mortality. In this way, reminders of death occasion a positive affirmation of existence and of home as *both* fixed and unfixed. On one hand, home becomes recognisable as a place in which reminders of the finitude of life are many. But on the other hand, an awareness of change and the vulnerability of human life means that home is mutable and hybrid. Just as silence connotes the simultaneous affirmation / crisis of self, so too reminders of death connote the simultaneous affirmation / crisis of home. Whereas the current chapter highlights R.'s horror of home, the final chapter, looking at *Corfu*, explores how Dessaix's narrator becomes "placed" in the world by his awareness of mortality.

The Silent Annunciation

The image of R. writing in a room at the Hotel Arcadia is a return of sorts in the context of Dessaix's work. Echoing Dessaix's "spiralling moment" in *A Mother's Disgrace*—in which, at the Sheraton Hotel in Cairo, he sets down the version of his mugging he will later tell Sergeant Mustafa—R.'s "letters" are also a response to the threat of death. His textual representation of himself, his continued presence on the page, within a narrative, resists the absence imposed by death. Whereas Dessaix's

adopting father, Tom, dies “mid-sentence” (MD 154) while writing a letter—his silence on the page signifying the silence of the grave—R.’s writings in *Night Letters* denote a sustained existence. So long as he can finish each sentence, he can go on “being,” at least as voice. Despite his resistance to silence, however, the theme and threat of silence, of “voicelessness,” repeats throughout the text, reminds him of death and decay, which in turn produces another occasion of writing / speaking. As it is for Dessaix in Cairo, R.’s textual representations of himself spiral around and continually return to silence and absence.

Perhaps the best example of the tension between silence and iteration in *Night Letters* is found in an early scene that depicts what R. calls “the Annunciation” (5). This scene not only establishes the centrality of silence to his textual representations of himself, but it also introduces his horror of home. Throughout his subsequent journeys, R.’s encounters will often bear similarities to the Annunciation and reveal his simultaneous attachment to / horror of home.

After spending the first two pages deciding where exactly to begin his narrative—“I never know where to start” (3)—R. settles on the Annunciation in which “Gabriel” (his doctor) diagnoses R.’s condition. The title of the episode is ironic, for while it alludes to an act of iteration, R.’s doctor, at least on the page, is silent. His diagnosis is never revealed explicitly. Instead, R. replaces his doctor’s words with references to the Bible: “Thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb ...” (5). Gabriel, the Angel of Life, here becomes the Angel of Death, a playful reversal that is underscored by the importance of silence throughout the scene. Not only is the doctor “silenced” by biblical references, but most of this scene is taken up with discussion of what is *not*

said. In response to the Annunciation, R. remarks sarcastically that there was “no point in my murmuring ‘*virum non cognosco*’ [‘seeing I know not a man’]” (6), in order to proclaim his innocence. Both R. and his doctor know all too well the cause of his illness. Consequently, he is left without a word: “My throat was full of phlegm. I coughed, but said nothing. I felt disembowelled. And then the gentle questioning began and I tried to call back up to him, yet felt too crushed to speak” (7). Although the “gentle questioning” comes from Gabriel (the doctor is given no other name), it is expressed in R.’s narrative voice thus depriving “Gabriel” of any voice: “Would I prefer to have [more tests] done in a couple of weeks’ time when he came back from holidays?” (7–8). In the end, the exchange between R. and his doctor is kept behind a veil of intertextuality; the Annunciation remains mute other than in terms borrowed from a Biblical narrative.

For their part, these terms come cloaked in irony; they bring not news of life but death, and in so doing, another turn of the screw, they bring Dessaix’s narrator to life, for it is through this news that he embarks on his journey and discovers the voice with which to write of it. Moreover, R. has not “found favour” with anyone; the Annunciation comes more as a death sentence, a repercussion for the “sin” of “straying” (I will return to guilt and retribution a little later). Yet, at the same time, it is Gabriel’s words that, in a sense, bring R. to life, and so in terms of R.’s presence on the page, the Annunciation does in fact bring him to life, and he does “conceive in [his] womb” a very lively narrator. If it were not for Gabriel’s words, R. would not exist at all. In this way there is a silver lining to the news. As in Dessaix’s other texts, in this scene there is a flickering between life and death, between silence and

utterance, that forms the very core of the narrator's identity and his thematic concerns.

When R. leaves the clinic and returns to the car, his partner, Peter, asks, "Well, what did he say?" to which R. replies: "'He says I've got it,' I said, using words that had only ever belonged to other people" (11). What exactly "it" is, is never named; the disease R. carries with him on his journey to Italy and Switzerland remains undisclosed throughout the text, the proverbial "shaft of silence" that will be reflected back to him via his later encounters on the road.¹ Further, the fact that R. uses words belonging to "other people" implies a displacement of his own voice; his words become a reminder of silence in that cliché, like silence, represents the oblivion of self.

The only person who has a voice in the whole scenario is Peter, who responds to R.'s news: "Well, first of all, I'll stay beside you all the way. And the other thing is that I'll be alright" (11). Peter becomes a kind of invulnerable presence accompanying R. "all the way." Remaining behind when R. sets off for Europe, and presumably the undisclosed addressee of R.'s letters, Peter stands as a present absence not only in R.'s journeys but also in the letters themselves, anchoring R.'s journeys and ensuring they will always be a "round trip." Following Peter's statement, they "wheel around" and head home, "teetering between saying nothing and saying everything" (11), a phrase which describes the Annunciation scene as a whole. Like Dessaix's mugging in Cairo, the "annunciation" of R.'s fate produces a voice that does not simply affirm his identity in the face of death, but rather announces the threat of silence as the key phenomenon around which he creates his identity.

Once they arrive home, R.'s condition worsens: "At home I got sicker and it was a bit of a nightmare [...] Hellish really" (11). With home a "hellish nightmare," R. thus heads to Europe determined, in his words, to "take myself out of myself" (190) and "lose myself in [Venice's] dizzying maze of laneways" (239). Not only will getting lost (if he is successful) forestall his journey home, where he must surely meet his fate, but also it will enable him to continue his narrative. As he says early in his story: "I don't mind getting lost" (4). Nevertheless, reminders of death and silence confront him wherever he goes, returning him to himself, to the familiar, thus foiling his efforts to become lost and reiterating the sustained presence of home.

"A childish fantasy": Getting Lost

Alberto Manguel notes that "because being on the move seemingly denies the promise of death, sick people long to travel" (173). Discussing the "'spinning' movement" of *Night Letters*, Manguel observes that R.'s writings "are patchworked with stories (long, short, unfinished, divided, invented, recorded)" and are the means by which he might "com[e] to terms with his own end" (174). Both spatially and intertextually, R. favours a mode of wandering, for "[s]pinning tales [not only] postpones the hour of our death [but death] is spoken of as the end of the voyage" (175–76). R. resolves to continue moving, into and out of narratives, cities and genres. By staying in motion he resists both the stillness and silence imposed by death.

R.'s mode of movement and narration, as Paolo Bartoloni suggests, also subverts Western notions of temporal and narratological linearity: "To wander

means to subvert the notion of an indivisible and ultimate point of arrival both at the level of time and space. The deeply rooted notion of linearity has not only informed the western understanding of physical journeys but has also affected other areas, including fiction" ("Traveling with Mortality" 109). For Bartoloni, "Dessaix's book responds and gives voice to that contemporary urge to bring to the fore of critical and artistic enquiry the area in-between final and supposedly tangible points of reference, be they master narratives or taken for granted cultural values" (109). Wandering in *Night Letters* thus not only defers death, but it also performs a "writing back" towards traditional forms of representation. At the same time, however, reminders of death / home are persistent throughout the text and reveal a profound *inability* to wander, to completely subvert linearity. In the end he will return home, for it is prefigured in nearly every episode of his travels.

Early in the text, R. describes his model of wandering, one that acknowledges no plan or itinerary and is therefore conducive to getting lost:

For years I've had a childish fantasy which goes like this: one morning I get up and say to myself, "Today's the day." (Significantly, this for me is also what the suicide says when the time seems at last right, when finally there's nowhere left to hide.) Without hurrying I pack a few things in a carry bag—a leather one, plain but smartish—saunter down to the tram-stop at the end of the street (it's vital there be no sense of being pressed) and sail off to Spencer Street Station as if I were taking the morning off to do a bit of shopping in the city. There at the station the real adventure begins. I look at the indicator board to see where trains are bound for and consider where I might go: Adelaide? Wangaratta? Warrnambool? Guided by an infinitude of

tiny impulses pushing me this way and that—my penchant for W's, for example, or a sudden picture of ambling up Wangaratta's main street one sunny morning months before—I go to Wangaratta. I nose about, drifting deliciously, catch a bus to Albury, fly to Sydney, examine the indicator board at Sydney airport, watch Harare and Osaka and Athens and Colombo flicking over, go to the ticket counter where, pushed and pulled again by memories so tangled I could never unravel them all, I open my mouth and startle myself by saying: "Osaka." From Osaka the ways branch out once more, fork and fork again, and I am born along on memory, association, feeling and chance. Choice will assume a new meaning, something closer to desire—the desire to be, of course, not to have. (13–14)

Writing about Bruce Chatwin's nomadism and "horror of home" (13), Simone Fullagar observes that "[t]he desire for a 'destination' leads to a domesticating form of tourism as the journey is structured like a narrative with a beginning, middle and end" (10). Without the structure of a "round trip," one can seemingly keep attachments to and an awareness of home at bay. Despite his desire for and faith in narrative, R.'s "childish fantasy" attempts to dismantle this domesticating structure of narrative / travel by remaining open to "memory, association, feeling and chance." This kind of travel promises the "loss" of self R. desires, so much so that even his voice becomes foreign when he "startle[s]" himself on saying "Osaka." Given that his travels are motivated by his diagnosis, it is understandable that, like Fullagar's Chatwin, home has become a "horror"; anything that bears a semblance of familiarity brings with it feelings of anxiety and claustrophobia. Getting lost, therefore, via the above mode of travel, might assuage the anxieties of a form of

consciousness shaped by Western norms of spatial, temporal and narratological linearity.

“I Was Certainly Feeling Trapped”: Death at Every (Re)Turn

The theme of getting lost in *Night Letters* is evident from the outset, the epigraph being taken from the first canto of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: “Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had wandered off from the straight path” (i). The opening lines of the text itself mirror the epigraph: “Streaking through the jungle on a gaudy leopard, cape billowing out behind me as if I were aflame, I have on my head (my greying pate)—and this is vital—a hat, a black, gargantuan fedora with a drooping brim, and streaming from one side of it is a cassowary feather (of all things). A flash of red and blue—and I am gone!” (3). Noel Henricksen comments that “Dante and his *Divine Comedy* are seldom far from R. or *Night Letters* [...]; each of the book’s sections is subtly introduced by an allusion to Dante” (“Allusion” 194–95).² Importantly, both texts begin with movement and a sense of disorientation, Dante having “wandered off from the straight path,” and R. “streaking through the jungle”; and both begin within the journeys themselves, not from any fixed point of departure—R. says in his first letter: “I’ve been here almost a week now” (3). For Dessaix’s narrator, his movement anticipates getting lost: “A flash of red and blue—and I am gone!”

Writing on the history of travellers getting lost, Zilcosky notes: “Beginning with Greek epic and myth and running through to Romantic fairy tales, heroes have traditionally dreaded losing their way” (“Lost and Found” 681). “Lostness,” though, was only part of the story: these tales were “always about the triumphant

moment of re-direction, the topographical ‘a-ha!’ experience, the right turn toward home” (681). Discussing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s travels to Venice in the eighteenth century, Zilcosky suggests that the “lost-and-found story became a literary trope in the Romantic era” (681); these travellers deliberately disoriented themselves in order to “eventually gain a new, more robust sense of self” (“Sebald’s Uncanny Travels” 103). The objective of getting lost, therefore, was to regenerate oneself, or to orchestrate some kind of new beginning: “Through losing himself [...], Goethe discovers a ‘new’ and apparently better ‘life’” (“Writer as Nomad?” 232).

R.’s goal of “los[ing] [him]self in that dizzying maze of laneways” (NL 239) draws on the Romantic tradition of getting lost and self-renewal. Additionally, *Night Letters* itself is heavily invested in Romanticism, from allusions to the travels of Laurence Sterne and Casanova, to, more pervasively, its emphasis on the sublime, particularly the way in which R.’s horror of home is stimulated by encounters with “wild” creatures in Italy’s railway system (to which I turn shortly), and by the way in which the decaying city of Venice is emblematic of R.’s physical state. Graham Huggan argues that the trope of the sublime in travel narratives “derealiz[es]” (110) death (and the stories themselves) in its propensity to mythologise death or scenes of pending disaster—that is, in the “reciprocal allegory that matches the narrative’s skilful blending of providential (metaphysical) and scientific (physiological / meteorological) accounts” (117). The “Annunciation” is a case in point; the reader is presented with a distinctly “providential” account of the doctor’s (“Gabriel’s”) medical diagnosis. It might be argued that this handling of death distorts and “trivializ[es]” (Huggan 121) the realities of the diagnosis and “resignifies” (Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss* 126) it into the abstract, thus

functioning more as an escape from rather than a confrontation with death. Huggan has criticised this method of addressing death in travel narratives due to its tendency toward the metaphysical, for the way in which bodily extremes are transformed into the “awe-inspiring, cathartic [and] uplifting” (121). His issue is that it often conflates the metaphysical and the scientific via an aesthetics of the sublime that skilfully dramatises “a variation on that clichéd form of divine punishment: ‘nature’s revenge’” (110). Death in this context is often “the price to be paid for substituting romantic idealism for practical knowledge” (114). According to Huggan, many representations of death and dying “*derealize*” travel writing in their recourse to metanarratives, which, “through a kind of willed congruence of the literal and the metaphorical,” raise the genre to the “elevations of Western literary myth” (107). Images such as R.’s jungle cats and “The Diver” in *Arabesques* undoubtedly elevate death into the sphere of myth in Dessaix’s work, relying as they do on the “poetic thematization” (Frow 123) of certain territories and contexts. At the same time, however, the presence of death in Dessaix’s texts, rather than prompting a retreat from the reality of the mortal condition, denotes a profound connection to the world and describes the particular place his narrators inhabit.

Key to R.’s quest for disorientation is the prevailing influence of Romantic traveller Laurence Sterne and his somewhat “anti-travel” book *A Sentimental Journey* (1768).³ Indeed, after the reference to Dante in the epigraph, while R. is trying to decide where to begin his narrative, Sterne is his first port of call: “Begin with the first sentence, was Sterne’s advice, and trust to Almighty God for the second” (3). While Sterne’s book subverts many tropes of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour and pre-emptes the self-reflexivity of modern and postmodern travel narratives such

as Dessaix's, the travels of its narrator, Yorick (a thinly-veiled Sterne), nevertheless operate within the Romantic—albeit, in Sterne's case an ironic—"economy of return" (Zilcosky, "Uncanny Travels" 103). For example, in questioning the benefits of "foreign knowledge or foreign improvements" (13) that were supposedly acquired by young men on the Grand Tour, Yorick is nonetheless displaying them.⁴ His whimsical mode of travel—"I seldom go to the place I set out for" (82)—is a precursor to R.'s. However, via a series of uncanny intertextual and physical returns, R. is denied both the loss of self and the recuperative moment sought by the Romantics. Consequently, Dessaix's text departs from the Romantic model of "lostness"; while Yorick and Goethe find themselves in better shape after getting lost, R. attempts to get lost intentionally but finds "lostness" impossible.

Night Letters contains a series of intertextual returns that accompany R.'s physical returns. Although out of sequence, the three sections of the text correspond to those of Dante's *Divine Comedy*; whereas the latter is structured "Hell," "Purgatory," "Paradise," the former, in its intertextual allusions to Dante, is structured "Purgatory," "Hell," "Paradise," thus wandering even from the text by which it is largely ordered (Bartoloni, "Traveling with Dante and Sterne" 22). This architecture, however, does provide R. with an avenue of return; even though he "strays" from it from time to time, it is a structure he nonetheless returns to. These textual returns often reflect physical returns that produce feelings of anxiety and dread in Dessaix's narrator. Perhaps the most definitive evidence of this (although extant in each part of the text) comes in the middle section, "Vicenza Letters" (i.e., the "Hell" section), in which R.'s wandering precipitates several uncanny intertextual and physical returns; each of which leads not, to use Zilcosky's terms in

discussing the Romantics, to the “excitingly strange” but instead to “the unsettlingly known” (“Lost and Found” 684).

Early in the “Vicenza Letters,” R. leaves Locarno “determined to take myself to Bologna” (117). Bearing in mind that his mode of travel is akin to Sterne’s, it is unsurprising that Bologna is not where R. ends up, though he does visit briefly. Arriving in Bologna, he finds the city closed to him; the money exchange is shut and he is forced to “lug my suitcase into the city and look for lodgings street by street” (125). The suitcase proves a major burden; while he wanders the streets of Bologna its handle snaps, making it even more cumbersome. Given the significance of luggage throughout Dessaix’s work, this scene is revealing: despite wandering a foreign city, R. cannot leave his “baggage” at home, or even at the station. The dangers of losing one’s baggage are evident in the passage in which the handle breaks:

Right outside a butcher’s shop the handle on my suitcase broke. Two feet from my nose, hanging by the door, was a whole dead deer. I watched two ancient, black-clad widows poking around like a pair of bloated flies amongst the piles of dead flesh—the forest of salami, feathered ducks and pheasants, boars’ heads, capons, sides of bacon, turkeys (plucked, obscenely white), the trays of leaking brains, the slabs of veal ... I stood there stock-still for a very long time. (126)

Reminiscent of Yorick’s ill-fated disorientation, this passage illustrates the risk of becoming lost and losing one’s cultural attachments. As soon as the handle on his bag snaps, R. is confronted with the sight of the butchery, its grotesque produce and the pair of widows. This is a claustrophobic moment for him, because it is death he

is trying to escape: if home connotes death and “the end of the road,” so too does losing himself, breaking his connection with his baggage. The Romantic paradigm of “lostness” is thus unavailable to R. because the traditional risk of getting lost (the loss of self / existence) only reminds him of his impending fate (he becomes “stock-still”) thus immediately returning him to himself. Despite his allusions to and longing for a sort of Romantic liberation, the Romantic promise of new beginnings is lost to him: “There could be no renewal, just growing decrepitude, rottenness and death” (NL 78). Moreover, the broken luggage is also a metaphor for R. having to lug his damaged body through Europe. The fact that it causes him to become “stock-still” emphasises his consciousness of being still, the relation of stillness to death and the need to keep moving.

R. is told by a man smoking in the doorway of a hotel that he is wasting his time in Bologna: “‘*C’è la fiera,*’ he said, ‘there’s a fair on. There are no rooms in Bologna’.” R. leaves. On returning to the station he observes “a feeling of vacant menace, of men prowling, hands in pockets, sharp-eyed” (126) and takes the first train that comes through which, incidentally, is heading to Verona. Once at Verona station, however, it is as though he is back in Bologna: “Stalking, padding, prowling, slinking, strutting all around me was a bizarre collection of highly painted whores, almost all of them in thigh-length leather boots and vividly clashing colours—yellows, cherry pinks, blacks and oranges” (127). His spiralling journey continues; he attempts to leave the station but decides against it on account of the darkened, empty streets and the “gulf of dark parklands” (128) between the station and the town. “Back I went,” he says, “pushing and dragging the hateful,

lumpish suitcase, past the mocking eyes and muttering lips, up the stairs the way I'd come" (128). Again he returns, despite his desire to move on.

R. soon takes another train, one bound for Vicenza. At the station in Vicenza the scene is the same as Verona and Bologna: "Strung out along the balustrade at the top of the brass-railed staircase I'd just come up was an assortment of booted girls in garish colours, a cigarette smouldering in each hand [...] Some of the girls had jutting Adam's apples" (180). He admits to feeling as though he has "entered the Doleful City" (179), referring to the first circle of Dante's "Hell." Again, in Vicenza there are no hotel rooms available anywhere: "Another fair" (182). The play on words becomes apparent: his efforts at "arrival" are being thwarted by "fair" after "fair" —in other words, fate. Despite trying to escape, he is destined to come face-to-face with his fate.

R. tries to sleep in an alcove but is herded away by two policemen who tell him it is too "dangerous" here, and that he "must go back to the railway station" (183). Dragging his disintegrating suitcase, he returns to the station where he spends an evening in "Hell":

Pandemonium. In the middle of the hall two tall black women in red hot-pants were screeching and clawing at each other. Packs of smiling men were gathering around them, hands in pockets, tense and elated. The dwarf in the green beanie was masturbating energetically in a corner by the overflowing trash cans. One of the whores toppled backwards to the ground, shrieking like a banshee, trying to grapple her flailing rival down with her. Two trains screamed through outside in opposite directions. A black wind from the tracks billowed through the hall, sending grit and paper whirling [...] Three

or four girls drifted over to me, cooing at me in husky, faded voices. They clustered around me, sour-smelling, breathy, their hands creeping over my chest and my tightening stomach, fingering my pockets, stroking the backs of my legs [...] They were boys. (183–84)

Henricksen has observed that “R.’s journey through Hell, like Dante’s, takes him through a variety of sectors, wherein he meets men and women who are vices incarnate” (“Allusion” 195). Dessaix himself, in an interview with Bartoloni, has acknowledged his deliberate intertextual return to Dante in this section: “Several of the scenes set at Vicenza railway station have a colouring directly borrowed from Dante’s ‘Hell.’ I mean that literally: the reds, the blacks, the yellows. The same can be said for the way the characters move and interact in that chapter” (“Traveling with Dante and Sterne” 22). These intertextual returns, however, underwrite a series of physical returns, entrenching the traveller in a cycle of constant return. Despite R.’s wandering, despite his desire to, like Sterne, stray, lose himself and “take myself out of myself” in order to recover himself, he is driven to repetition by chance, by the closed money exchange, by the fairs in Bologna and Vicenza, by the trains that happen past. In addition to this, he is encumbered by his “lumpish” suitcase, which he is also unable to leave behind. Despite wandering and abandoning himself to chance, R. is unable to become lost or even disorient himself. Not only do the railway stations evoke Dante, after Bologna they begin to evoke each other and R. finds himself caught in a hall of mirrors, in a labyrinth of physical as well as textual repetition.

Recounting a similar experience to this, Sigmund Freud, in his study "The Uncanny," describes a journey involving a series of unwanted returns while he too is travelling through Italy:

As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny [...] Other situations which have in common with my adventure an unintended recurrence of the same situation [...] also result in the same feeling of helplessness and of uncanniness. (237)

Freud here describes instances of return strikingly similar to those experienced by Dessaix's narrator. Like R., Freud, in an attempt to escape a quarter of questionable character, "wander[s] about" but continually finds himself "back in the same street." Most importantly, Freud returns continually to the street against his will, as though being drawn in by something "fateful and inescapable," something that he might otherwise have put down to "'chance'" (237). These constant returns yield Freud's feeling of uncanniness; a feeling also sensed by R., given that he ends up, after shaking off the "hands crawling into my clothes," inside a "glass box" (184) at Vicenza Station (the First-Class Waiting Room) asking himself: "Was I at the bottom

yet? Was there good to be squeezed out of this hollow moment?" (185). R.'s sense of helplessness is apparent, and his claustrophobia evident in the symbol of the "glass box" (also an allusion to death: the coffin).

For both Freud and R., travel is uncanny because of the impossibility of losing oneself completely; despite their attempts to "wander" and effectively lose that which is familiar to them, ultimately they are forced to return, fated to repeat, and thus unable to experience, as in the Romantic model, the sense of loss that necessarily precedes the "psychologically redemptive" (re)discovery (Zilcosky, "Writer as Nomad?" 236). Rather than enacting "a certain disturbance of the person" (230) both R. and Freud become, simply, disturbed. Zilcosky, in reference to Sebald, defines this kind of late twentieth-century travel (albeit tentatively) as "post-postmodern": "someone who wants to get lost but cannot, because he keeps inadvertently traveling the same paths" (240). These attempts to stray return R. to feelings of claustrophobia and guilt, often guilt for "having strayed" in the first place. Likewise, these emotional responses return him to the scene of the Annunciation and the following weeks at home, which R. describes as "Hellish" (11).

"I had wandered off from the straight path": Professor Eschenbaum's Straying and Retribution

R.'s wandering—and that of others in *Night Letters*—always leads to a disturbing return and stillness in several forms: capture, imprisonment and the sickbed. Those who wander in *Night Letters* often pay the price for their "deviance," suggesting a certain guilt on the narrator's part. R. projects a desire for retribution (i.e., his own

retribution) onto those characters he comes in contact with and in the stories he relates. Not only are Freud and R. unable to get lost, their physical (and in R.'s case, textual) returns are characterised by "deviant" forms of sexuality, investing these returns with an erotic element. For Freud it is the return to the "painted women" in the red-light district, whereas for R. it is to the "painted girls" with jutting Adam's apples. Whereas Freud's model of return is heterosexual and denotes a return to the female, R.'s continual circling back to the painted girls with jutting Adam's apples denotes a model of return that is homosexual by nature. *Night Letters* alludes to this kind of "straying" in its Dantean epigraph: "for I had wandered off from the straight path." The word "straight" here carries connotations of physical and sexual orientation: to wander physically means to "divert" oneself sexually. The result of this kind of wandering is almost always some sort of punishment or retribution.

Using a discourse of "lostness" to connote "deviant" homosexuality extends as far back as the Bible: "And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward the other; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet" (Romans 1:27). The error referred to here is straying; the word "error" itself being generated from the Latin *errāre*: "to wander" (OED). Therefore, while homosexuality is deemed by both the letters of Paul and the travel writing of Freud as undesirable or neurotic, *Night Letters* suggests that sexual "wandering" is the desired objective, another means of "losing" / "finding" oneself. But does sexual deviance enable the kind of self-(dis)possession that the Romantics sought via their own methods of losing their way; and does it liberate R. from the Freudian model of physical and textual return? In the end it does not, for any attempt to engage with

these tropes of travel results in a reminder of mortality via a retributive stillness. It is helpful here to investigate the relationship between R. and his fellow traveller in *Night Letters*, Professor Eschenbaum, the mysterious figure also staying at the Arcadia Hotel, one whom, on several occasions, R. shadows through the narrow alleyways of Venice in order to discover the nature of the professor's nightly journeys.

One of the first things R. relates about Professor Eschenbaum is that "his luggage is still missing" (21). From the outset, therefore, where R. is unable to detach himself from his baggage, the German professor has lost his (actually, as the fictitious editor Miazmov notes, he is not a professor but a doctor [98]). In an earlier letter, R. asks: "Why do people like the professor come south?" (12). On arriving in Venice, Eschenbaum takes a haircut, one that makes him "look very different" (32), and buys a leather jacket and a peaked cap, which precipitate "quite a transformation" (56). Losing his luggage and taking on a different appearance, the "professor" is seemingly able to lose himself in a manner that R. finds impossible. The answer to R.'s question about why people like the professor come south seems self-evident: to affect the same kind of "lostness" that R. himself desires. Later in the text, the professor affirms this: "more than anything else, I think I'm pursuing forgetfulness [...] In a way I suppose I *am* looking for [...] re-enchantment [...] when I come to Venice" (217). Indeed, his voice is uncannily similar to Dessaix's in *Arabesques* who echoes the professor's sentiments: "I make art—and travel—both to remember and to forget" (289). The implication here is that the professor is looking to engage with the Romantic paradigm of getting lost in order to re-discover himself. Eschenbaum even manages to lose R. when the latter follows him through

Venice one night in order to discover “where it is he scurries off to night after night on his supposed ‘constitutional’” (56). R.’s use of the term “constitutional” to describe Eschenbaum’s nightly journeys to Venice’s S&M bars is a double entendre. Firstly, it implies these escapades are made for the benefit of the Professor’s constitution and well-being. At the same time, the word implies that these journeys belong to his very constitution and form “an essential part or element” (OED) of his character, thus reviving Dessaix’s essentialist leanings. Travel, for the professor, like Dessaix’s narrators, enables the traveler to arrive at the very nub of their being.

Eschenbaum’s transformations, and his supposed ability to lose himself in the Venetian crowds, suggest that he is able to enact the kind of lostness that precedes Romantic transformation and self-discovery. However, when R. attempts once again to solve the mystery of the professor’s constitutionals by, in a repetition of the first instance, following Eschenbaum through the crowds in Venice, it is R. himself who becomes the uncanny reminder of that which the Professor is trying to lose.

After following the professor from the Hotel Arcadia, R. momentarily loses sight of him and quickens his pace until, while worrying how he will ever find his way back, “I found [Eschenbaum] standing in front of me, hands in his jacket pockets, staring me straight in the eye” (114). This is a moment of uncanny return for both characters:

Maddeningly, he didn’t utter a syllable. What he was supposed to say was “Why are you following me?” or “What is the meaning of this?” — there are several stock phrases—and then I would normally choose a stock response (feigning astonishment, asking him to mind his own business, admitting

candidly and disarmingly to my idiotic prank—there are many). But he said absolutely nothing. He just stood there in the darkness and stared at me. I opened my mouth to say something but nothing came out. After a few seconds, utterly unnerved, I turned around and walked back the way I thought I'd come. (114)

This scene echoes two earlier episodes in the text and stands as an example of R.'s "horror of home." Firstly, R.'s pursuit of the professor, "as a caprice" (113), is reminiscent of the "childish fantasy" he looks to realise via his mode of travel through Italy and Switzerland. Acting on "the spur of the moment," and being "drawn along in his wake" (113), R. indulges his curiosity to find out where the professor's nightly constitutionals take him. R.'s hope is that he might lose himself: "He was the wrist, in a sense, while I was the whip, recoiling and flying in fitful arcs at his command" (113). Similar to the way in which the Orient in *Arabesques* promises the erasure of self, following the professor through the chaotic Venetian alleyways, R.'s movements are dictated by those of another. But just as he is "beginning to wonder how wise it had been to embark on this little adventure, and how long it would take me to find my way back" (114)—that is, just as he is beginning to become lost—he finds himself standing face-to-face with the professor. Neither says a word to the other. R. himself tries to speak, but "nothing [comes] out," mirroring the Annunciation scene in which neither the doctor nor R. are described as saying anything to each other, and in which R. also attempts to say something, but "felt too crushed to speak" (7). Both R.'s and Eschenbaum's silence is a reminder of R.'s diagnosis, a reminder of death, and a reminder of home. On the verge of getting lost, R. is returned to himself, a moment that leaves him "utterly

unnerved" (114), one from which he immediately moves on from, turning around after only a few seconds and fleeing the scene.

It is also a moment of return for the professor. It is true that, in Venice, Eschenbaum becomes (almost) unrecognisable. However, if, as Biarujia argues, the professor is R.'s "reprobate alter ego" (93), then R., as Eschenbaum's doppelgänger, embodies precisely what the professor is trying to outrun as he flashes through the Venetian landscape. Staring each other "straight in the eye," their confrontation is an act of uncanny physical return, where R. is "utterly unnerved" and the professor, hands in pockets, is struck dumb (as though in a glass box—the silence of the grave). Despite Eschenbaum's efforts to lose himself via a dramatic change of appearance and his covert constitutionals, as he passes "in and out of small shafts of light" threatening to "vanish [and] vanish again" (114), he finds his shimmering double staring back at him, as mute and persistent as a mirror.

Not only is it a physical return; as it is with R.'s physical return in Vicenza, there is also an element of textual return in the narrator's attempts to follow Eschenbaum in Venice. Gustav von Aschenbach, in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), is a precursor to Eschenbaum, not only in name but also in his mode of and motivations for travel. Dessaix himself has noted that the two characters share a "similarity in some regards" ("Traveling with Dante and Sterne" 23); here Dessaix alludes to the "myth" of "anxiety and panic" (23) that is attributed to Venice by works such as Mann's. And there are indeed more similarities than this between these two figures.

Aschenbach, an author, travels from his home in Munich to Venice in order to escape both "a difficult and dangerous point" (Mann 197) in his writing and "the

commitments of fame" (207). Much like the professor, Aschenbach is travelling to "disappear" in order that he might return "invigorate[ed]" and so that his later work might be "bearable and fruitful" (201). Originally seeking somewhere "tropical" (199) he heads to an Adriatic island, Pola; but on finding there a "provincial Austrian hotel clientele" (one that is all too familiar to a German), he longs for "something strange and random," and thus, "haunted by an inner impulse that still had no clear direction," he decides on Venice (209). Even this decision, however, is prone to uncanny repetition, for no sooner has he ordered his ticket than an old "goat-bearded man" issuing tickets exclaims, "To Venice! [...]" echoing Aschenbach's request" (210).

Zilcosky notes the presence of the uncanny in *Death in Venice* and comments that "Aschenbach's tragedy consists [...] in his inability to disorient himself sufficiently" ("Writer as Nomad?" 236). While in Venice, Aschenbach becomes besotted with Tadzio, who is staying with his family in the same hotel as Mann's protagonist. Towards the end of the text, Aschenbach's efforts to pursue Tadzio bear an uncanny resemblance to R.'s efforts to follow Eschenbaum:

One afternoon, dogging Tadzio's footsteps, Aschenbach had plunged into the confused network of streets in the depths of the sick city. Quite losing his bearings in this labyrinth of alleys, narrow waterways, bridges and little squares that all looked so much like each other, not sure now even of the points of the compass, he was intent above all on not losing sight of the vision he so passionately pursued. (263)

Although Mann's protagonist loses Tadzio as the boy crosses a bridge, his gaze meets with the latter's "strange twilight-grey eyes" just before the pursuit ends. In

an earlier scene, Aschenbach is depicted staring at his own reflection in the mirror while taking a haircut and uses the word “Grey” to describe what he sees before him (262). Like R. and the professor, Aschenbach’s eyes meeting those of his quarry heralds an uncanny return, one in which, like R., he is left feeling “unnerved” (Mann 263; Dessaix 114). Further, this late episode is reminiscent of the novella’s first scene in Munich where, while waiting for a tram by the Northern Cemetery, Aschenbach finds himself being stared at, “straight in the eye” (Mann 199), by a stranger standing across the street. This encounter immediately precedes the eruption in Aschenbach of a “youthful craving for far-off places” (199). Aschenbach is therefore a point of textual return for *both* R. and Eschenbaum. On one hand, Aschenbach’s desire to escape his “familiar profile” (Mann 201), his mode of wandering, lost luggage and change of appearance, align him with Eschenbaum. On the other hand, his pursuit of Tadzio through the labyrinthine city and its “unnerv[ing]” conclusion, the mirroring of pursuer and pursued, and Achenbach’s eventual illness align him with Dessaix’s narrator. Tadzio’s grey eyes are doubled by the pestilent, overcast sky that brings tidings of Aschenbach’s ailing health (222), the “colourless” (199) eyes of the stranger near the cemetery and the cemetery itself, all of which, like R. to Eschenbaum, serve as reminders of his inability to lose himself and thus the apparent inevitability of return and death.

Achenbach’s attempt to subvert his “familiar profile” via an “illicit” sexuality, which might suggest a break in the Freudian heterosexual mould, does not lead to the liberation and renewal he desires. In fact, his illness and subsequent death, after he steals one last look at Tadzio’s “twilight-grey eyes,” exemplify the risks of wandering. *Night Letters* too, on many occasions, contemplates the risks of

“wandering off from the straight path.” Biarujia has noted that “*Night Letters* is [...] a phallogentric work of art; it is not a ‘voyage of discovery’ but a guided homotextual sex tour” (96). Homosexuality is depicted, often though not always via the professor, as sexual transgression throughout the text, which is in turn coupled with sin and retribution.

R.’s discussions of desire are usually accompanied by images of vulnerability that symbolise an awareness of mortality, for it is likely that his desires are the cause of the miasmic, AIDS-like illness with which he is diagnosed. Venice itself is portrayed as “blue-veined” (combining images of mouldy cheese and the veins of the body) with “blotched façades” (3; deploying HIV symptomatology), reminiscent of R.’s sense that people “must be able to sniff me rotting” (79). In voicing his somewhat casual desire for Emilio, the Italian waiter who works at the Hotel Arcadia where he and the professor are staying, R. observes the “scorch mark from the iron on his otherwise spotless shirt,” and comments on its appeal: “A minor imperfection is always so seductive, especially if it hints at a story—the faint trace of a scar, the most discreet of limps” (131). R.’s penchant for the “imperfect” and the contaminated (overcoded Venice, with its history of plagues and canals like open veins, is prone to contamination), allude to a deviant desire, which is duly pervaded by an air of peril, even guilt. (R., on visiting Patricia Highsmith in Locarno explains her interest in guilt [29].)

Night Letters features many “deviant,” transgressive spaces, most of which carry connotations of imprisonment and retribution, such as the Venetian Ghetto, the prison cells of the Leads from which Casanova escaped, the Tintoretto at the Scuola di San Rocco (21)—which depict scenes of Christ’s Passion and reception

into heaven—and a mediaeval torture exhibition with its vast array of tools for retributive justice (40–41). Although R. leaves Australia on being diagnosed with an unnamed disease, like Aschenbach fleeing Munich after locking eyes with the stranger near the cemetery, his travels do not “take him out of himself,” or enable him to escape his fate; for R., every turn is a re-turn, which thus casts him in a closed circuit of repetition and recognition.

More than just compiling a compendium of illicit desires and dark destinations, *Night Letters* expresses its narrator’s guilt and fear of lostness by evoking the dangers of straying. Obviously, the disease is one of them, contracted, as he suggests, on one of his “adventures” (15). The Annunciation scene plays on these feelings of shame and guilt, acting as a death sentence within a Judeo-Christian moral framework, subverting the scene of the Virgin Mary finding favour with God by characterising R. as unchaste, contaminated (i.e., impure) and duly punished for the sin of straying. Additionally, the returning motif of the leopard (3; 80; 271) is a symbol of “sins of the appetite” (41)—that is, the “evils” of desiring. He muses on the cause of his malady: “the more you crave [...] the more vulnerable you are to the loss of *everything*.” In a parenthetical remark he asks: “Have I too often craved?” (106). The reminders of death and punishment that clutter *Night Letters* suggest that he knows the answer to this question, and just as they serve as an awareness of the finitude of life, they also stand as evidence of his guilt for having sinned.

Such cravings have their consequences, even for the professor. One morning, hoping to breakfast with the professor, R. knocks on his door at the Arcadia to find him “propped up in bed, his face blue with bruises, one eye closed,

his lips split and swollen, his shoulder in a sling [and] suddenly very old" (198).

"It's my own fault," the professor says, "I took a risk" (198), hinting at the solution to the mystery of his "constitutionals." (This is a repetition of the Romantic paradigm; Sterne's Yorrick also "grew sick" after straying and adopting the foreign "*beggarly system*" of flattery [120; original emphasis].) Battered and bruised (mirroring both Venice's "blotched facades" [3] and his visitor), Eschenbaum tells R. he went the previous night to "a club": R. translates this as a gay S&M club with "red lighting, mirrors, a pitch-black maze, gleaming torsos, harnesses, groans and cries, soft, discordant music—hell disguised as paradise—or should that be the other way around?" (198–99), again evoking Vicenza Station and "Hellish" home. The professor tells R. that it is "the only place in the world I can stop thinking [...] and just be" (199). His beating, he explains, came after having "gone a hundred metres, probably in the wrong direction" (199). His shoulder is "dislocated" (199) when his new leather jacket is stolen from him, suggesting the dangers of slipping the "cultural straight jacket." Eschenbaum's pursuit of the "desire to be" not only leads to "punishment," but it also strips him of his travelling self; instead of "taking him out of himself," his attempt at getting lost ultimately returns him to himself. His beating, delivered, it is revealed, by the Arcadia's staff, Emilio, Giorgio and Angelo, is an uncanny return and a reminder of the risks and retributions associated with straying.

Throughout *Night Letters* there are other examples of these risks and retributions. The professor tells R. "The Story of the Disappearing Courtesan": harbouring a "simmering greediness she despised in herself but could not rise above" (160), she falls ill and, following an affair with a father and son, she is taken

to an inn by the father (who has learned of her behaviour) where she is raped by gangs of men (167). Contrary to his mythologised persona, Casanova is said in *Night Letters* to have been imprisoned for being “homosexually involved with three powerful Venetian men” (253), where he falls too ill, developing “appalling piles” (257). These passages, and those involving the professor, reveal that sexual deviance and homosexuality do not lead to a Romantic “re-enchantment,” nor do they break with the Freudian model of the uncanny. Rather, desire and “wandering off from the straight path” ultimately lead to uncanny returns that anticipate the narrator’s approaching death.

Death as Home: Stillness and Wandering

In *Night Letters*, the dangers of straying reveal a thinly disguised guilt for having strayed, one that in turn reveals an underlying fear of rejection or abandonment. These “punishments,” in other words, connote a profound attachment to home and ideas of sin and retribution. Those in the text who stray (or attempt to) almost always suffer a retributive stillness: the professor in his sickbed; the courtesan unable to escape the room in which she is raped; Casanova imprisoned; R. himself becoming “stock-still” when his suitcase breaks. It is also not difficult to imagine that the letters themselves, collected as they are by Igor Miazmov, may be a posthumous collection, therefore signalling R.’s final return and subsequent inertia. So while R.’s “childish fantasy” (13), which is “[m]ore or less” how he “came to be in Venice” (14), might itself be his own kind of “constitutional,” and thus connote a placeless drifting, his mode of travel is nonetheless motivated by and maintains an awareness and “horror” of home. As Fullagar has suggested: “Travel works as a

form of distraction from the present, the filling up of time with places, stories, encounters" (12). *Night Letters* itself is a paean to distraction in the presence of death, not only via R.'s wanderings, places visited and chance meetings, but also evinced by its structure prone as it is to tangential stories narrated by others (notably Rachel Berg [47–94] and the professor [136–74]). It seems that even the text itself has an uncanny dread of finality, deferring it for as long as possible. In the words of Manguel: "Spinning tales whiles away the traveller's long hours, and also (as Scheherezade [sic] knew) postpones the hour of our death [...] Death is spoken of as the end of the voyage; to keep death at bay, as Ulysses must have realised after his return home, the traveller must keep travelling" (175–76). Death and home are linked in *Night Letters*, not only through its structure, but also via R.'s "childish fantasy" and guilt.

At the same time, however, R.'s journeys and letters reveal a *longing* to return to the familiar both spatially and textually. Despite the fact that R.'s mode of travel is an enactment of Dessaix's sense that "[l]arge numbers of us nowadays float placelessly above the world's nation-states" ("Pushing" 36), his experience in travelling by this method through Bologna, Verona and Vicenza reveals an inability to "float placelessly." At the end of the travelogue-cum-novel, following Professor Eschenbaum's departure, a series of repetitions prompt him to "move on" (269) from Venice and head for home. Firstly, on the way up to his room to write one of his final letters—a place he returns to each night—R. stops at the desk in the hotel foyer to speak to Angelo, one of the men responsible for Eschenbaum's mugging, and finds him wearing the professor's watch. After looking Angelo "straight in the eye" (268), R. admits to himself that seeing the professor's watch again is "more

than unsettling" (268). The next day, his last in Venice, as he waits for the *vaporetto*, R. sees a man who looks strikingly similar to the professor: "Grey crew-cut, high forehead, taut features, stylish leather jacket" (269). Like seeing Eschenbaum's watch, the likeness leaves him feeling "quite shaken" (269). The man turns out to be Giorgio, another of the men involved in the professor's altercation. The repetitions again take on a sinister, uncanny quality, and R.'s responses to them are feelings akin to anxiety and dread and his response is to flee the city.

Finally, as he wanders around St Mark's Square, "[w]hat really convinced me [to return home]," he says, is when he becomes "aware that wherever I looked there was a lion" (271), and here he describes several lion statues decorating the square. These repetitions bring about yet another, for the winged lions call to R.'s mind (and therefore to the reader's) the opening passage of *Night Letters* in which he describes himself "streaking through the jungle on a gaudy leopard" (3). Other than the final postcard, which features a Giacometti sculpture and reads simply "I'm on the way" (273), the image of R. aboard a jungle cat is the last, and a repetition of the first. And although R. says on the penultimate page that he rides this cat with "true exaltation" (272), this is not a moment of revelation or a Romantic "right turn toward home" (Zilcosky, "Lost and Found" 681), because it is aboard such a creature that R. has come to be in Venice. His travels and, as he says, letters are *all* "part of that exultation" (272).

R. discovers very little on his journeys other than the impossibility of getting lost. His death, diagnosed at home—supposedly deferred by "straying" and the intrusion of other narratives—is nevertheless mirrored back to him wherever he goes. Feelings of guilt, claustrophobia and dread are impossible to outrun; it is on

these feelings R. arrives in Venice and it is on them he departs. Via spatial metaphors, mode of travel and intertextuality, R. creates and traverses a landscape that reflects his own dis-ease, his fears regarding “the end of the road.” Despite his “childish fantasy” and affected placelessness, it is this ultimate stillness, his final resting place, that characterises his travels. R. cannot enact the Romantic “right turn toward home” because, in a sense, he never left; everywhere is familiar. Thus his awareness of mortality binds him to himself and projects onto the world a series of images that enable him to describe his finite position in the world. In the next chapter, I examine *Corfu* and the ways in which, although the familiar inspires horror in Dessaix’s narrator and often evokes images of death and decay, it also prompts him to return home. As a homecoming novel, *Corfu* reveals how death and an awareness of vulnerability are key features in Dessaix’s concept of home, and how he does not live in spite of them, but through them.

¹ Because Dessaix was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1994, Javant Biarujia has suggested that R.’s story is actually Dessaix’s story (78–79). According to Biarujia, R.’s “insistent refusal to reveal himself” (78) (i.e., his disease) reveals his / Dessaix’s “internalised homophobia” (80), given that AIDS has been commonly associated with homosexuality. But bearing in mind the link between silence and homosexuality Dessaix forges in *A Mother’s Disgrace* (see chapter one), Biarujia’s claim seems misconceived. Silence is a direct expression of his homosexuality.

² This is also a reference to an early passage in Robert Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), a story about an ageing emeritus professor who returns to Venice and begins to transform into a wooden puppet. See Henricksen’s article for an intertextual analysis of *Night Letters*.

³ Although Bartoloni acknowledges Dessaix’s debt to Sterne in his article, “Traveling with Dante and Sterne,” the analysis focuses almost exclusively on Dante and neglects an investigation of *Night Letters* as an homage to Sterne.

⁴ Sterne’s “economy of return” is presented in *mise en abyme* in the section of *A Sentimental Journey* entitled “The Act of Charity.” Yorick observes an encounter between two ladies and a beggar in a darkened alleyway near the “opera comique” in Paris. The beggar manages to obtain a large sum of money from the women, and Yorick notes that the “secret” to the beggar’s success is “flattery” (116). Using this method, he then elevates himself in Parisian society. However, before long he admits to himself: “’twas a dishonest reckoning—I grew ashamed of it” (120). He subsequently falls ill and leaves Paris longing “for those of Nature” (120). Abandoning the “beggarly system” (120; original emphasis) of flattery, he is returned to

himself; that is, only after successfully losing himself is Yorick reimbursed with more certainty in who he is.

Chapter 6

"A delicate instrument in a stony place": Homecoming in Corfu

In the final episode of *Corfu*, after having returned from the eponymous island to his home in Adelaide, Dessaix's unnamed narrator (I will call him "N.") describes a black-and-white Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph that is fastened to his bedroom wall: "In the middle of a bare landscape (just a scruffy tree or two, some dusty bushes and a few unremarkable hills in the distance) a comically enormous double-bass, slewed across the back of a man in a suit, is riding off down an empty, stony track away from the camera" (345). Although somewhat slapstick, the image is also one of vulnerability and "oblivion" (346); the subject is in a state of always moving away from the viewer (i.e., making himself absent), and the fragility and grace of the double-bass stand in contrast to the harsh, rocky landscape. In the novel's penultimate paragraph N. reads the image as "a delicate instrument in a stony place" (346). Stuck to his bedroom wall, such that he sees it "each morning" (346), the photograph, with its allusions to fragility and absence, is a reminder of mortality and characterises N.'s home with a sense of vulnerability and oblivion.

This chapter continues with an examination of the trope of the horror of home in Dessaix's texts, this time as it appears in *Corfu* whose narrator takes up residence in the house of little-known Australian author Kester Berwick while Berwick is travelling. Although N.'s journeys and the destinations he visits are underpinned by a motif of escape, *Corfu* is ultimately a tale of homecoming. Like *Night Letters*, it is defined by wandering both thematically and structurally via its drifting narrator (and Berwick), its sojourns into literary biography, history,

travelogue and autobiography, and the proliferation of intertextual references to Homer, Sappho, C.P. Cavafy and plays by Anton Chekhov, to name some of the more prominent ones. In typical fashion for Dessaix, the text is divided into three sections, with each section relating loosely to the three phases of the narrator's journey: his arrival on Corfu, his growing familiarity with the place and the people, and his eventual turn towards home. Initially fleeing William—the narrator's love interest—and their complicated love affair in Rome, N. journeys to Corfu in order to "ride out whatever comes until I'm myself again" (7). On the Greek island N. stays in Berwick's house, and, after learning the story of his absent landlord, finds curious parallels with his own story, from their misfit childhoods in Australia, to their love of theatre, European culture and travel, their homosexuality, penchant for drifting and, in particular, their shared affection for William. Haunting the house at Gastouri—moving among Berwick's things, sleeping in his bed, etc.—the narrator develops an intimacy with Berwick that is consistent with the way in which Dessaix "follows" other authors throughout his works: Berwick's life soon comes to inform the narrator's. Central to this intimacy is the question of home; whereas Berwick has escaped Australia for permanent exile on Corfu, N. searches for a way he might reconcile himself to Australia and learn to be at home. But for N. this is easier said than done. As with *Night Letters*, in *Corfu* the familiar, anything reminiscent of home, produces feelings of anxiety and dread and often brings with it the connotation of death and the desire to flee. N.'s desire to return home is inconsistent with the threat, as he sees it, of being placed in the world. In this chapter I analyse the ways in which N. conceives of a notion of home that is both fixed and unfixed, one that is unprotected from vulnerability and structured around the present

absence of figures such as Berwick. The reminders of mortality and vulnerability throughout the text reveal N.'s profound connection to home; together, they come to define his place in the world.

The Art of "Fuck[ing] Off": An Island Escape

To begin with, N.'s journeys are an escape—from William in Rome, from England where he has been living, from Australia before that. Arriving on Corfu, he finds the island, and Berwick's house in particular, to be characterised by motifs of escape and oblivion; almost every object with which N. comes into contact is informed by a story of escape. Foremost is the way in which Berwick himself has escaped the minds of most Australians. Of all the literary figures with whom Dessaix engages in his writings, Berwick is the most peripheral in terms of his position in a collective cultural consciousness. Given Dessaix's interest in marginal literary figures, it is unsurprising that Berwick occupies a key position in his work. Dessaix is often eager to illuminate the marginality of the writers he chooses. In *Twilight of Love*, for instance, while staring at the bust of Turgenev, Dessaix doubts whether any of the passers-by "could have named a single novel he'd written" (13), to which he adds that Turgenev was once "Russia's most celebrated novelist [...]" And now—almost total eclipse" (13–14). Likewise, at the beginning of *Arabesques*, Gide is described as a "once famous French writer and intellectual" (3), but despite being "once the incarnation of French thought and letters," he is now "half-forgotten [and therefore] may need an introduction" (4). This penchant for the "half-forgotten" is also evident even in Dessaix's academic writings of the mid- to late-1970s, in which he highlights similar notions, such as Turgenev being not only "eclipsed" by Tolstoy but also "an

acquired taste" ("Beautiful Genius" 61–62). And in another article, Dessaix looks to draw attention to the theories of the Russian structuralists, in particular Yuri Lotman, a figure to whom "very little attention has been paid in the West" ("Yuri Lotman" 38), and one who "does not exist" to "students of poetics, stylistics, and critical and literary theory in the West" (43).¹

But if Turgenev, Gide and Lotman are peripheral figures in the Western cultural consciousness, Berwick is practically forgotten. This is articulated in *Corfu* by Arthur, an Irishman living permanently on the island. Arthur has come to pay a visit to the house at Gastouri and the newly arrived narrator in order to give him "all the guff on the locals. Including Kester" (63). Arthur asks if he has seen Berwick's manuscripts, and before receiving a response delivers his thoughts on the matter:

The point is that nobody is ever going to publish any of it. It's simply dead boring. Kester can't write. He was in the theatre once, too, you know — acting, teaching, writing plays ... all gone, like a puff of smoke. Who's ever heard of Kester Berwick? Oh, to listen to him, you'd think he was quite the celebrity — the names he drops! [...] He may've known Dame Sybil Thorndike — good luck to him — but the fact is he's a lonely old man stuck in a God-forsaken village on an island most people have never heard of ... tootling the days away on a bamboo flute he made himself and teaching English to Greek fishermen's sons. He's not even qualified. (79–80)

Although Arthur is derisive about Berwick's life and writing, about his veritable absence from the world, it is precisely these things that are attractive to Dessaix's narrator; not only is Berwick's writing out of synch with current trends — writing

that might be said to be “an acquired taste” —but also he is depicted as a man to whom the world is oblivious: “Who’s ever heard of Kester Berwick?” Other than to those who have read *Corfu* or Berwick’s *Head of Orpheus Singing* (or his even lesser-known, obscure one-act plays), he remains an unknown figure in Australia, not to mention wider, literary circles. Although Dessaix might have to characterise Turgenev and Gide as “eclipsed” literary figures—that is, push them towards obscurity—with Berwick his narrator has to do the opposite and draw him out from almost complete oblivion. For many if not most, there is little question surrounding the importance of Turgenev or Gide; one’s memory of these men is easily jogged (if indeed they are as forgotten today as Dessaix suggests). Berwick, however, is another matter: “as for Kester Berwick’s pale existence—his notes in old envelopes, his yellowing playscripts and chipped cups and plates—it was little more than a faint smudge in the corner of the last page of history” (107). As an embodiment of the forgotten, even the ignored, and the margins of cultural consciousness, there can be hardly a better subject.

Berwick is not alone in oblivion. As a spatial representation of Berwick’s absence from the Australian imagination, the island of Corfu itself is, in Dessaix’s text, populated by people for whom escape is a suspended state of existence. Earlier in the above conversation, Arthur recalls years before when the community of expatriots on Corfu threw a launch party to celebrate the publication of Berwick’s *Head of Orpheus Singing*. Despite being a day of political unrest throughout Greece, with the Colonels declaring martial law and implementing a curfew, the party goes ahead. Fearing trouble with the authorities, the attendees make their way home in the darkness: “Then half of us got lost on the way home—the hills were alive with

sozzled ex-pats trying to find their way back with no headlights. I ended up getting lost with Kester" (77).

In the previous chapter I have already explored the connotations of getting lost in terms of the way in which Romantic travellers often looked to get lost in order to affect a revitalised and more self-assured homecoming. But whereas in *Night Letters* R. finds it impossible to get lost, it is a state in which Berwick, together with the other ex-patriots on Corfu, finds himself stuck (however willingly or unwillingly): "half of us got lost on the way home." Nearly all of the ex-patriots on the island are lost: "They were mostly just beached there, waiting again" (60). Greta, the Australian matriarch of the ex-patriot community on Corfu, having come to the island in order to escape "drab" 1960s Australia, admits as much: "it's too late to move on. And anyway, where would we move on to? Where most of us came from no longer exists" (60). In *Corfu*, then, being lost equates to a state of suspension, a detachment from one's origins and a sense of being adrift, placeless. It is not so much a sense of being *dislocated* as a state of being *unlocated*, "waiting," as though between states, in much the same way as Corfu itself is situated between Australia and the major centres of Western Europe. If for R. in *Night Letters* the Romantic model of revitalised return is unavailable to him because he is unable to get lost, it is also unavailable to the ex-patriots of *Corfu* because they have no home to return to. Their island is a place of escape, a condition voiced by Greta's mad and estranged husband, who stands in his dressing gown like a demented statue on the balcony of "the Big House" and barks at N. whenever he visits, yelling repeatedly for him to "Fuck off!" (62; 227).

This suspended state of getting lost is particularly manifest in the objects Dessaix's narrator finds in Berwick's house. The day following his arrival at Gastouri, he is trying to write a letter to William whom he abandoned without a word in Rome. Unable to "find the voice" for the letter, he "distract[s]" himself by opening the drawer of Berwick's writing desk: "Poking around amongst the letters in English and German and old envelopes with exotic stamps, I unearthed yellowing notebooks, small diaries, several manuscripts, newspaper clippings (some fifty years old) and, scattered amongst them, photographs—uninteresting at first" (31–32). These items, together with the books on his bookshelf, stir his curiosity about Berwick and are the very objects around which he constructs a profile of his absent landlord. Although N. finds the items "uninteresting at first," they acquire more value and meaning as he comes to learn more about them. Not only do they bring Berwick "to life," but also they render his absence palpable.

Berwick's house stands as a precursor to the literary destinations and preserved or restored federation homes that Dessaix visits in his subsequent publications. In *Twilight of Love*, for example, *Les Frênes* is strikingly similar to the Gastouri house in *Corfu* in that it enables an apparent understanding of its former occupant. Wandering about Turgenev's house, through the kitchen, dining-room and music room, navigating the "traces" (161) of Turgenev, first editions of his books, the piano, letters, Dessaix is afforded a better understanding of the Russian. Standing in his study, "all the different Turgenevs I had come across—political thinker, elegiac poet, 'incomparable story-teller'—began to come together in a new configuration" (167). Dessaix's prose is infused with a longing for unity and wholeness, this time for the fragmented and perhaps incongruous images he has

held of Turgenev to “shake down into a single, intricate pattern” (167). This longing also exists in his narrator’s visit to Corfu and his search for Berwick: “I thought about the two pictures of Kester Berwick I’d just been presented with and wondered if they’d ever dovetail, then merge and come alive as a single image with real depth” (87). As the “single image” materialises, Berwick becomes both present and absent.

Like Turgenev’s house at Bougival, Berwick’s house provides the narrator of *Corfu* with a particular insight into the character of its owner. Fearing the arrival of William—who, he has learned, is on the way to visit Berwick—N. flees him once again and travels to Molyvos (present-day Lesbos) where Berwick spent the early years of his Greek life. There he meets Leila, a friend from N.’s London days, who also shares a connection to Berwick. Over the course of several meetings, Leila tells of Berwick’s romantic past: his three lovers, all of whom, in one way or another, have by now vanished from his life. After almost two weeks away N. returns to Gastouri. Having heard Leila’s stories, both Corfu and the objects in Berwick’s house become familiar and begin to take on meaning: “I really did feel as if I were coming home” (208). Walking to Berwick’s house from the bus-stop, residents call out to him in Greek, familiar faces populate the cafés and kiosks, the “neighbour’s cat rolled over to have his tummy scratched.” The place is so familiar that he announces: “I was home.” In particular, though, Leila’s stories about Berwick are made more “real” by the objects in the house at Gastouri. Although he learns of Berwick through Leila’s stories (and those of other ex-patriots on the island), it is the objects in his house that enable N. to not only grasp the “single, intricate pattern” of Berwick’s persona, but also to see him “becoming flesh” (210).

Whereas, to begin with, the photographs in the house at Gastouri are “uninteresting” (32), following his return from Molyvos they anchor the narrator’s image of his absent host:

That portrait on the wall beside the window—nothing out of the ordinary, just a yellow and brownish picture of a rather gawky young man in an open-necked shirt—must be of Alan Harkness. The photograph in the drawer of the young man in shorts sitting on a stone wall with his arm around a blonde young woman in long trousers must be Alan, too, somewhere in America. Too painful to frame, but too precious to throw out. (211)

In the desk drawer, he also finds a letter from the parents of Raymond Muigg, an Austrian soldier Kester had “taken to just before the war” (211). The picture of Harkness recalls the failed relationship between him and Berwick, severed when the former left Berwick in England on the relocation of their theatre company to America. The letter from the parents of Muigg, another failed love affair, tells of Muigg’s death in the war, but also suggests suicide (“it was not clear who fired the bullet into Raymond’s head. Could it have been Raymond?” [213]). More “snapshots,” now of John Tasker, evoke another “defection” (151); Tasker flees Berwick’s overbearing love: “Everything John saw [on his travels with Berwick] he saw [...] through the bars of a cage” (150).

These photographs, and the letter from the Muiggs, speak not only of the more significant, defining moments and relationships in Berwick’s life, but also, and importantly, they speak of flight: Harkness to America; Muigg (through the suggestion of suicide) his own existence; and Tasker the confines of Berwick’s love. Indeed, Berwick himself is said to have come to Greece “to escape” (144): “Athens

looked promising in 1959 for someone with Kester's inclinations—plenty of idle young men for him to draw out, to take a Socratic interest in; cheap rent; an Australian climate without (as he'd have seen it then) the disadvantage of being a cultural backwater at the end of the world" (158).

In addition to the flighty nature of Berwick's romantic relationships, the books on his bookshelf, to which Dessaix's narrator refers over and again (11; 31; 70–71; 76; 209–210; 281), symbolise the wanderings and uprootedness not only of the subjects or authors of the books themselves but also of Berwick's tastes and attentions. For N., after hearing Leila's stories, these books become

a babble of recognizable voices: E.M. Forster's novels, Clive James' memoirs of an Australian childhood, Annie Besant and the host of Theosophical pamphlets, slim paperbacks on Buddhism and the Tao, *The Odyssey*, Michael Chekhov's guides to actors—they all now fitted in. Not just tattered spines on unvarnished planks, these books were Kester's companions on his journey from flat, suburban Adelaide [...] to his house among the straggly oaks and olive-trees of Corfu. (210–11)

As Noel Henricksen remarks, drifting is a primary theme of *Corfu*, in which "words like 'drift,' 'float,' 'marooned' [...] and 'drown' ring through the pages [...] subtly repetitious, attached to no one character or circumstance. Conversation drifts [...], floats, is untethered [...]; distracted, one of Dessaix's characters might momentarily drift off [...]; and the minds of foreigners are apt to 'drift towards sex'" ("Hopelessly Adrift" 38).² Likewise, the objects in Berwick's house exemplify the wandering nature of its owner. The items on his bookshelf recall certain states with which Berwick could identify: displacement and homosexuality (E.M. Forster), hybrid

identities, affiliations and pseudonyms (Clive James), alternate religious beliefs and the wanderings of both Ulysses and the mid-twentieth century acting school run by Michael Chekhov (from Russia to the UK to Europe to America), nephew of the famous Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Moreover, the religious items on the shelf are not referred to as “texts,” or even as “books,” but as “pamphlets” and “slim paperbacks,” suggesting a wandering or passing interest rather than devotion and commitment. Even the bookshelf itself is little more than a series of “unvarnished planks” and therefore seemingly makeshift and impermanent. Likewise, the photographs N. finds in the desk drawer are reminders of the kinds of men Berwick is drawn to: “the rootless and the spiritually rudderless” (285), all of them escapees. Berwick’s unresolved problem is that he has spent his life trying to anchor himself to the “rudderless.” Despite being the home in which Berwick has lived for many years, very little of its contents suggest that its occupant has settled. And the fact that Berwick is said to be travelling during the time of N.’s stay further characterises the house as more of a “base” than a settled home, a symbol of a permanent state of escape not balanced by any sort of homecoming.

Not only do these objects symbolise escape, but they also work to affirm Berwick’s absence. At once they are reminders of Berwick, evidence of his existence, and also reminders of the fact that he is always somewhere else. This is why Dessaix’s narrator feels he sees a ghost when he returns from Molyvos (210), for Berwick is both there and not there. Dessaix’s quest for narrative is again evident in his narrator’s search for Berwick, in the way in which Berwick “becomes flesh.” Not only is Berwick the absent centre around which the text revolves, but also the stories that bring Berwick to life revolve around absences, around the departure

and disappearance of the significant people in his life. Like the image of the beehive Dessaix uses to describe the gay centre of Sydney in *A Mother's Disgrace* (164), Dessaix's work itself is structured in such a way, with a honeycomb of absences forming the cellular core. By using absent figures such as Berwick as "anchors" for his texts, Dessaix, to use Susan Stewart's language of the souvenir, "both invents and distances" (ix) his subjects. The more certain the image of Berwick becomes in *Corfu*, the more N. feels he is seeing ghosts. Not only do ghosts signify a reminder of the past, but also they are a reminder of mortality; with Berwick simultaneously present and absent, every object in his home reminds Dessaix's narrator of death. Berwick himself is said to be travelling because of "his teeth" (104), presumably to treat their decay. Given that rotting teeth is also a symptom of AIDS (Engeland et al. 321), and given that by the time *Corfu* was published Dessaix had been diagnosed HIV-positive, Berwick's travels can be read in a similar way to the travels of R. in *Night Letters*—that is, as a means of deferring or even escaping death.

"I was trapped" ... again: The Threat of the Familiar

While the house at Gastouri is symbolic of Berwick's "rudderless" existence, for N. there is much about it that is familiar. Despite being "not at all what [he'd] had in mind" (9), Berwick's house is immediately "comfortable" and "intimate," filled with the kind of "silence you can [...] let creep over you at the end of a long evening with a friend" (11). Even the view is familiar; having just arrived from Rome, N. notes that it is "more Italian than Greek" (11). A few days after his arrival, he explains this sense of familiarity to Prue, another ex-patriot, "[m]arried to a local" (76): "I came into [Berwick's] house and it was like hearing echoes [of]

conversations I'd taken part in, or overheard, I'm not sure" (83). His recognition of the things around him is useful, for it enables him to better understand his own life and position in the world. Given N.'s immersion in European culture—his narrative is filled with allusions to European writers and artists—it is not surprising that he finds a kindred spirit in Berwick. But however affirming Berwick's house might be, the narrator has an aversion to the familiar, and the familiarity of the place brings with it reminders of death and the desire to flee, reviving once again the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self central to Dessaix's *oeuvre*. So although the house at Gastouri is comfortable and intimate, N. also has the "strong, sudden feeling" that it is, at the same time, "almost certainly deceptive" (12), restating the correlation between the familiar and anxiety that exists in *Night Letters*.

Arriving in Gastouri is therefore a homecoming of sorts for N. Like Dessaix's "encounter" with Turgenev at Courtavenel in *Twilight of Love*, it affords him a "tacit accord" (TL 136) with his host. In *Corfu* as in the other books under discussion in this thesis (with the exception of *A Mother's Disgrace*), Dessaix uses an entwinement of identities in the construction of his narrating persona. The lives of his narrators feed into and off those of the literary figures in whose shadows they travel. *Arabesques*, for example, is not just the story of two men living "double lives," but the stories of two men spliced together. This technique of "recognition"—i.e., in having his narrators recognise themselves in the lives of others—establishes a "third" identity that stands in metaphorical relation to "real life" as opposed to a contiguous one. Like his mode of travel, in making an art of identity, Dessaix is seemingly "taking refuge" in the so-called immortality and invulnerability of art—that is, it is a response to, and flight from, death. Moments of recognition connote a

“retreat” into literature in the face of the reality of mortality. For example, struggling to find his voice when writing a letter to William (i.e., facing voicelessness / oblivion), N. opens Berwick’s desk drawer and therein finds the “life” and voice of his host, which then scaffolds the entire narrative of *Corfu*. But this flight into parallel identities does not enable the escape it seems to promise, for although these moments of recognition are self-affirming, ultimately they lead to reminders of mortality and the impulse to flee.

In *Corfu* there are many similarities between the figure of Berwick and Dessaix’s textual persona, particularly as the latter is presented in *A Mother’s Disgrace*. It is not surprising that Dessaix’s narrator feels he is “coming home” (208) when he arrives at Berwick’s house, given the history of its owner. Moving among the objects in the house, and talking to Berwick’s friends, N. uncovers the story of a life similar to that of Dessaix’s in *A Mother’s Disgrace*. From growing up “know[ing] surprisingly early [...] that something isn’t quite right” (279; MD 33), to a deep involvement in theatre (particularly Russian); from a change of name (Berwick was born Frank Perkins), to a life moving back and forth between Europe and Australia; from an interest in alternative religions, to their homosexuality, the lives of Berwick and Dessaix’s textual persona are uncannily similar. When N. notes that “[t]he narrator in Kester’s writing is so transparent he’s hardly there at all” (254), one might also question the transparency of *Corfu*’s narrating voice. That is, via Berwick’s novels, one might see through to the defining characteristics of the man. In *Corfu*, N.’s identity is embroiled with both Berwick’s and Dessaix’s personae in his other books. But while Berwick’s house / identity might be a homecoming for N., and further inform the textual identity of Dessaix, it is no safeguard against

mortality, for the more familiar the place becomes, the more N. is reminded of death.

By the midpoint of *Corfu*, the entwinement of Berwick and N.'s identities becomes so tightly woven that Dessaix's narrator actually mistakes himself as the addressee of a letter meant for Berwick. After returning from Molyvos, he finds the letter from William on Berwick's desk. It begins ambiguously, "Dear Friend":

I've missed you. It's all my own stupid fault, I suppose. I didn't really know what I was doing. Still, your habit of disappearing into thin air at the drop of a hat can make things a bit awkward at times.

Are you OK? I've spent a few days here (Agape let me in), but didn't feel quite right about it, with you not even knowing I was here.

All the same, seeing your things around the house—books we'd talked about, clothes I'd borrowed, notes you'd written to yourself—memories came flooding back. And that was good, really. Made me a bit sad as well.

I'll hang around for a few more days, just in case you come back and we can meet again. It would mean a lot to me. I'll be at your friend Greta's. She's amazing.

Love,

William. (209)

Not only could the letter be either for Berwick or Dessaix's narrator, but it could have been written by either William or N. (to Berwick); it contains sentiments that one assumes N. might direct toward Berwick: his "habit of disappearing into thin air"; "seeing your things around the house [...] memories came flooding back";

meeting “would mean a lot to me.” The openness of the letter — “Dear Friend” — enables N. to subtly play with the identities of addressee and addresser, suggesting an intimacy between the three men or even a transparency by which one can be read through the lens of another. Nevertheless, N. assumes the letter is meant for him. He imagines Greta telling William about him, suggesting that he “won’t mind if you move in for a few days” (210). Dessaix’s narrator is disturbed by this intrusion, by the approach of the familiar. Although on his return from Molyvos he expresses feelings of happy homecoming, on finding “no *unfamiliar* odours, no half-drunk cups of coffee” (208; my emphasis) in Berwick’s house, and confronted with William’s letter, he is, in the end, not so happy to be home: “I was trapped” (210).

When next day N. is at the local fish market, he hears through the bustle of the busy street “a familiar voice” (215). It is William, who stares at him “as if I were a walking corpse” (215). They engage awkwardly, almost reluctantly, in conversation, and William tells him of his mistake regarding the letter: “That was for Kester. He went away before he got my card. Is it you staying at his place?” (216). In their discomfort they look “away at the zoo milling around us in the smelly heat, at the trays of dead fish,” while Greta, accompanying William and unaware of the complexity of the situation, is talking about the need to have Berwick’s old dog Terpsi put down (216–17).

The experience of the familiar is underscored by death and decay: N. hears William’s “familiar” voice amid talk of corpses, death and flesh decaying in the humid air. Even if N.’s entwinement of identities is read as an escape from the realities of his life (in terms of living artfully *through* the narrative of another), given the many similarities between Berwick and N., it is nevertheless an “escape” to a

familiar place. Despite N.'s "transparency," through which he is able to both define and escape himself, there is no escaping the presence of death and an awareness of mortality.

Hearing William's voice and confusing himself with Berwick produces feelings in both men of being "[s]tunned" (215) and "shocked" (216), together with notions of "pain, streaked with anger, blame, guilt and hunger" (217) and an awareness of "weakness" and "vulnerab[ility]" (217). This scene, in which N. comes face-to-face with William, recalls the scene in *Night Letters* in which R. comes face-to-face with the professor. In this instance, the meeting leaves R. feeling "utterly unnerved" (NL 114); it is, as I suggested, an experience of the uncanny, which by nature produces feelings of anxiety and dread towards the familiar.

Likewise, N.'s increased familiarity with Berwick's house and the objects therein produces thoughts of death, feelings of claustrophobia, the desire to flee and recapitulate his horror of home. Although he notes that the objects in Berwick's house are coming "alive" (213) to him as he puts names and narratives to the faces in the photographs, on the night following his return from Molyvos he has a disturbing dream. This dream begins in Berwick's house before shifting to Java and then to Adelaide. It is a hellish dream, filled with an air of impending doom, similar to R.'s visions of "Hell" in Vicenza railway station in *Night Letters* (183): "Voices shrilled [...] Everyone rocked with laughter" (*Corfu* 214); on a large screen a shadow-play re-enacts the life of Dessaix's narrator, and when he takes a knife and slashes through it he finds, sitting in the light behind the screen, almost every character in *Corfu* holding cut-out puppets in their hands.³ Then, suddenly, he is in his childhood home in Adelaide where his mother says to him: "It's so good to have

you home at last [while] smoking one of the du Mauriers that killed her" (213–14).

Despite the apparent happiness with which he returns to Berwick's house, several pages later N. finds it, literally, a nightmare. And not only is his imagined return home to Adelaide a hellish journey, but once there, the image of his mother evokes painful memories, reminders of death and casts home in a horrific light.

Berwick, his house and the objects it contains are all of them, for Dessaix's narrator, *memento mori*. His increased familiarity with the surroundings evokes the figure of Berwick and a desire to flee. Following William's arrival on Corfu, when the house becomes so familiar that the narrator now refers to it as "my house" (264), very little time is spent at Gastouri. As soon as he starts seeing ghosts, he avoids the place almost completely. Throughout the last third of the novel, more of N.'s time is spent at "the Big House" where William is staying with Greta, and where the expatriots stage an amateur production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. The house at Gastouri is mentioned only in passing as a place where N. reads in the mornings (278; 311). More attention is now given to his and William's wanderings about the island and the action that occurs at the Big House (a euphemism for jail, reiterating N.'s sense of feeling trapped as the environment grows increasingly familiar).

The episode in which the narrator and William finally do spend the night alone together in Berwick's house, "to see what sort of intimacy might be possible" (265), is interrupted by a discussion of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. In this aside, N. muses on the "first adulterous coupling" (266) between Anna and the novel's male protagonist, Vronsky, particularly the way in which Tolstoy describes the atmosphere following the encounter: "gazing at the woman he has just had sex with, Vronsky 'felt what a murderer must feel when he looks at the body he has

robbed of life'" (266). This propels N. into a discussion of "seizing" (267) beauty, and the conclusion that "[b]eauty [...] and mourning go hand in hand" (267), suggesting that his artful creation of identity necessarily involves an interaction with and not necessarily an escape from mortality.

By this stage in *Corfu*, both the house at Gastouri and William have been established as familiar figures. Their intimacy in this episode is contextualised by an awareness of death, corpses, murder and mourning. The very moment that N. has sought (and also fled) throughout the novel is underscored by an awareness of mortality. And despite being only a little over two-thirds of the way through the text, it is the last scene that includes the house in Gastouri (other than a few mentions of reading and a quick cup of tea with William, who arrives with a poem by C.P. Cavafy that mourns "the ageing of my body" [295]). Once the house becomes familiar it is associated with death, then it is fled from. Even when, in the epilogue, N. returns to Corfu several years after Berwick's death and visits the house at Gastouri, he and Greta pay it little attention: "We didn't linger" (341).

Throughout *Corfu*, being attached to a fixed, familiar place produces feelings of claustrophobia and is defined by allusions to death and mortality. The island itself is seen initially as a place of suspended escape, where permanent attachments are kept at bay. Despite this, though, there is always the "threat" of the mainland, which hovers on the horizon throughout the text like a reminder of N.'s inevitable homecoming. The coastline of Albania is referred to over fifteen times, and, while the narrator is on Molyvos, the coastline of Turkey lurks in his consciousness in a similar manner (131; 182). His awareness of the continent interrupts or at least intrudes upon his reveries of an island escape. Islands like Corfu are often symbolic

of a state of permanent detachment: “The location is by definition eccentric, because it acknowledges that there is a centre elsewhere” (Conrad 8). The shadowy presence of these regions alludes to the “threat” of such a centre, the pull of home and of familiarity as it appears in *Corfu*.

Like the presence of the mainland, death is never far from N.’s narrative. Its oppressive nature, evoking in N. a sense of being trapped and the desire to flee, reveals his profound attachment to home. Rather than being a place of escape, as it is for the community of ex-patriots, Corfu is a reminder of what N. is trying to avoid. Unlike N., the ex-patriots, for whom home “no longer exists” (60), are not oppressed by death at all, often reacting to it with a degree of nonchalance. Maxwell Coop, the flamboyant cross-dresser, for example, barely bats an eyelid on learning of the death of Greta’s husband: “Not a moment before time” (261). Greta herself is unmoved when discussing the need to have Berwick’s dog put down (217), and, when her husband falls (or jumps—like with Raymond Muigg, it is not made clear) from the balcony of the Big House, she is practically nonplussed: “Oh, bugger!” (230). These characters—as opposed to N. who, during the commotion of the death / suicide of Greta’s husband, reaches for Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*—are not anxious in the presence of death; reminders of mortality do not produce the desire to escape, and the lack of uncanniness in these moments further exemplifies their detachment from home. Despite N.’s attempts at integrating himself with this community, his responses to death and the familiar reveal a continued awareness of and attachment to home. Although he looks to get lost in unfamiliar landscapes and by merging his identity with that of Berwick’s, there is no escaping the gravity of death / home. Like the arrival of William on Corfu, death intrudes continually on N.’s narrative.

Berwick's house, as a collection of *memento mori*, crystallises the ubiquitous presence of death in *Corfu*. N.'s problem is how to reconcile himself with a life in the shadows of death, for this also reconciles him to a sense of home.

"The tottering ride into oblivion": Coming Home

I would like to return to the discussion of the object that opened this chapter, the black-and-white Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph of the double-bass riding a bicycle that is pinned to N.'s bedroom wall in Adelaide. It is the final image with which the reader is presented in *Corfu*. Now back at home, every morning upon waking, Dessaix's narrator comes face-to-face with this image. Although immediately comic—the oversized instrument slung across an unbalanced rider—there is in this photograph an allusion to oblivion and vulnerability. Of course, a black-and-white photograph in the age of digital photography in living colour is almost enough to suggest a sense of old-worldliness and the passing of time, a forgotten age, as it were. But the content is more revealing. The rider is moving away from the viewer, suggesting not only a perpetual state of movement but, necessarily, movement *away*; he is in the process of always leaving on what N. calls "the tottering ride into oblivion" (346). Added to this is a sense of being out of place; N. notes the disparity between the "crafted beauty of this instrument suspended against a desolate background" (345); it is, in other words, "a delicate instrument in a stony place" (346).

As an image of oblivion and vulnerability, the photograph is a reminder of mortality. The fact that it is mounted in a place at N.'s home such that he sees it "each morning" (346) suggests that an awareness of mortality is a fundamental

element of his sense of being at home, of being placed in the world. This idea of home is thus resistant to ideas of place as immune to change and, by extension, to ideas of identity as fixed and immune to change. It is also resistant to the idea that an “escape” into literature is also an escape from the physical realities of life. This kind of homecoming denotes a sustained interrogation of self and home and a sustained and simultaneous escape and return. Although the familiar evokes feelings of claustrophobia and the need to escape, attempted escapes always give way to the familiar, so much so that the desire to escape itself becomes familiar and thus, ironically, comes to define N.’s sense of home. If the Cartier-Bresson image is one of escape, it is also an image of home. In this way, home is both fixed *and* unfixed, for it connotes an impulse to travel away, but at the same time a sense of home becomes attached to those very objects that give rise to such an impulse. It is another instance of Dessaix’s penchant for the “both at once.” The more N. feels at home the more he desires to flee, but also, the more he desires to flee the more he feels at home. His return to Adelaide is perhaps consistent with the notion of a “revitalised” return sought by Romantic travellers, but it is one that comes about only on realising the impossibility of getting lost.

Like the anti-essentialist / essentialist nature of Dessaix’s concept of identity, home for N.—and Dessaix—is a hybrid, mutable construct. Nevertheless, absence, the sense of a void, remains at the centre of this concept, maintaining an essentialist bent toward the depiction of home: home is *essentially* a state of crisis / affirmation. This is reminiscent of Dessaix’s sense of homecoming in *Twilight of Love*. When at the ruin of Courtavenel, noting that “[t]here was indeed nothing there” (125), Dessaix understands what he imagines Turgenev’s sentiment might have been on

arriving at the same spot over 150 years earlier: “he had come home at last, yet at the same time belonged not here, but somewhere else” (126). Not only does a sense of homecoming in the context of a ruin connote an absent home, but also, the notion of not belonging at home suggests that a sense of longing for “somewhere else” is a dominant characteristic of Dessaix’s experience of home. Despite often affirming rootless, rudderless, even cosmopolitan existences, the objects that N. “collects” on his travels and writings evoke the authors associated with them. Through the resulting awareness of mortality, therefore, N.’s narrative generates meaning. Underscored by such an awareness, the objects through which he narrates, rather than connoting endless drifting, connote a grounded human existence, one that is both bound to place and yet implies continued movement and interrogation.

¹ This, of course, is sound academic practice. But in terms of Dessaix’s later writings, which make tropes of the ghostly and the vanished, this preoccupation with margins and peripheral figures acquires a slightly more revealing hue. In this context, Lotman is also an attractive figure for Dessaix. Born into a Jewish intellectual family in Petrograd, he was forced to take up his work in Estonia due to anti-Semitism in Russia. At the University of Tartu he established the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. Thus, from exile in Estonia, Lotman contributed to and became a leading proponent of Russian structuralism. The play between centre and margin here is one that appears time and again throughout Dessaix’s work. His preoccupation with the revival of forgotten figures suggests a desire for movement from periphery towards the centre; that is, it reveals a longing to “place” these figures, perhaps not to centralise them *per se*, but at least to bring them into the wider cultural consciousness and characterise them as forgotten. This lends Dessaix’s work an “aura” of oblivion. His desire to “move” these figures from margin to centre, from oblivion to awareness, is further evidence of the motifs of stillness as death and movement as death’s deferral that exist throughout Dessaix’s work.

² Henriksen goes on to give an exhaustive account of the appearances in *Corfu* of words like “drift,” “adrift,” “float” and “drown.”

³ This scene is most likely a reference to Christopher Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously*, set in Jakarta, whose narrator, like Berwick, is a shadowy figure, curiously both present and absent, reflected in his allusions to and discussions of Javanese shadow-puppetry in the *wayang kulit* (Koch 4).

Conclusion: Being Here

Berwick's house in *Corfu* is a microcosm for Dessaix's travels and travel writing in their entirety. Simultaneously "flesh" and "ghost" (210), Berwick's presence in the novel is always shadowed by the reality of his absence. And just as the house in Gastouri contains a collection that, to use Susan Stewart's terms, is concerned with "the articulation of the collector's own 'identity'" (162), so too do Dessaix's texts share a similar concern. Dessaix's travel functions as a mode of collecting via which he is able to assemble a kind of literary museum or cabinet of curiosities with the objective of articulating the defining characteristics of his own identity. This exemplifies Judith Adler's notion of travel as an art form, one "that creates meaning through play with richly symbolic spaces" (1374) in order to "deliberately [cultivate] forms of subjectivity" (1384). Having said this, it is important to note that Dessaix is not the sort of travelling collector who appears in, for instance, Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*: "From Charles Darwin, who sails off for years in the *Beagle* to collect specimens, to Charley Milward gathering mylodon skin in a cave" (Blanton 102). Rather, like Chatwin himself, who "offer[s] a nomadic option [...] of collecting signs" (Blanton 105), Dessaix's travel writing offers a collection of tales (invented and / or lived), persons, objects and destinations that work together in articulating a common set of themes and values.

I have suggested in this study that the destinations Dessaix visits and the people, stories and objects he encounters enable him to affirm a free-floating placelessness. From his failed attempts at uncovering traces of his genealogy in *A Mother's Disgrace* to arriving at Courtavenel in *Twilight of Love* and finding

that “[t]here was indeed nothing there” (125), these episodes and places speak to the apparent void or “scene of absence” that underscores Dessaix’s evocation of himself and the stories of his life. Wherever Dessaix travels, and whatever he comes into contact with, there is the recurring motif of the absent. Such absences highlight Dessaix’s unescapable awareness of mortality and reveal an underlying draw towards home. The travel routes and traditions he follows—in the footsteps of Turgenev, Gide, Berwick, Sterne, Mann *et al.*—are not only reminders of these travelling writers, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they are reminders of the *absence* of these figures. As I noted in chapter three, in the case of Dessaix’s evocation of Turgenev and the hopes of Nietzsche’s *good Europeans*, Dessaix compares himself with the Russian author, not so much in order to highlight how the two are similar (although he does this), but instead to give voice to the absence of the nineteenth-century optimism. In this case, Dessaix travels through a late-capitalist Europe that certainly has been united, as envisaged by the *good Europeans*, but in a way that is ahistorical, commercialised and homogenous, or in Dessaix’s terms, “barbarian” (TL 129).

Likewise, Dessaix travels to North Africa in *Arabesques* where he evokes the well-established history of “forgetting” oneself in the homoerotically charged Orient. He exploits the promise of forgetting in this region in two ways: firstly, by vanishing into cliché, and secondly, by subverting the tropes of Occidental representations and portraying himself as the forgotten and invisible. The promise / threat of oblivion in the Orient enables Dessaix to sustain the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self that exists throughout his work. It is not the case that “everywhere is nowhere” for Dessaix, but that a

theme of oblivion makes everywhere the same. Vulnerability and an awareness of death motivate his departures, but they are ultimately inescapable and represent the constant challenge of reconciling himself with his home.

Throughout Dessaix's body of work, Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa and Russia acquire an aura of absence, as places of identity crisis, as places where one might lose oneself, as places of the ghostly. Of all his motivations for travel—to remember who he wanted to be (*Arabesques* 290), to experience new things ("Travelling in Hope" 142), for wisdom's sake ("Orientalism" 203), to find home (*Corfu* 316)—it is the threat of silence (manifest as an awareness of mortality) that instigates the majority of his journeys. As the opening passage in *A Mother's Disgrace* illustrates—in which Dessaix is held at knifepoint in Cairo—it is only when threatened with death that his voice is stirred. His response to the threat of oblivion is to speak, to ground himself in narrative. Just as Berwick's presence is simultaneously evoked and distanced in *Corfu*, Dessaix's voice evokes his own presence which is simultaneously deferred by the theme of absence, such as the recurring motif in *A Mother's Disgrace* of the "shaft of silence running up through the centre of [his] life" (20).

Dessaix's narrators define themselves by a series of absences—of voice, of his literary heroes and, particularly, of a single, defining narrative. These narrators give voice to themselves in ways that revalue many tropes of travel writing, namely identity, Orientalism, authenticity, civilisation, home and away. With the exception of *Twilight of Love* and *Arabesques* (though cases may be made for them), Dessaix's motivation for travel is always some sort of

absence: in *A Mother's Disgrace* it is a sense of absence that accompanies adoption; in *Night Letters* it is the threat of silence that accompanies his diagnosis; and in *Corfu* Dessaix's narrator sets off after his divorce and, more immediately, after fleeing his burgeoning relationship with William. In the cases of *Twilight of Love* and *Arabesques*, Dessaix's project is more to do with how to articulate and cope with a sense of absence, as opposed to being explicitly motivated by a particular threat. His travel in general is an attempt to come to terms with mortality, the finitude of life. As N. says in *Corfu* on arriving on the eponymous island: "I'll stay here, I'll cast anchor here and ride out whatever comes until I'm myself again" (7). Not only does this suggest that his journey to Corfu is motivated by a sense of being without a self, it also suggests that he can speak of himself from the position of being without a self, again highlighting the gap between voice and self and defining his autobiographical persona by the present absence of this gap. The "shaft of silence" is filled with a voice throughout Dessaix's work, but it is a voice that reiterates this silence.

Jeff Malpas claims that "[m]ovement [is] the means by which space is grasped in its complexity" (*Place and Experience* 166). By travelling "with" such figures as Turgenev, Gide and Berwick, within landscapes of forgetting, Dessaix is seemingly defining himself as out of synch with—and thus out of place in—the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Far from celebrating this severance and discontinuity in a postmodern sense, Dessaix's work is permeated with a sense of longing for unity, wholeness and meaning, particularly in his rhetoric of centrality with words such as "spiral" and "coil," images of staircases with

voids at their centre and in his desire for his travels to provide a “single image” of the authors he “follows.”

Despite this rhetoric spiralling around “what isn’t,” informing narratives that underscore the absence of permanently grounding narratives, Dessaix’s mode of travel as an act of collecting reiterates his desire for a centre. The objects and tales he “collects” connote not only a desire to order or grasp the world, but also to give a certain order to his articulation of self. Although these objects revolve around narratives of placelessness and absence, the recurring *memento mori* effectively *place* Dessaix in the world and inform a human experience of it. And although much of his travel is in response to an awareness of impending doom, the fact that death and decay continually intrude upon his efforts emphasises that, in fact, no such escape is possible and thus no revitalised return. Despite being attempts to protect himself from vulnerability, Dessaix’s travels effectively compel him to embrace his own fragility and mortality. As Malpas claims: “Recognising our inextricable tie to our surroundings means also recognising our own finitude and mortality” (*Place and Experience* 192). Dessaix’s journeys make the inversion of Malpas’s statement equally true. This mode of travel, as collection, connotes not an escape from but a groundedness in the world, unprotected from vulnerability and loss, one that reveals “the connectedness of an embodied, located, bound existence” (193).

In the end, despite his penchant for open-ended narratives, and although he is still publishing, Dessaix’s journeys come full circle. His work elaborates a concept of home and being in the world that necessarily involves

the threat of oblivion. Given that mortality and vulnerability are inescapable, either at home or on the road, Dessaix is compelled to live with these forces. As his eventual homecoming in *Corfu* suggests, a sense of mortality is an inexplicable component of being placed in the world. Although Dessaix deploys these objects in order to inform an essential absence or, as he puts it, placelessness, at the core of his self, this “shaft of silence,” is mortality, and it is around this present absence that he plots his place in the world.

This study has analysed the ways in which the awareness of mortality in Dessaix’s travel writing symbolises the simultaneous crisis / affirmation of self that is central to his textual persona. On one hand, the threat of silence stimulates Dessaix’s narrative iteration, while on the other this iteration always coils around silence; in plotting his crisis he defines who he is. Like “The Diver,” Dessaix’s vibrant exultations hang suspended over “the sea of death.” Via the tropes of travel writing, Dessaix formulates narrating personae that collapse binary oppositions of home / away, self / other and traveller / tourist. In this way his work can be read as a “writing back” towards exploitative and xenophobic discourses of nationalism and imperialism. His constant awareness of death / silence translates as an awareness of the limits of discursive representation, which in turn reveals his place in the world. Dessaix’s travel writing explores these limits spatially and depict an open, generous relation to the world. This relation is not maudlin or melancholy, but rather exultant.

While I have stressed the importance of the tropes of travel writing in the articulation of Dessaix’s textual persona, this study is not the final word on his work. Dessaix’s awareness of an essential absence at the centre of his

intellectual and artistic project quite possibly invites a psychoanalytic reading, particularly given that his first text, *A Mother's Disgrace*, recalls his adoption, subsequent search for his birth mother and, almost as an aside, the death of his father. Moreover, all of his texts contain meditations on desire and sexuality and some feature dream sequences that carry significant symbolic weight (*Corfu* 213–14; *NL* 80, 93 and 271–72; *Arabesques* 290–91). An analysis from a psychoanalytic perspective would necessarily investigate Dessaix's travels as acts of melancholy or mourning, and would thus invite a further investigation into the ethics of such loss as indeed much travel writing scholarship is now doing (see Gilroy; Eng and Kazanjian; and Middeke and Wald). Also, an exploration of the tension in Dessaix's work between movement and stillness might contextualise Dessaix's position within an Australian tradition. Given, as Richard White observes, that the Australian experience of place has traditionally oscillated between "movement and sessility" (7) and involved a constant comparison with "somewhere else" (4)—usually Europe—these themes may work against the "European-ness" of Dessaix's writings and place them squarely within an Australian postcolonial discourse. There are undoubtedly other ways to read Dessaix's texts, whose breadth, depth and meticulous fashioning both invites and holds up under analysis. His challenging of comfortable and inherited discourses and narrative structures provides scope for investigations from a variety of spheres. This study reads his travels as an articulation of his place in the world of late-capitalism. Ultimately, his gesture towards death is also a strike against it. Like the postcard that signals the end of *Night Letters*—with the simple message, "I'm on the way"

(272)—Dessaix's texts are epistles from the land of the dead marked with a writing that simultaneously affirms and defers the presence of the writer.

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