

Songs of the Village Idiot: Ethnicity, writing and identity

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Abstract

Self-definition through the act of writing fiction is complicated for a minority ethnic writer in Scotland by issues of language, voice and cultural identity. Employing narrative structures that deliberately express that complexity through multiple time-frames and voices can undercut still-powerful colonial mythologies, and present an alternative paradigm of the inner life of social minorities, by means of an allusive, transcendental or musical approach to the poetics and politics of fiction in a multi-ethnic society.

In some ways, whenever I write, I am posing questions of self-definition. I do not mean this simply in the narrow “identity politics” sense, but rather in the sense that literature represents an exploration of the spatial and temporal place of humans in the order of things, an aspect of which nexus might be called “society”.

Much of this dynamic of self-definition concerns the interaction between the interior and the exterior, a process of quest for underlying realities through a kind of antinomian pantheism. Some of this entails a reaching downwards to the substrate and outwards across wavering social barriers – artificial constructs which too often have been confused with petrified, geographical features – in order to explore and evince the inherent interconnectedness of culture. Faith, that need to construct a *raison d’être* for being and to connect with a greater whole, involves an attempted slippage of consciousness, an elision from the individual to the whole that at root is not dissimilar to certain processes which occur in literature, in the fictional architecture that is (re-) constructed by each reader, and in the partly-internalised compositional techniques that are the stock-in-trade of the writer. The transfiguration of literature into *logos*.

In a sense, both reader and writer begin from the outside, from something akin to Muriel Spark's sense of permanent, indefinable exile, what she calls "a constitutional exile", or a "restlessness" ¹. In this context, I wish to discuss three of my stories, in an attempt to evoke the processes that were/are at work within and between each, particularly with relation to the interaction between the literature produced and the society in which a writer lives. And of course, the works which a writer produces themselves form a miniscule, yet singular, part of any given society.

Taking the third party narrative voice (the voice against which James Kelman has so effectively inveighed) and using it in ways which beguile and subvert the structures that dominate the societal mind, which expose these as pliable, malleable, deceptive, and as just one constructed set of voices among many, just one scale of notes in an infinite musical universe, can surely be as powerful a tool as writing in any demotic. I know, because I've worked within both literary styles. It is probably no accident that one of the strengths of my writing is sometimes thought to reside in the manifold voices through which it "speaks" ². In itself, this represents an ongoing refusal to allow the generic group of white, middle-class English writers to monopolise referential thought. I am Wandering Jew rather than imperial adventurer. I appropriate, dissect, dissimulate and re-invent voices, some of which might be imagined as belonging exclusively to one particular social class or ethnic group. It is a syncretic, and at times ecstatic, process, which through thematic coefficients tends somehow to turn the constituent voices back to the individuated physical, and therefore potentially democratic, moot of song.

The three novellas all derive from the same era in my life, i.e. 2000-2002. This is important, not merely in the obvious chronological sense of the writer being at a certain age and in specific circumstances with regard to other individuals in his life and the broader society around him, but also in the sense in which fiction initiates what AL Kennedy calls "conversations in the mind" ³. It might be said that such interactions are based on previous conversations between a particular mind and an elliptical vision of society, and possibly also on the initially subconscious anticipation of "conversations"

yet to come.

These stories differ in some respects from the high-octane, hallucinogenic, urbanised fiction of, for example, my novel, *Psychoraag* (Black and White Publications, 2005) through which I attempted to delineate some aspects of possible “Asian Scots” thought-experience⁴. There is a slowing of the pace, they are on a different plane, both literally in their largely rural settings, and figuratively in their possible origin, part of an ongoing attempt to (re)-construct the world using varying, sometimes quantal, sensibilities. There was also the practical reason that I was limbering up to begin another novel, in consequence of which the pace and timbre of the stories is much more akin to the bourgeois English novel than to short, (especially urban) fiction.

Partly, they represent the playing-out of an obsession with fictional assonance and etymology. Firstly, this process occurs in the literal sense of following the possible names of mountains, rivers, songs and cities – some of the loci where societies are formed and exist, and through which ultimately literature comes to be written – many of which can be traced back to ancient, and sometimes surprising, sources. However, there is also a less linear dynamic that might be likened to weaving a carpet, using symbols and processes ingrained in the hands of the weaver, techniques which have become internalised and hence, to some extent, forgotten. The threads converge at points, sometimes anticipated, sometimes not, which are scattered through various layers of the carpet. As I weave, I learn. Every word I write is an act of re-discovery. And there lies the joy.

By definition, these processes are never exclusive; at the risk of reiterating the banal, it should be stated that all writers do it a different way, drawing on complex underlying agendas stemming from their various life experiences, belief systems, moral framework(s), the need to feed and clothe themselves, etc., all of which are inherently fluid. In Scotland, while there is a now-venerable tradition of writing stemming from white working-class experience, work by those from black and minority ethnic groups, partly because of the demographics of migration and socio-economic class, remains at an early stage. Therefore currently literary culture cannot be said truly to approximate to

Scottish society, any more so than does the currently all-white Scottish Parliament or most of the other power-structures of the state.

The Saelig Tales opens on a summer's evening in the walled back garden of a vicarage in southern England. The vicar is sitting at the table when another man, who appears to be a gamekeeper, enters through the garden gate and joins him. It transpires that this gamekeeper is John Rotherfield, the vicar's old friend (both men are in their seventies). This becomes the framing narrative for three textually-separate internal narratives.

The Saelig Tales is partly an exploration of the nature of storytelling and the elusiveness of objective "truth" as expressed through narration. Language is of this planet, it consists of a set of symbols which themselves cannot approximate to anything beyond human perception. Yet somehow, as the New York City-based Scottish writer/intellectual, Alastair Reid, elucidated recently ⁵ these symbols are able to signify regions beyond themselves, regions that stretch toward the cold, blue light of infinity. Perhaps, in the Beckettian sense, there is nothing else – yet surely that conclusion itself is symbolic. Much of my prose tends at times to strive for the poetic, not simply in the acoustic, sibilant sense, but in the figurative manner of song and storytelling being a form of two-way communal transfiguration. Behind every writer, there is a composer; within every reader there is a musician.

I spent part of my childhood living in a Lincolnshire village, so to some extent the geography of rural England is the geography of my mind. This aspect of Britain, the rural, the "old", the essentially pre-industrial, has in the last twenty years become subsumed into commuter-land for millions of (mainly white) bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, the sources of whose wealth lie in the multi-ethnic cities. In some senses, rural England, rich or poor, is perceived by many as a white enclave. Within this model, there has occurred the transformation from a reduced-but-active farming community to a mixture of impersonal agribusiness and bucolic pastiche. Sometimes, it is portrayed as a mythic never-never land of tolling bells and bicycling vicars, a pristine England which supposedly existed before emigration from the New Commonwealth changed forever the

demographic complexion of that country.

I love the countryside, not just in the sentimental manner of the jaded town-dwelling escapee, but because some of my happiest memories, moments of play, day-dream and story-making, lie within its frame. Those amber vistas that are no more. The mindset of childhood, a five mile-radius of infinite possibilities, an awareness of the ubiquity of magic in the diurnal, is very much akin to what is aimed at by the writer; a particularising of the general, an intense, almost musical close-up of the universe. When I use the image of childhood here I am thinking of the individual experience, an awareness of the immanence of magic, which in spite of everything remains the great strength of our consciousnesses. Those things in our individual consciousness which we consider to be somehow objective, rational, unaffected, actually derive from transmutational nodes of whose existence we are pretty much unaware. It is partly to elucidate such nodes that I write. Of course, I do not believe that such an analogy can be extrapolated to whole cultures or groups of peoples, as in discredited Western Romantic theories of cultures or nations having “childhoods” or “adolescences”.

And so, through the interleaving fiction of *The Saelig Tales*, I lay claim to rural England. It is mine, because I have written it. Performed out of love, this is an intensely political act, the significance of which I well recognise. I am no class-impressed South Asian scribbler arriving in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to dwell as a supercilious, yet eternally-craven, visitor. I am not the wandering subject with the colonised hindbrain. Indeed, in this aspect, I am not wandering at all. In the dream-arama sense, rural England – its landscape, its people – is mine.

The first internal narrative in *The Saelig Tales* documents the words of an Anglo-Saxon monk, Aelfrith of Wurth, who in the face of impending Viking invasion, decides to secrete, in the structure of the unusual church which he has built, a mass of parchment relating to his lifelong itinerant quest of compiling the songs and customs of his own land.

The very English Home Counties setting of the frame-story, that kind of anaesthetised, church bell ringing, de-bestialised version of D.H. Lawrence which has become so prevalent in so-called “popular” fiction as well as through the potted aspidistra crime genre of Agatha Christie and others (John Bull in a Barbour jacket), begins to be undermined and its complacency to be eroded by the seeding of complementary histories, of other possible truths. This sense of unease seeps into the summer vicarage garden as we learn of the vicar’s betrayal of his best friend, many years earlier.

Yet the undermining of the complacency of the construct occurs also through opening the doors to the mythical-esoteric and by the sudden unheralded changes in voice which maqam the piece. ⁶ The effect of all this is to begin to open up a fresh dialectic, where not only the roots of those qualities which are traditionally considered as being “English” are exposed and brought into question, but also the very nature and dynamic of logical-analytical narrative itself is deconstructed, perhaps not so much in the Barthian sense as through a mediaeval Sufi-like sensibility. This is pursued further, in the frame-story, through the interaction between John Rotherfield and Sufi mystics during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the closing days of the First World War, and the process by which this interleaves with his quest for aesthetic perfection as personified by his lover, Caroline.

The second narrative is an Elizabethan period story of the bewitching of an effete aristocrat by a miller’s daughter and the gradual transformation of this mutually-exploitative relationship to genuine human love, and it is told partly in Elizabethan-style verse.

So we have moved from a time-frame (the late 1960s) that is still, in 2005 CE, broadly recognisable as contemporary, to a tenth century one, then back again to the 1960s, but with allusions to the First World War and to the capture of John Rotherfield by Turkish forces, then to the late sixteenth century story, then back to Rotherfield’s physical and spiritual journey through eastern Anatolia as the Great War ends in chaos, with White Russians, Armenians, Young Turks, prisoners-of-war and others all forming part of the

narrative.

Then, for the third internal narrative, we're in a nineteenth century village on the south coast of England, with the story of a curate who, deep in a summer's night, encounters smugglers looking to secrete a strange cargo in his church.

As the frame narrative evolves, a story set during the protagonists' youth among the oxbows of the old river also unfolds, a story that involves the conflicting trajectories of their various loves. The vicar and Rotherfield loved the same woman, Caroline, and the story is one of betrayal and redemption (or the lack of it). A nexus is revealed between Caroline and the mythical woman who appears in various guises in each of the internal stories, tales which are being read, during the night in the vicarage garden, by Vicar Synnot to John Rotherfield from a book that he had purchased a short time before, in a house sale. The theme is that of spiritual progression towards a kind of enlightenment, or at least towards a state of greater awareness. Ideas of secretion, of hermeneusis, recur throughout the narrative. The story builds to a confrontation between the gamekeeper and the vicar, and to a final resolution of sorts.

This is not a linear, conventionally logical story. The concept is to allow the reader to conceive a series of underlying structures, quite different from, and yet complementary to, that of the literal narrative. The original meaning of the Anglo-Saxon word, *saelig* is "holy" and so the term *Saelig Sussex* would mean "The Holy Land of the South Saxons" and "The Saelig Tales" would be "The Holy Tales". To concatenate various and deeply English incarnations of Sussex – ecstatically-holy Saxons and unseen yet feared Norsemen; the dances of dissimulation between proto-capitalist and aristocratic Elizabethans; and the cloak-and-dagger night games of Victorian curates and smugglers – with Sufi ideas cloaked in those of John Ruskin and his magic architectural lamps, is itself unusual and might be seen as an example of the use of the tactic of paradox as a key to structural-symbolic meaning. At the mythopoeic level, it is a reinvention of England. But this is no England we have ever known. The story is a metageography where every thing holds signification; it is a place, a society, of multiple interlocking levels, played

out in a gently hallucinogenic folk-song of swaying steeple bells.

Long after the completion of *The Saelig Tales*, I learned that the seminal text *The Journey of the Soul: The Story of Hayy bin Yaqzan* by the eleventh century Andalusian writer, Ibn Tufayl (which may have been one of the sources of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) at one point was translated into English by an academic vicar from the Home Counties who, as it happens, had planted a Syrian fig-tree in his garden. In *The Saelig Tales*, Vicar Synnot too cultivates a fig-tree in the outer part of his manse garden. Fig-trees, and figs, are heavily symbolic in various cultures.⁷ Part of my project is to allow the reader to awaken to the perpetual and core nature of the influences of cultures which usually are considered Other in so-called Western thought, and the manner in which such profound concepts underpin our society and literature. This is a living process, it is history as life, as continuous formation of the present, and to engage in this Zeitgeist is to explore the cartography of knowing. To paraphrase from *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*: to engage in this journey, is to become *Alive, son of Awake!*⁸

The next story I wish to discuss is the novella, *The Spanish House*. This is set partly during the autumn and winter of 1974-75, and partly in the year 2020, between London and rural Spain. The protagonist is a woman from London, Marjory Morris, who meets a certain Joe Leon at a Marxist meeting. She comes unexpectedly into a moderate inheritance from a hitherto estranged uncle, and they decide to take some time out. She spots an advert to rent a barraca⁹ in southern Spain. She telephones the number given and finds herself being interrogated by a certain irascible Doctor Levi, who owns the property. The story is contemporaneous with the dictator Franco's last illness, and it is told entirely from Morris's perspective and in her voice.

Joe Leon is of Jewish origin, though he has eschewed religion for dialectical materialism. The couple share a set of values, a view of the world. From the moment they arrive at the deserted barraca, however, they begin to react very differently to their new environment (a fictional setting, close to the village of Darra on the northern slopes of the Sierra Morena at the point where the three provinces of Castilla La Mancha, Estremadura and

Andalusia meet). Marjory becomes fascinated by the local church and its priest, but the attraction, at least at first, is essentially a surface one. Joe, on the other hand, starts out the straight materialist, but by degrees falls into a state of intoxicated self-neglect. Their relationship steadily falls apart. The story is permeated by the *cante jondo* (deep song), one of the folk-song forms of southern Spain. Church and priest, it turns out, are far more than they seem, as is the elusive Dr Levi. Philosophically, the story is an exposition of the dialectic of the spirit in the pre-Marxist sense. Ideas of Sephardic and Arabic culture rise uncontrollably from the white, burned earth of the Inquisition-Conquistador trail, along with the unresolved axis of the Spanish Civil War (the second being partly an ultimate consequence of the first), until the narrative is driven to a screaming climax that is wordless in its intensity.

I see the Iberian peninsula (together with Sicily) as pivotal to the onset of the Modern era, as well as being a constant reminder of the interconnectedness of Judeo-Islamic-Christian culture and thought. In *The Spanish House*, this matrix manifests against the semiotic backdrop of an almost rabbinical dialectical materialism. The node in *The Spanish House* is the relationship between sex, politics and religion and the manner in which these three play out through the character of a woman at a particular time in history. The fugue lies in the link between love – Eros – and the aim of transforming the human condition. The poeticism of the piece becomes so intense that the fiction begins to bend; a process analogous to the effect on time-space of being funnelled into a cosmic black hole. The deliberate use of the folk-song idiom is a turning-on-its-head of the flawed and dangerous Romantic and post-Romantic concept of “a people”, a self-contained tribe, a hermetically-sealed “folk”, linked, bound and defined by the land on which they dwell. In a distorted mirror-image of the eschatologies of some traditional societies where the people are seen as being an integrated seam in the landscape, in the patriotic-nationalist rapture the land becomes defined by dominant groupings, their dominance being expressed through those ultimate farcical reductions of folk songs which we call national anthems.

The Spanish House plays out using folk songs, but here the agenda is the opposite,

namely to elicit the lie, the inherent impossibility, of such a concept. Towards the end of the story, forty-five years on, the protagonist herself begins to question the veracity of the narrative, to poke faults in its fabric, to question its rules of engagement and even the existence of the other characters in the novella, and to point out obviously hackneyed literary devices such as the moderate inheritance, the newspaper advertisement, the peculiar phone conversation, until ultimately, she is led to confront the tenuousness of her own existence, not simply as a mortal human being but also as a functional character in a fiction. This calls into question the range of possibilities of the novel and novella forms in the long stream of storytelling and music that comprises the human imagination and also evinces the polyvalent and sometimes contradictory relationships between song-forms like flamenco, reggae or rock and politics. Not so much angels on the head of a pin, as a balancing-act along the invisible strings connecting diametric Kabbalistical poles stretched almost to breaking point. *Crack the vessels!*

The third story I would like to discuss here is entitled, *The Aerodrome*, and concerns a sixty year-old Indian man who arrives at a disused World War Two air-base in Lincolnshire. He sets up canvas-and-easel and begins to sketch the aerodrome as he imagines it might have been before it was bombed, all those years before. We learn that his father had volunteered to join the Royal Air Force and was posted to this aerodrome in eastern England. During a lunchtime hangar concert, the siren sounded, and the entire orchestra, together with the audience of RAF and WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) personnel ran to the nearest shelter, and this shelter took a direct hit. Many years later, our protagonist has cycled slowly, on his father's black bicycle, all the way from northern India, carrying with him the only possessions his father left behind; a cigar-tin, his airman's boots and a small book. He notices a white line at the edge of the runway, follows it, and falls down a scree into what is clearly the remains of an old air-raid shelter. Unable to extricate himself, he sits down, takes out the book and begins to read. Just then, he notices, to his right, a small, wooden door ...

We slip between three consciousnesses, all narrated in the first person: that of the sixty year-old son; that of the Luftwaffe pilot who bombed the aerodrome; and that of the

upper-class English WAAF volunteer with whom the father was having an affair. The trajectory of the story flies towards the moment when the button is pressed, the fatal bomb released into the sky. Only once, at the very climax, do we hear the quiet voice of the artist's father, issuing from deep in the English earth, before we return at last to the son whose quest, after all, carried us into this story.

The physical descent into the earth enables us to go backwards in time, as though we were not readers, but archaeologists. And in the same way that archaeologists piece together shards of pots and chains of necklaces, we, along with the protagonist, are induced to reconstruct internally this symphonic story of three individuals whose lives and deaths dance together on the point of a steel gramophone stylus. It is no accident that the German pilot is a failed concert pianist.

It has always seemed to me odd, and inaccurate, that in films and books about World War Two there are almost never any Indian, African, Chinese or Arab characters, other than as "the natives", that ubiquitous and demeaning imperial denominator. Has there ever been a feature film about the Burma Front that portrays Indian troops in character roles? And if such a yawning gap exists, then why is it so? In the C19th, my family emigrated from Afghanistan to the British Raj of India as a consequence of the so-called 'Great Game' being played out between those two 'Mint Imperials', Russia and Britain. During WW2, my maternal grandfather fought as a Field Officer, a major and adjutant, on that forgotten Front (forgotten, even in its own time). Thirty years later, after my parents had migrated to Britain, as a boy I used to cycle past the many disused, deserted aerodromes of eastern England. I even learned to drive on one! In its obsolescence, the word "aerodrome" seems somehow sonorous and poetic, like the word "oracle". And let me tell you, they are eerie places, especially in the unbroken, blinding sunlight of mid-summer (I never ventured into one at night!). Nowadays, some of them are still used occasionally for Sunday go-kart racing and suchlike, but they once held within their perimeters the bulk of British air power and the precariously-balanced fate of that country at a critical time. So, in more ways than one, these places are part of my history too.

Appropriately, perhaps, I heard in April that finally *The Aerodrome*, which with its multiple viewpoints, inter-racial love story and triptych chronology, would be ideal for adaptation to film, was published, free-to-view, on the ghostly web by the Caithness-based ‘Scotia Review’ magazine.

Perhaps it will have been noticed that the one common thread running through all three stories, is the presence – the immanence – of music. Perhaps like the mathematician-composer, the late Iannis Xenakis, I strive to perceive the correlation between architecture and sound, or that between geography and song, or that between society and the dissonant frequencies emanating from a plucked string or a blown reed. Energy equals illumination, twice over. A strange, somewhat heretical concept, this, especially nowadays when we are caught between glossy millenarian faddism and die-hard, two-dimensional materialism. And what else but a bizarre hemi-hypothesis would lead me into the realms of an Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monastery, a stone shack on the Sierra Morena and the beige concrete of a deserted Lincolnshire aerodrome? At times, while writing (or should I say, composing?) *The Aerodrome*, I had the distinct sense of a presence over my shoulder. At the risk of sounding ludicrously Byronic, sometimes I do feel less like a creator and more like a conduit.

But perhaps this is simply an internalisation of compositional technique; the well-tuned athlete becoming unconscious of the shift and tug of each pace yet remaining supremely aware of the internal energy that causes every single movement. Yet I suspect that this is too linear an explanation. If, as in so many of the stories I write, time and space indeed flow in malleable parallels rather than sequentially, if ultimately the architectures of reality are far more complex than even contemporary mathematicians or astrophysicists can conceive of, then who is to say what is, and what is not, possible? Indeed, who is to say what is, and what is not? ¹⁰

But this is all tied up with my place in the community – or in society, if you prefer – since no matter how much we may dissemble, it is neither possible nor desirable for artists to be dissociated totally from the people around them, those by whom they were

raised and those who form their working/living milieu, as well as the people of the wider world. The blade is double-edged, we must grasp it with both hands – and be prepared to open up, to bleed. Furthermore, it is important to be wary of “ethnic” readings of all output produced by an artist who happens to belong to a group which is in the minority in a particular locus (but who, taking a worldwide frame, may very well belong to various majorities). One must avoid the ghetto-ising of talent, or the exoticising of that which was always intrinsic.

My approach, like the man with X-ray eyes, would be to try to see connections, whether historical, historiographical, literary or societal, or (more likely) a mixture of these, for such factors also exist in mutuality. In this regard, it is important to apply as many models of criticism as is possible to a piece of writing, and then some! Each work will throw up its own fractal of possible critical approaches, and an attentiveness to these, apart from giving the work its due measure of artistic respect, should also help to prevent the inappropriate genericising of work simply on the basis of the ethnic or religious origins of the author. As a corollary, let us then apply a cultural critique routinely to the work of white, middle-class, English writers. But it is important not to get hung-up on an identity politics trip; there are so many other kinds of interesting dynamics at work, whether socio-economic class, gender, historical, geographical, metaphorical, metaphysical, perceptual, ecological, poetical or whatever. And the point is, they are all dynamics; like cultures, like notions of aesthetic, they alter. Writing is about change, for the author, for their readers, for the characters, all, and this can subvert the entire concept of fixed, societal edifices.

My agendas as a writer, or my muse, my daemon - whichever of these you prefer – are rooted in the science of being as well as in “pure” art and in the local, the here-and-now, as well as in the geo-historical or historio-geographical politics of identity ¹¹. Perhaps the reason I seem to hover around boundaries and borders, marches of the intellect, why figuratively speaking I seem to spend much of my time hanging around street-corners, may be because I am striving for unity. You live, you die, and your loves fade away and are forgotten. Space is a vacuum, there can be no sound; the music of the spheres is an

impossibility. Well, whatever. But I like stories. They're good for the time between. If we knew everything, we wouldn't need stories. The existence of, and our need for, fiction, probably means that we will never know everything. Somehow, this is reassuring. The (non) act of writing is the (non) seeking out of connections, of hermeneutic relationships. It is really a kind of intuitive, personal-into-societal magic, with words as alchemical symbols. But what I'm really reaching for lies beyond any language, even those of music or mathematics. I am wary also of equating language with concepts such as "freedom", "place", "a people", etc. To use a poetic terminology in a semiotic way, my stories strive, not so much for rhyme, as for assonance, or for even looser linkages, perhaps for Baudelaire's *correspondences* between superstructure and substructures. Much of my fiction is not so much allegorical, as employing symbols which operate on literal and allusive levels. In Sanskrit poetics, this process arouses in the reader that essence, *rasa*, which is central to attaining a state of knowledge. The reader becomes a *rasik*, a lover. In societal terms, such processes can engender the exploration by the reader of the area of tolerance and concepts of "The Other", not in the liberal materialist sense, but on the syntagmatic, metaphysical plane which has been so effectively delineated by, for example, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić¹². I hear the reader as a musician, not a musician in the Western classical tradition, but a jazz musician who "breaks and enters" the text at will and who, through the act of reading, redefines old modalities¹³. I refuse to be a set designer for what Bernal calls "staged histories"¹⁴. Like Isidore of Seville, I am searching for the *prema-rasa*, that tone evocative of love, which is the greatest of all the *rasas*.

Sufi writers considered that form, shape and analogy had the power to settle within the reader or hearer and transform the understanding; Rumi's "blood into milk" concept. The word "religion" means "that which re-connects". An innate sense of musicality means that the reader would be aware (even if subconsciously) of such micro- and macro-structures within the text as chiasmus and thematic parallelism. To quote from Weightman, "This produces a higher order of significance from which it is often possible to see not so much what a text means but what it is seeking to do"¹⁵.

None of the three stories discussed is overtly political, in the narrow, colloquial sense of

the word; none of them concerns purely contemporary events or forces. Yet among other things, on reading these stories, we are engaged in the minutiae of socio-political changes; in Renaissance and Reformation, in both World Wars of the twentieth century, in the ending of old empires, in various aspects of intra-colonial relationships, in the immensely fertile yet currently tragically unfashionable nexus of the Islamic-Jewish interaction, in the relationships between human beings and the land, in the linkages between past (whether recent or distant) and present, and in the interplay between materialism and spirituality. These interactions emerge from the perpetual discourses of our mind. It is how we communicate with one another, with the past and with the multiple others that comprise our selves. To wander through the streets of literature, facing both ways, towards the past and the future, to move, as Arendt says, both dialectically, frenetically, analytically and also undialectically like the proverbial village idiot ¹⁶, allowing random images, concepts and musics to filter into one's consciousness, is to effect a kind of linguistic transference which can result in powerful, multi-dimensional creative writing.

Perhaps because I spent a long time, in my young adult life, either failing to nurture any pre-existing literary talents I might have had, or else being forced by the rigours of petit-bourgeois economic and other expectations to not even be aware of these (Adam Smith showed that economic life cannot be separated from social life – how true!), and also because the entry of my work into publication (and thence, into a kind of acceptance, or at least recognition) has invariably been a hard-fought and, at least in the early stages, a solitary process of a thousand vicarious Eid-al-Adhas ¹⁷, I constantly feel as though my lease on this talent, this ability to string words together so that their whole becomes greater than their sum, is a shorthold one, and that I am in perpetual danger either of it slipping away or of it being proven to have been illusory or slight in the first place. This seems to be a fairly common existential condition among writers and probably other artists as well, and perhaps it is the need which drives creativity. Perhaps, also, it results partly from the unspoken requirement placed upon artists by this liberal materialist society to hold together the sum of the symbolic meaning of all of its forms.

The cartelisation of global publishing means that in an essential sense, we are in danger of reverting to the monopoly situation which pertained in Europe before the invention of the printing press ¹⁸. I read an article in which the chief executive of a major publishing company ¹⁹ predicted that in a few years' time, global publishing will be owned by three companies and he saw this concentration of power as a good thing as it would help redress the balance with retail bookselling cartels. This may well be the case, but surely the luminary was missing the elephant in the sitting-room. Why must the alpha and omega of the book world consist of one giant cartel cutting deals (known as 'equity joint ventures') with another? Fiction and news markets are coming to resemble each other. As in the reporting of events from successive conflicts from the Falklands War onwards (Iraq being only the latest of these 'fleurs du mal'), only certain narratives become permissible, comprehensible even, while the rest fall beyond the pale, taboo outside of the engendered tribal consciousness. In the C21st, the only permissiveness left is the permission to conform. I think, for example, of all those exotic contemporary novels with thickly Orientalist covers; a sari-clad, henna-daubed Indian woman pirouetting on a pyramid of spices; while all too often, the texts within simply narrate the petal-strewn bridle-paths of what a journalist-friend of mine called, 'safe multiculturalism', fashionable tracts where normative absolutes are almost never thrown into question. This is just a tiny part of an internalised censorship far more insidious and ubiquitous than overt political censorship ²⁰. Full-spectrum dominance means that no longer can the Word roam naked through the world, but must don the various outfits of the emperor's new wardrobe.

The internet, though still the major expressive medium of dissent, increasingly is being pumped with disinformation, and is in danger of becoming a glorified echo-chamber, where we talk largely with different versions of ourselves; the world-wide web, as collective psychotherapist ²¹. And anyway, it's only a matter of time before the latitudes and longitudes of cyberspace, like those of the polar regions and the Amazon Basin before them, are bought, sold and delivered. Make no mistake, the global economic system offers at best merely the freedom to sing the company song, to write the company's books, to wear the company's clothes, to shoot the company's gun ²². And

literature becomes a numinous, egregious courtier in what is coming almost to resemble a vertiginous Jungian priest-kingdom. These oligopolies are politically 'liberal' only in so far as it benefits their own interests. This process is anti-democratic, anti-competitive, anti-entrepreneurial and anti-innovative and it should be illegal, as it's one of the main reasons why much of the world is in the parlous state it is in. Neoliberalism results in ever-greater disparities between rich and poor and to societal ossification, as has been demonstrated recently in the UK (and, ironically also in the USA) when one compares socio-economic mobility in recent years with that, operative twenty or thirty years ago ²³.

All this has a direct impact on the arts, on books, on the stories we tell. To quote Robert McChesney, "After World War II, the Allies restricted media concentration in occupied Germany and Japan because they noted that such concentration promoted anti-democratic, even fascist, political cultures" ²⁴. The much-lauded 'creative classes' had better wake up and smell the sulphur. And of course, should one stray from the petal-strewn path assigned to one then there is always the danger that one might end up being rendered unto the leathery bosom of a Lear jet to Hell. All of a sudden, it is as though the Enlightenment had never happened and we're back in the psychotic, nightmarish world of Guelf, Ghibelline and Dante Alighieri, where Beatrice is a gleaming witch burned at the stake. In Mediaeval times, too, there were people, like the Trobairitz, who scribbled in the margins: *Make love not war!*, but as documented in my novella (and now also drama, which played on the Glasgow stage last month), *The White Cliffs*, the Trobairitz and their works were almost totally obliterated from the face of history. Those of us who remain historically excluded tend to cast up from our nets the many voices of exile, the poetry of the lost and bewildered, the songs of the village idiot.

The windmill came from Asia; turning its giant arms has never been easy. Perhaps it is character-building or talent-honing. Perhaps, but it is also artistically and physically exhausting. An element of my relationship with society is grounded in this sense of perpetual fatigue, of trying to turn the unturnable. If I go on it will be because I am good at nothing else and because I will have earned enough through selling my labour by other means to 'rent' a few minutes, here and there. But this piecework is not a recipe for great,

or even good, art. To abuse a George Mackay Brown analogy, if I were a carpenter I would have carved an aircraft-hangar full of wondrous tables, or if I were a dead rock musician, then my back-catalogue would fill an unpressed quadruple (presumably budget) album. But who would sup at the table, who would listen to the music? Those, perhaps, who can subvert, if only in their own heads, the ASDA Top Twenty, those readers perhaps, who refusing to be patronised, refusing to just "sit back, shut up and shop" ²⁵, prefer to dream their books into being, those who know how the red, soul, string is strung. *Ziryab singing in the dead of night...* ²⁶.

At the end of politics, at the end of the subway line, lies language. And so, it makes political sense, countering oppression, whether consciously or unconsciously, to begin with literature. The obliteration and denial of any referential or causative links between "European" cultures and thought (which includes European diasporic American, Australian, etc.) and those of the rest of the world was, and remains, a deeply racist, inherently colonial act based on wholly inaccurate assumptions. Yet these assumptions have led to a catalogue of denial and arrogance and to an overt and subliminal racism, a wilful ignorance, perpetuated through the media and much popular culture that essentially precludes intelligent discourse and which serves to provide cultural-societal justification for continuing Western economic and political exploitation and colonialism. To acknowledge that the works of "other" cultures have defined or formed those of one's own is to accept that the one, big carpet of human civilisation has had many threads, and this carries definite and potentially explosive political connotations both for those who deify/ demonise the so-called "West" and for those who fossilise/ essentialise the so-called "East". Such things can lead ultimately to "clashes" and wars justified by false literary edifices in which each punctuation mark is a closed bolt. Since I am a global village idiot, I refuse to accept such idols.

To explore the nature of fiction is to change it. The famous (or it ought to be) jar from the seventh century CE ²⁷ on which Europa is depicted in Oriental costume is far more dangerous to this poisonous hegemony than the thousand bearded "fundamentalists", those 'Dogs of God' ²⁸ with failed imaginations who owe their existence, their filled

bellies, their political legitimacy and even to some extent their ideas, to the machinations of the corporate military-industrial West. What is not well-known is that in this old jar is a windmill djinn. To play in storm and stress (especially perhaps in Scotland, where in some senses a colonial mythology began with the reification of certain languages and peoples through folksong and storytelling) and to become a Walter Benjamite artisan-trader of the story, refusing to abbreviate or acquiesce in the dominance of certain mythologies, can be a dangerous pursuit. And of course, I write (and dream, and sing) in English, which derives, in part, from Anglo-Saxon. So the old monks of Saelig Sussex are dancing around in my head and on my tongue through the cadences of the words that I speak, and upon the tips of my fingers, the phrases that I write. In a way, through exploring and creating dialogues between the familiar and the exotic, in playing idiotically with concepts hitherto hallowed and internalised in society beyond the point of denial, I am trying to turn back the bolts, to swing open the doors. To turn the windmill, and free the djinn!

1. Abdel-Moneim Aly, 'The Theme of Exile in The African Short Stories of Muriel Spark', *Scottish Studies Review*, (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Autumn 2001), pp. 94–104.
2. Bryant, S., 'A Kaleidoscope of Stories', in Joy Hendry (ed.) *Chapman 99*, Chapman, 2001.
3. A L Kennedy, *PEN Lecture*, Edinburgh International Book Festival, 2001.
4. However, at this juncture I feel it is important to point out that in my book, *The Burning Mirror*, through a cycle of stories set in contemporary Argyllshire and the Welsh Marches in the 1930s, I have explored themes relating to Goidelic and Brythonic Celtic mythology and folklore and that in my recently-dramatised novella, *The White Cliffs*, the underlying theme connects Mediaeval Catharism in Southern France, Tom Paine and his Revolutionary Headstrong Club of the late C18th and a strange winter love affair set in Cold War Eastbourne in 1966. Furthermore, a play for BBC Radio Four, *The Dark Island* was set in a fictitious Outer Hebridean island and utilising Urdu and Gaelic song-forms, juxtaposed the persisting contemporary scandal of feudalism and rural bonded labour in Pakistan with maritime concepts of liminality and metaphysical themes of guilt. Through essentially comedic and sometimes farcical stage dramas - rollicking entertainments aimed at all ages – I have explored the dramatic possibilities of Saami (that is, northern Scandinavian) culture in relation to live political issues such as deforestation, the exploitation of natural resources and the variform configurations of capitalism and monotheism with the pantheistic shamanism and linguistic diversity of indigenous trans-Arctic societies. I sail with a broad compass and paint from a deep palette, yet my work is anchored always by the gravity and magnetism, the continuous referential of place and humanity, of physicality.
5. Alastair Reid, *Edinburgh Lecture* (unpublished, spring 2003): Playfair Library, Edinburgh; during this lecture, which the author attended, Reid cited in support of his argument, the views of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges with whom he had personally been acquainted.

6. The Arabic word, 'maqam' means 'place' or 'situation'. In the context of music it refers to the specific Arabic tone scales, of which there is an enormous variety due to the vast range of different microtones. It can also refer to a special kind of musical suite, consisting of improvisations based on certain standard rules of performance and aesthetics.
7. In Christian symbolism, the fig-tree, which bears fruit with no visible blossom and before even leaves appear on its branches, has represented at various times a knowledge of worldly good works, impulsiveness, a lack of intelligence, a type of church or of each person's heart, a sign of the Lord's Second Coming, and the Virgin Birth. In symbolic terms, it has been contrasted with olive and vine trees.
8. Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Tufayl, *The Journey of the Soul: The Story of Hai bin Yaqzan*, Dr. Riad Kocache (transl.) (London: The Octagon Press Ltd., 1982).
9. The Spanish word, 'barraca' means 'a very basic hut or cabin, a shanty or hovel'.
10. Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow noted: "Our knowledge of the way things work, in society or in nature, comes trailing clouds of vagueness. Vast ills have followed a belief in certainty". G.K. Chesterton wrote: "Life is not an illogicality, yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is:... its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait." (secondary quote from *Davidic Chiasmus and Parallelisms - What's New*, p. 3, at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3500/index21.html>).
11. Amin Malouf, *On Identity*, Barbara Bray (trans.) (London: The Harvill Press, 2000).
12. Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, *Sarajevo Essays: Politics, Ideology and Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
13. Dennis Cooley, *Bloody Jack* from Douglas Barbour, 'Introduction' (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002) pp. vii-xiii.
14. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-asiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985* (London: Vintage, 1991).
15. Simon Weightman, 'Symbolism and Symmetry: Shaykh Manjhan's Madhumalati Revisited', in Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (eds.) *The Heritage of Sufism, Vol. III*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), pp. 464-492.
16. Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction', Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (USA: Random

House, Inc., 1985), pp. 1–51.

17. Eid al-Adha: the annual Muslim festival celebrating the offer of sacrifice by Abraham of his son.

18. A few trans-national corporations now own the vast majority of global publishing and like God, they are seldom to be named, not even for talismanic purposes. Beneath these are a handful of second-tier companies, the archangels of our time.

19. Alison Bone, 'Three Publishing Giants Predicted to Rule in 10 Years', *The Book Standard*, March 15, 2005. However, a series of articles, written by Geraldine Fabrikant in the New York Times (March 16th, 17th and 18th 2005) subsequently opined that the publishing world was on the brink of a modulated mitosis, since in specific areas the big cartels were not performing well as they might. We shall see, we shall see ...

20. Robert McChesney, 'The New Global Media', *The Nation*, Nov., 1999 issue: " "As George Orwell noted in his unpublished introduction to *Animal Farm*, censorship in free societies is infinitely more sophisticated and thorough than in dictatorships, because "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban"."

21. The creation and innovation of the world-wide web was driven largely by pornographers and so perhaps in this context, the big corporations' idea of the news as wet dream is entirely appropriate.

22. Listen again to John Lennon's song, 'Working Class Hero' (from *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, 1970), a song which I have never yet heard being played on any radio station in the UK.

23. Jonathan Brown, 'Britons Struggle More Than Others to Get Ahead', *The Independent*, Monday 25th April, 2005. This article refers to a study undertaken recently by the London School of Economics.

24. Robert McChesney, 'The Global Media Giants', *FAIR*, Nov/Dec 1997, <http://www.fair.org>.

25. Robert W. McChesney, 'Global media, Neoliberalism and Imperialism', *Monthly Review*, Vol. 52, Number 10 (March 2001).

26. Ziryab (real name Abu al-Hasan Ali Ibn Nafi) was a master musician, singer and fashion icon, an exile from Baghdad, who moved to Cordoba, where he set up a music

school and is credited with adding a fifth string to the 'ud (lute) which was the precursor of the guitar. His nickname means, 'Blackbird'.

27. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-asiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985* (London: Vintage, 1991).

28. Dogs of God: 'Domini canes', Latin for 'God's dogs', was a pejorative term for the Dominican Order, which participated heavily in the murderous plethora of Inquisitions that terrorised Europe for over half a millennium.