

Cyberwriting and the Borders of Identity

“What’s in a Name” in Kroetsch’s
The Puppeteer and Mistry’s
Such a Long Journey?

Borders are fast disappearing in the new Europe, along the information highway, and in the mega-channel universe. Hong Kong’s Star Satellite, carrying five television channels to fifty-three countries, has already changed the face of Asia. In India, a new generation openly celebrates the country’s “Californication,” while their elders debate “The Challenge of the Open Skies” (Joseph) to a state broadcast monopoly. Given such a fundamental shift in the mode of information, we might ask whether the nation state, or local culture, or even the concept of a substantial self can survive the communications revolution?

Five hundred years ago, Gutenberg threatened speech communities in Europe with a similar loss of identity. With the benefit of hindsight, we can understand how the book redefined the human subject as being self-bounded and self-contained, much like the bound volume which came to occupy a reader’s inmost consciousness. “I think; therefore I am,” the philosopher established as the surest ground of metaphysics; but what made this idea thinkable was the very subjectivity engendered by the book. The new religion of the Book also brought about a revolution in church and state, undermining age-old hierarchies. Henceforth, the privileging of a sovereign consciousness, which demanded increasingly liberal values, would change all the old forms of social and state organization.

Now, in the midst of another communications revolution, the modern philosopher announces “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing.” Though Jacques Derrida has had little to say about electronic writing per se,

several comments suggest that he would locate us between the epoch of the book and that of the electronic mark. In *Of Grammatology* he argues that the artificial intelligence of the “cybernetic program” has tended “to oust all metaphysical concepts—including the concepts of soul, of life, of value, of choice, of memory—which until recently served to separate the machine from man” (9). In consequence, the very “constitution of subjectivity” (113) in technological societies has been altered, as Mark Poster claims in his study of “Derrida and Electronic Writing,” by the immateriality of new forms of script: “The writer encounters his or her words in a form that is evanescent, [as] instantly transformable” as mental images, and so “the human being recognizes itself in the uncanny immateriality of the machine” (111-12).

This uncanny “mentality” of the machine underwrites the paradigm shift in recent theories of the humanities which have made language or culture, not nature, the final ground of interpretation. Forty years ago, Roland Barthes foresaw that, because “man in a bourgeois society is at every turn plunged into a false Nature” (156), the mythologist must decode the myth of a culture, to expose it as an alibi. Today, it remains the critic’s task to expose the stubborn alibi that linguistic determinations and other forms of social construction are really facts of nature; questions of race and gender have also brought to light transcultural systems of domination which at every turn oppress women and non-Europeans. Again, it is Derrida who, as Gayatri Spivak says, “has most overtly investigated the possibilities of ‘the name of woman’ as a corollary to the project of charging ‘the ends of man.’ In *Of Grammatology* he relates the privileging of the sovereign subject not only with phonocentrism (primacy of voice-consciousness) and logocentrism (primacy of the word as law), but also with phallogentrism (primacy of the phallus as arbiter of [legal] identity)” (Spivak 144).

This large-scale critique of the metaphysics of identity no longer privileges the subject as a sovereign consciousness, nor gender and race as facts of nature. Even the nature of our sensory perceptions—our entire positivist epistemology—is called into question by computer-generated virtual realities. For the first time, those who make it down the on-ramp onto the information highway sense how their nerve-endings no longer stop with their fingertips, but reach around the globe. And so the “uncanny immateriality” of the machine raises new questions about the space of our communities and even the integrity of our bodies. Where should we re-draw the borders of an identity once based on the book?

A longtime spokesman for the critical avant-garde, Robert Kroetsch has been gradually reworking French anti-humanist assumptions into a recognizably Canadian context. In an essay entitled “No Name is My Name,” he argues that a “willed namelessness” has always been the cultural norm in Canadian writing, a norm that he values since it holds out at least a hope of “plural identities” (*Lovely* 51-2)—an obvious social good in a society made up of so many races, languages, and ethnic groups. But Kroetsch also confesses his scepticism about the “very notion of self” (47), such scepticism being perhaps “the most significant consequence of structuralism: its rejection of the notion of the ‘subject’” (Culler 28).

By contrast, a writer of colour from a more traditional society, such as Rohinton Mistry, seems to take the old humanist assumptions as a given. *Such a Long Journey*, the first novel by an Indian immigrant to win the Governor General’s Award for Fiction (1991), sees the threat of ethnocentrism to personal identity, but takes refuge in a kind of universalism tied to English itself as the guarantor of identity. When a Parsi character bemoans the loss of his familiar world in the changed street names of Bombay, Mistry’s protagonist asks, “What’s in a name?” To which his friend Dinshawji replies:

No, Gustad. . . . You are wrong. Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it’s on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? (Mistry 74)

What Dinshawji laments in the loss of the old names is the loss of the old logocentric security, that metaphysical reassurance via language “of the meaning of being in general as presence” (Derrida 12). Though Dinshawji resists the loss of his social identity and even his personal history to the politics of “Maharashtra for Maharashtrians” (73), the erasure of the old names also eradicates his world, makes absent what should be “naturally” present. Ultimately, he experiences the rewriting of the map of his neighbourhood as an interruption in his self-presence. A life by any other name would not be the same life. But in terms of the old metaphysics of identity, his ultimate appeal is to the fixity of print.

Conversely, the characters in Kroetsch’s latest novel, *The Puppeteer* (1992),

are regularly “exchanged for each other, and again” (126); lovers engage in “Finding other names” (127); and the words of two narrators—one speaking and the other typing—blend on the page as their personal identities begin to merge. *The Puppeteer* marks something of a narratological departure, even for someone as experimental as Kroetsch. It should come as no surprise that this is his first novel composed on the computer. It seems to me, the effect of the new technology on the writer’s process is decisive: “Writing at the border of subject and object” (Poster 111), the old Cartesian subject no longer stands “outside the world of objects in a position that enables certain knowledge of an opposing world of objects” (99). Instead, the experience of “computer writing resembles a borderline event, one where the two sides of the line lose their solidity and stability” (111).

The epochal difference between the typographic and the electronic mark may finally serve to determine “What’s in a name?” for both Mistry and Kroetsch. But we would first need to locate the differences in writing between an electronic society (Canada in the 1990s) and a traditional one (India in the 1970s). What are the consequences in either case for the character of the book? Can Mistry, who has lived in Canada since 1975, possibly resist the effects of his new milieu? Or can the country he recalls in his writing ever escape the logic of technology?

In Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western logocentrism, the breakdown of the classical logic of identity occurs in the shift from an epistemology based on speech and presence to one based on new forms of writing, belatedly exposing an absence at the heart of writing in general. But technological change only exposes what Derrida claims was repressed in the whole history of writing by a metaphysics of presence—that language itself is “always already a writing” (106). For alphabetic script reveals what was always intrinsic to the system of language, even as its phonetic character helped to maintain our illusion that what we read was “united to the voice and to breath,” and so was “not grammatological but pneumatological” (17).

A computer monitor more obviously takes our breath away, dispersing the mind and its mental images in a mirror outside itself, even as it “depersonalizes the text, removes all traces of individuality from writing, de-individualizes the graphic mark” (Poster 113). Yet alphabetic writing always had the same hidden power to open “a fissure between the author and the idea” (Poster 125), to disperse the identity of a speaking subject still conceived in the instant of “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak” (Derrida 7). The

“electronic mark” only “radicalizes the anti-logocentric tendencies that deconstruction argues are inherent in all writing” (Poster 123), for it “puts into question the qualities of subjectivity . . . [vestigially] associated with writing and more generally with rationality” (112-13).

“The Battle of Proper Names” in *Of Grammatology* concludes that what’s in a name is more likely the whole coercive network of relations bounding the subject. Only the phonocentric illusion of hearing/understanding oneself speak hides this coercion and helps to naturalize the whole system of differences. But what the “concealment of writing and the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name” can no longer hide is “the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying. . . In effect, it reveals the first nomination which was already an expropriation” (*Grammatology* 112). To name is to mark off territory, to set social bounds or limits, to forcibly erect boundaries which seem natural, which are “perceived by the social and moral consciousness as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity.”

Mistry’s protagonist in *Such a Long Journey*, expressing an awareness that “the reassuring seal of self-identity” is a social and political fiction, says, “Why worry about it? I say, if it keeps the Marathas happy, give them a few roads to rename” (73). But the novel seems to foreclose on such political questions when Gustad’s friend protests the violence done to his own identity, meanwhile ignoring the violence done by the British name-giver to Maratha identity, much less the “originary violence” of naming itself.

Resisting loss at every turn, the narrative structure of *Such a Long Journey* thus enacts what Derrida saw in Lévi-Strauss as “a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins” (*Writing* 292), which sends Gustad Noble on his own long journey toward a recuperation of lost beginnings. The “original” loss in Gustad’s life is the innocence of a happy childhood, when the Noble family could still afford a vacation with the luxury of mosquito nettings at a hill station: he likes to recall “That picture of my mother—locked away for ever in my mind: my mother through the white, diaphanous mosquito net, saying goodnight-Godblessyou, smiling, soft and evanescent, floating before my sleepy eyes, floating for ever with her eyes so gentle and kind” (242). Even a toy seen in the Chor Bazaar reminds Gustad of the thieving uncle who gambled away his father’s bookstore: “And what had become of the Meccano set? Lost with everything else, no doubt, during the bankruptcy. The word had the sound of a deadly virus, the way it had ravaged

the family" (101). Even the feel of a fountain pen between his fingers evokes a powerful nostalgia for the world of childhood: "This was the bloody problem with modern education. In the name of progress they discarded seemingly unimportant things, without knowing that what they were chucking out the window of modernity was tradition. And if tradition was lost, then the loss of respect for those who respected and loved tradition always followed" (61).

His son Sohrab's lack of respect for paternal authority threatens Gustad's traditional values with their inner contradiction: "He will have to come to me. When he learns respect. Till then, he is not my son. My son is dead" (52). Just as hard on his friends, Gustad will not forgive Major Jimmy Bilimoria for packing up and leaving their apartment building without a trace: "Without saying a word to us. That's friendship. Worthless and meaningless" (49). The xenophobic force of tradition even shows up in a symbol of seeming inclusiveness, a sort of ecumenical wall separating the apartment compound from the street. A refuge from the Hindu majority, the concrete wall is a border marked by the odour of a counter-territoriality. Each day at dawn, Gustad suffers both the stench of urine and the sting of mosquitoes as he performs his *kusti* prayers, sheltered all the while from the stares of passersby. He hires a pavement artist to draw pictures of the gods and goddesses and saints and mosques of all the world's religions. But the wall is neither as holy nor as ecumenical as it first appears, since its saintly face masks a more divisive purpose: to preserve the Parsi in his self-sameness and hierarchical privilege, and to protect him from the threat of difference, of Otherness itself.

Gustad also erects other walls to hedge him in from the world. To his wife's dismay, he will not take down the blackout paper tacked to the windows nine years earlier, during a devastating war with China when even Nehru broke under the treachery of his Chinese brother Chou En-lai. Gustad has learned too well the truth of brotherhood, as revealed in the biblical story about "Cain and Abel. . . Fairy tales, I used to think. But from the distance of years, how true. My own father's case. His drunken, gambling brother who destroyed him as surely as crushing his skull. And Jimmy, another kind of Cain. Killed trust, love, respect, everything" (178). All that saves Gustad from the fate of Abel is a few pieces of rescued "furniture from his childhood gathered comfortingly about him. The pieces stood like parentheses around his entire life, the sentinels of his sanity" (6).

Neither is he alone in this novel in clinging to remnants of a happier past. Miss Kutpitia, a neighbour in Khodadad Building, appears to be an Indian

Miss Havisham, a Dickensian woman who has stopped the clock in her apartment at a point thirty-five years ago when her motherless nephew—her sole reason for living—was killed in an auto crash. Tenants who come to use her telephone are kept at bay in a little vestibule, and are never permitted to see beyond the closed door into the inner apartment where, "Like *tohruns* and garlands of gloom, the cobwebs had spread their clinging arms and embraced the relics of Miss Kutpitia's grief-stricken past" (284).

Ultimately, so many images of loss remind us of the condition of the emigré author for whom Gustad's sentiments are quite natural: "How much of all this does Sohrab remember, he wondered. Very little, I think. For now. But one day he will remember every bit. As I do, about my father. Always begins after the loss is complete, the remembering" (210). The childhood home is not so easily foregone, it would seem; its loss looms large within and without the text, as does the nostalgic yearning to reconstitute that absence in language, in a logocentric guarantee of presence. No wonder, then, that the names must not change, lest it should turn out, as Dinshawji says, that he was "living the wrong life, with all the wrong names" (74).

And yet, as Laurie Coutino tells Gustad in shame and terrible anguish, "Mr Dinshawji has ruined my own name for me" (176). For the incorrigible flirt and joker, playing on the Parsi word for the male member, has told her that he wants her "to meet his *lorri*. . . 'You can play with my little *lorri*,' he said, 'such fun two of you will have together.'" In his thoughtless way, Dinshawji has named her his thing, has committed precisely the kind of linguistic violence that Derrida describes in "the first nomination which was already an expropriation" (112). For Dinshawji has literally made the woman's proper name improper, has turned "Laurie" into the metaphorical measure of his own narcissism by appropriating her identity to that of his "*lorri*."

A third story of naming is just as violent, and ultimately quite as disruptive of self-presence. The local physician, Dr Paymaster, had some fifty years ago purchased the closed-down dispensary of Dr R. C. Lord, MBBS, MD Estd 1892. Revered for a sense of humour which could make his patients laugh their sickness away, Dr Paymaster one day committed the terrible blunder of removing the old doctor's sign and putting up his own shingle. "The very next day, the dispensary was in turmoil. Patients were marching in and marching out, demanding to know who this Dr Paymaster was" (113). The only way the new doctor could recover his practice was to hang up the old sign with the former doctor's name on it, "and the confusion

vanished overnight. And overnight, Dr Paymaster sorrowfully realized something they never taught in medical college: like any consumer product, a doctor's name was infinitely more important than his skills." But he has had to give up his proper name to practice those skills, has had to accept being renamed within the generalized writing of a community which resists real change. And so the loss of his proper name turns out to be no change at all; it is simply another means of conserving the past.

Even in its narrative form, there could be a parallel between the novel and what Mistry calls "a country stuck in the nineteenth century" (155). Technically, there are very few risks, and very few discoveries, in the use of a limited third-person narrator to present differing points of view at the level of alternating chapters, or scenes, or even paragraphs. Narrative omniscience, like the fixity of print in a sign that cannot be changed, becomes a larger mark of continuity with the past, of the reassuring sense of an author-God.

Kroetsch's *The Puppeteer*, on the other hand, demands to be read in the new social context of "the borderline event" of electronic writing. The borderline between the writing and reading subject immediately begins to blur as the apparent narrator, Jack Deemer, reads the typescript of its protagonist-author Maggie Wilder in the very process of its production. In Deemer's words, "Maggie Wilder is writing this. Reading over her left shoulder, I become a loving supporter, the champion of her need to get the story of her wedding dress down on paper. Now and then I say a few words, joining myself into her train of thought. Sometimes, perhaps just to tease me, she scrambles a few of my words in amongst her own" (17).

The "borderline" identity of the narrator is further complicated by questions arising out of various forms of theatrical performance in the narrative. At the heart of the story is a puppet show put on by Dorf, the narrator of a previous Kroetsch novel, *Alibi*, who is now hiding out in Maggie's attic from his old boss Jack Deemer. Maggie, in the early stages of a separation from her husband, has walled herself in from the world quite as much as Mistry's Gustad Noble with his blackout paper on all the windows, much less Billy Dorf disguised as a monk and hiding in her attic, calling himself Papa B. Yet Dorf, alias Papa B, who has also spent three years in hiding in a Greek monastery, tries to reach Maggie through "Karaghiosi, the most popular of all the Greek shadow puppets" (115). Within the frame of a simple set, screened by a white bedsheet, the puppet comes knocking

with his long, hinged right arm. "Are you locked in there, Maggie Wilder? Do you want out?"

"I'm not at home to you," a voice answered. "Leave me alone."

There was no figure to be seen inside the house, only a voice to be heard. Papa B was speaking both voices, but neither was his. The voice of the second and invisible speaker, Maggie recognized, was an imitation of her own. (116)

Wishing to unmask the pretender, Maggie wilfully violates the theatrical frame by speaking in her own person to the puppet, the stage persona of Papa B: "Karaghiosi, you are always pretending to be someone you aren't. I know that much about you. You're pretending to be Papa B" (117). Papa B, who is pretending to be Karaghiosi, is accused of pretending to be Papa B, of playing himself. Yet he is also pretending to be Maggie, using her voice to ask her to give up her own identity, to play their mutual friend Inez: "Maggie was shocked and yet excited too, by the name she was given. She had become part of the play. She liked that" (117). And so the audience of one surrenders her proper name to the play of signification, crossing the line into the space of performance. Like the users of electronic message services, she appears to embrace the circumstance that "Identity is fictionalized in the structure of the communication" (Poster 117).

Later, however, when Maggie is seated once again at her desk, another puppet dressed up as a monkish Papa B addresses her in her own person: "Tell [Karaghiosi] that you don't want to be alone" (121). The breaking of the frame from the other side of the stage now strangely unsettles Maggie: "She could not, that second night, bear the directness of the puppets' approach. One of the puppets was asking her simply to play herself, and Maggie found the assignment impossible" (122). The borders of identity begin to blur as well for Papa B whom Maggie has forced to play himself: "The voice of the monk was almost but not quite that of Papa B. Papa B, trying to imitate his own voice, was hesitating" (121). The "real" voice of Papa B now belongs to Karaghiosi, as it were, while his imitation of himself sounds inauthentic—authenticity receding into infinity in all these deliberate confusions of identity. Now it is Jack Deemer, the narrator, who puts the problem most succinctly: "Who was the puppet, who the puppeteer?" (123).

Since it is Deemer who winds up with the girl at the end of the novel, his narrative substitution of himself for Papa B almost makes up for his impotence to change the past. Certainly, he would have us believe that the whole affair has been staged for his benefit: "Maggie, I suspect, felt that in telling

me the story of her love affair with puppets was telling me back into my own desire" (119). Ultimately, then, Deemer calls for another ending to the whole performance:

They were the puppets, Maggie and Dorf, not Karaghiosi. That ancient Greek shadow puppet became master. It was he who manipulated their desire. . . . Karaghiosi, that slave and fool, became master. . . . Maggie taking the pain of Karaghiosi's heave. They were exchanged for each other, and again. They were orphaned into rhapsodies of desire. . . . "Karaghiosi," she said, calling him back. She said the name, making a small experiment into the naming of a wish. The whispered name was a reassurance to her own wet tongue, and she wondered whose hair touched her small breasts. . . . They were a frenzy of silence. They laughed, then, after, finding shirts and socks, pyjama bottoms and the cold cups of brassieres, there in the rank dark. Finding other names. (126-7)

In the act of love, the lovers have been exchanged for one another, have for the moment become truly *Other*. Crossing borders of flesh, they have "traded places," to cite the title of Maggie's first published collection of short stories. And so have the puppets and puppeteer been exchanged for one another, even as the reader (Deemer) and the author (Maggie who types the text before our eyes) have also traded places.

The other site of borderline events in the novel is the elaborate wedding dress which Maggie wears to the typewriter because "she could hear the story she intended to tell" (2) whenever she puts it on. Maggie wants "to write the autobiography of a wedding dress" (15), partly out of the conceit, as she says, that "dresses could talk" (27), and partly out of a conviction, as another character says, that "Brides look alike—in the long run, it's the dresses that differ" (28). Now, even the boundaries of genre begin to blur as the speaking subject is displaced from person to thing, and history (or perhaps biography if the dress has a "life"), dissolves into *auto*-biography, the dress "writing" its own story as told to Maggie, just as Maggie writes her own story as told to Jack Deemer.

The dress, however, is not unique to Maggie; it has been worn before by Deemer's wife Julie Magnuson, and it seems, according to its maker, to have been "double digit bad luck" (52). As a signifier, it encodes a social practice whereby each bride who wears it is supposed to find a new name and a new social identity. Julie was supposed to become the wife of Fish, who had even "asked for one small detail to be included in the flow and drift of details on the dress" (58)—a rainbow trout. But the dress, which keeps its identity as a differential mark in a system of differences without positive terms, contains

a myriad of signs, just as a bride like Julie who marries and remarries carries the potential of many new names. The sign of the fish cannot even save Fish from being waylaid en route to the altar, where the bride is claimed instead by Jack Deemer: "In the tumult of the dress we were the story," Deemer says, "that Josie Pavich had only guessed; we were the lovers in animal form that she had so carefully pictured, the man with the body of a fish, the horse-headed man, the woman with octopus arms" (137). The dress, in other words, is a sign of the whole underlying system of *metamorphoses* encoded in weddings; it speaks of the bride and groom as shape-changers, and of their shifting identities in marriage.

Even Jack Deemer, who dons the dress in disguise at the end of the novel, becomes other than he is, and henceforth speaks differently: "I put it on. And then something precious happened. Wearing the dress, I was no longer simply myself" (251). At first, the dress merely puts him in mind of the woman he once married: "Waiting there, sitting, pacing, I came to understand how Julie Magnuson must have felt on the morning of her delayed wedding" (252). And yet he continues to wear the dress after an accident at the Greek chapel where the "monk" Dorf falls over a cliff to his death. The ruthless old collector who had once sought Dorf's life is apparently changed enough by the dress to persuade Maggie to live with him and to work "on—dare we say?—a saint's life" (264). "Papa B is seen as something of a saint by the monks and priests of Mount Athos" (264), not least because his cassock has turned him into "the monk he had so long pretended to be" (250), the true performer of his part. So, too, Deemer is transformed by his performance as "Maggie puts a beach towel over the shoulders of my wedding dress and tells me to close my eyes, which is hardly necessary, and she shaves me and does my hair. "You must look the part," she tells me, often, while she is doing this" (266). Feminised by the dress-as-sign, this most manipulative of men winds up in the role of a bride.

Of all the borders which are crossed in *The Puppeteer*, this one—the subversion of gender identity—is the least "natural" or, in narrative terms, the most forced. For Jack Deemer is a man who is not above murder, a wealthy thug, by his own admission, whom "people mention with curiosity and disgust. You don't put together a collection of collections without first putting together a little heap of the stuff that buys collections. Once in a while I had to make the rules fit the occasion" (71).

How, then, could such a macho man be so easily taken over by his own disguise? Or how could a dress—even if it is a linguistic sign—gain total control over its speaking subject? Why, in a word, should we be willing to see an incorrigibly male identity erased at the touch of another signifying system?

In a postmodern society already beginning to ask whether gender is determined by anatomy or by culture, the wedding dress evokes the “genderless anonymity” (Poster 121) of electronic communications. For individuals linked through computers now converse, “often on an enduring basis, without considerations that derive from the presence to the partner of their body, their voice, their sex, many of the markings of their personal history. Conversationalists are in the position of fiction writers who compose themselves as characters in the process of writing, inventing themselves” (117). In the immaterial medium of the new writing, material differences such as gender no longer have to determine the old borders of identity.

Though a wedding dress is not a computer, it is clearly a form of address, serving as a medium of communication. “If dresses could talk” (27), Maggie says, then dons it to write “her autobiography of a dress” (23). Much like the “mirror effect of the computer” which “doubles the subject of writing” (Poster 112), the dress doubles Maggie’s subjectivity. Her identity is thus dispersed as much as Deemer’s in wearing this dress, much as any writing subject in computer communications is “dispersed in a postmodern semantic field of time/space, inner/outer, mind/matter” (Poster 115). Through the fluid medium of the gown, the writer is made an amanuensis for the object itself which turns into a speaking subject. So inner/outer, mind/matter, are also reversible semantic fields in the dress.

The indelible mark, however, of the new context of communications to which the dress belongs is a figure of itself. Almost at the outset of the story, Maggie notices “for the first time, in the intricate embroidery and beadwork on her lap, the outline in miniature of the dress she was wearing. The dressmaker who had filled the dress with detail had, with the same care, left blank an outline of the dress no larger than a postage stamp” (3-4). This self-reflexive sign of the sign—the so-called *mise en abyme*—puts into an abyss, or subverts the authority of, the real, as does a television monitor on the desk of the television announcer, receding into infinity. We are reminded that the world we “see” is mediated, or constructed by, the medium which shapes our perception; it no longer has its “real” ground outside itself, and yet it has the power to change the way we see ourselves.

Take another look at *Such a Long Journey* and you will find, even in a supposedly traditional novel, the telltale mark of this same *mise en abyme*:

Gustad looked closely at what seemed a very familiar place. “Looks like our wall,” he said tentatively.

“Absolutely correct. It’s now a sacred place, is it not? So it rightfully deserves to be painted on a wall of holy men and holy places.”

Gustad bent down to get a better look at the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a . . . (288)

The infinite regress of a picture on the wall of Gustad’s compound shows how Mistry’s traditional world is no more immune than Kroetsch’s postmodern world to the effects of modern technology. Here, however, we might read the sign of Mistry’s postcolonial resistance to a form of realism which would naturalize the status quo, or legitimate the existing social order. For the self-reflexive picture displays a figure founded only on itself, a sign which is wholly arbitrary and conventional, and yet which has been allowed to stand, in the name of Dada Ormuzd and *kusti* prayers, as the ground of social division. In this space of the wall-within-a-wall can be seen another space in which the *post-* of postcolonialism, “like that of postmodernism,” emerges as “a *post-* that challenges earlier legitimating narratives” (Appiah 353). Suddenly, the painter’s *mise en abyme*, like the postrealist mark of cyberspace, puts into an abyss the social reality of a wall which on its painted side displays the face of universal brotherhood, but on its blank side reveals the face of social partition.

Finally, in this space, we ought to observe how the postrealist ideology of postcolonial writing can have a very different motivation from that of postmodern writing. As Kwame Appiah remarks of a postrealist impulse in African writing of the past two decades:

Far from being a celebration of the nation, . . . the novels of the second, postcolonial, stage are novels of delegitimation: they reject not only the Western *imperium* but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of delegitimation cannot be the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal. Indeed it is based, as intellectual responses to oppression in Africa largely are based, in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years. (353)

Mistry’s delegitimation of the nationalist project of the postcolonial bourgeoisie is nowhere more apparent than in the suffering of Gustad’s

long-lost "brother" at the hands of RAW and the Indian Congress Party. As Major Jimmy Bilimoria says on his deathbed, "Gustad, it is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power" (280). This same subplot of embezzlement and atonement nearly defies belief, using wild gossip and innuendo to offer a postrealist critique of the elected oppressor. But Mistry's inclusion of pseudo-documents and digests from newspapers also delegitimizes the "realism" of journalism itself as a tool of the national bourgeoisie who equate Mother India with Mother Indira: "the line between the two was fast being blurred by the Prime Minister's far-sighted propagandists who saw its value for future election campaigns" (298). In the concluding "*morcha*" of the people on their corrupt governors, the novel ultimately appeals to an ethical universal which Dr Paymaster, its reluctant leader, can only trope in terms of suffering human flesh: "You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed. True, they said, but we cannot hold our breath for ever, we have to do something about the stink" (313).

In the final analysis, doing "something about the stink" in this novel requires more than direct political action. The political and the aesthetic meet again in the figure of that wall which speaks of universal brotherhood and social partition. Since both meanings are imaginary constructs, not facts of nature, the sign itself is bound to change. In the end, Gustad has to accept the idea that the social wall must come down. "The pavement artist, awaiting his turn to speak, said despondently, "Please, sir, they are telling me I have to give up my wall." Gustad had gathered this from the new notice on the pillar, the cement-mixers, and the waiting lorries. For the briefest of moments he felt the impending loss cut deeply, through memory and time; the collapse of the wall would wreck the past and the future" (329). But in the battle of demonstrators to save the wall, it is the idiot Tehmul, the neighbourhood manchild who worships Gustad, who is killed. Tehmul, it seems, has been made a scapegoat by Gustad's wife Dilnavaz, by a mother who is willing to sacrifice one of the "children of God" for the sake of her own estranged son. For Dilnavaz employs a witch in the person of Miss Kutpitia to cast a spell on Tehmul in hope of purging the evil from Sohrab; coincidentally or not, the idiot dies because his life means less to her than her own child's life. Thus the wall of family continues to partition the world even behind the outer wall of Parsi identity.

Gustad, however, is surprised to find that the "wreck [of] the past and the future" which he had feared in the tumbling of the wall only makes him more open to past and future both. At the death of his mother thirty years before, he had been unable to shed a single tear: "Seeing his once invincible father behave in this broken manner" had made him swear silently "to himself, then and there, that he would never indulge in tears—not before anyone, nor in private, no matter what suffering or sorrow fell upon his shoulders; tears were useless, the weakness of women, and of men who allowed themselves to be broken" (101). But at the sight of the idiot child's broken skull, something finally breaks in him as well: "His voice was soft and steady, and his hand steady and light upon Tehmul's head, as the tears ran down his cheeks. He started another cycle [of prayers], and yet another, and he could not stop the tears . . . the salt water of his eyes as much for himself as for Tehmul. As much for Tehmul as for Jimmy. And for Dinshawji, for Pappa and Mamma, for Grandpa and Grandma, all who had had to wait for so long" (337). In weeping for his dead mother, Gustad cradles the head of the dead manchild in a way which makes him virtually a Parsi Pietà, as truly feminised as Kroetsch's Jack Deemer.

What Gustad has not yet seen, of course, is that he has already assumed the role of a father to poor Tehmul; every "child of God" is become as one of his own sons. But accepting the loss of this child finally opens his eyes, quite literally: "Gustad turned around. He saw his son standing in the doorway, and each held the other's eyes. Still he sat, gazing upon his son, and Sohrab waited motionless in the doorway, till at last Gustad got to his feet slowly. Then he went up and put his arms around him. "Yes," said Gustad, running his bloodstained fingers once through Sohrab's hair. "Yes," he said, "yes," and hugged him tightly once more" (337). The estranged son and the lost child Tehmul have also traded places.

Though the reader and narrator are not explicitly exchanged for one another in *Such a Long Journey*, the pavement artist is at least aware of such aesthetic economies: "In a world where roadside latrines become temples and shrines, and temples and shrines become dust and ruin, does it matter where [I go]?" (338). Not that he has entirely escaped the temptation himself of monumental art: "The agreeable neighbourhood and the solidity of the long, black wall were reawakening in him the usual sources of human sorrow: a yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable" (184). He has even given up his coloured

chalks not long before this and has begun to paint in oils, giving way to the aesthetic temptation to construct a wall against time itself. But in the best Hindu fashion, he learns that nothing is eternal, not even art. And so the aesthetic wall is breached anew, if in a different sense from the way in which Kroetsch's puppeteer "had gone through the frame" (153). For here, too, the reader finds that art cannot erect a boundary against life, though Mistry more modestly concedes the superior power to nature and to social forces which exceed his own technology.

Finally, it is the entirely natural force of decay—a sign written indelibly in human flesh—which marks a significant difference between the postcolonial and the postmodern novel. As Deemer relates the story of Dorf's death in *The Puppeteer*, he tells how the latter "had fallen straight down [the cliff] and landed on his head, somehow causing some of the bones of his neck to force his tongue out of his mouth" (257). But in bringing the body back up the cliff, "the sling either slipped or broke and poor Dorf was in for a second crash" (260). This comic treatment of a corpse points to what has been left out of cyberspace or the world of virtual reality: the body which suffers. But it also opens to question that founding absence in the "science" of grammatology: the breath of the body. For, as Derrida notes with astounding equanimity, "What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself" (*Of Grammatology* 25). That indifference to the presence of the body (of writer or of reader) and its material conditions exposes the continuing idealism of the postmodernist or the poststructuralist—the material trace of writing somehow exceeding, or transcending, the material conditions of its own production.

By contrast, the scene of Dinshawji's funeral in *Such a Long Journey* conveys "a certain simple respect for human suffering" which is never far from view in the postcolonial novel; inevitably, it restores us to the terrible burden of human flesh and the limits of the mortal body. On the march up the hill to those hideous vultures waiting in the Tower of Silence, Gustad realizes how the solemn sound of feet on the gravel "was magnificent, awe-inspiring. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Grinding, grating, rasping. The millwheel of death. Grinding down the pieces of a life, to fit death's specifications" (253). Which is not to say that a Parsi can see no humour in death: in a repeated funeral scene the "vulture controversy" between orthodox and progressive Parsis turns as funny as any comic scene in Kroetsch.

But what lingers in this second funeral scene is the gratitude of the sole other mourner for Major Bilimoria, a Muslim comrade whose life he had saved on the battlefield in Kashmir in 1948: "Ghulam wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He said, his voice steady now, 'Your Parsi priests don't allow outsiders like me to go inside'" (322). In the end Gustad's story takes down the wall between Parsi and non-Parsi alike. Now Mistry can take us up the hill with Gustad where not even the women are allowed to go, but where we—women and other outsiders—are permitted vicariously to pay our last respects to the dead. To return to one of the book's predominant visual figures, the blackout paper which the protagonist takes down in the end allows us to see in as much as it allows Gustad to see out. And what we find at last is that story does—has always done—what is not unique to the new technologies: it blurs the boundaries of subject-object division, does away with borders, displaces the binary of Self and Other. Finally, what the Anglo-Indian writer reminds us in the West is that Eastern identity has always been given to ceaseless change.

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