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ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW HELL:  
THE RHETORIC OF UNIVERSALITY  
IN BESSIE HEAD

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
University of North Texas in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

George Edwards, Jr.; A. B.; MDiv.; M.A.

Denton, Texas

May, 1998

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This dissertation approaches the work of South African/Botswanan novelist Bessie Head, especially the novel A Question of Power, as positioned within the critical framework of the postcolonial paradigm, the genius of which accommodates both African and African American literature without recourse to racial essentialism. A central problematic of postcolonial literary criticism is the ideological stance postcolonial authors adopt with respect to the ideology of the metropolis, whether on the one hand the stances they adopt are collusive, or on the other oppositional. A key contested concept is that of universality, which has been widely regarded as a witting or unwitting tool of the metropolis, having the effect of denigrating the colonial subject. It is my thesis that Bessie Head, neither entirely collusive nor oppositional, advocates an Africanist universality that paradoxically eliminates the bias implicit in metropolitan universality.

In addition, this dissertation explores the role of certain “universal” interests to which Bessie Head appeals in the prosecution of her thematic objective. This ensemble of interests--

political history, philosophy, psychology, mythology, and theology-- each element of which I call a "universalium" to reflect the fact that each is one of a discrete set of "universals," is used at once to overcome the arcana and particularities of her narrative and to mediate the theme of universal brotherhood.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE UNIVERSALIUM OF POLITICAL HISTORY: THE POSTCOLONIAL PARADIGM.....	15
3. THE UNIVERSALIUM OF PHILOSOPHY.....	70
4. THE UNIVERSALIUM OF PSYCHOLOGY.....	94
5. THE UNIVERSALIUM OF MYTHOLOGY.....	123
6. THE UNIVERSALIUM OF THEOLOGY.....	152
7. CONCLUSION: THE ONTOLOGY OF UNIVERSALITY.....	188
WORKS CITED.....	220

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A Question of Power, the 1974 novel by Bessie Head, presents Elizabeth, a South African Coloured who takes a one-way exit visa with her son to Motabeng, Botswana. In this non-metropolis without streetlights that a character refers to as “just a great big village of mud huts,”<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth descends into a four-year struggle with insanity. The setting, the character, and, to some extent, the plot are marginal to the Western/world imagination. Elizabeth’s nativity in South Africa, in Head’s time the oddchild of the Western family of nations, the name of whose political system was usually known only to be mispronounced; her membership among the Coloureds, that mysterious middle group in a country thought of mostly in terms of its polarization into black and white; her expatriation to an even less noted country to a city of which certainly not many in the West have ever heard; and the concern with the miseries of her mental pathology all constitute successive veils of particularity which, it is my thesis, the novelist overcomes with a rhetoric of universality embodied variously in appeals to



political history, philosophy, psychology, mythology, and theology.

It is further the thesis of this dissertation that this rhetoric of universality not only mediates the arcana of the narrative, but, above all, advances the narrative's theme of egalitarianism.

Speaking of Sello, one of the two primary psychic familiars who inform Elizabeth's madness, Head writes in the opening lines of the novel:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: "I am just anyone." (11)

The statement, "I am just anyone," the leitmotif of the novel, is a syntactic expression metonymically equating the self and the other in terms of value, dignity, and human rights. In view of this theme of the universality of the rights of man, the elements of her rhetoric can be regarded as extensions or logical complements of her theme, as, indeed, the universal concerns or *universalia* of the universal that is man. As Head uses a discrete ensemble of these *universalia*, I have called each of that limited number, therefore, a "universalium."

This rhetorical and thematic focus upon the essential equality

of man, while it echoes the Western concept of the rights of man, reveals, nevertheless, pronounced dissonances with that concept when considered under the aspect of history. This dissertation approaches the work of Bessie Head as positioned within the paradigm of postcolonial literature,<sup>2</sup> that is, as the writer's artistic engagement with the phenomena of colonialism--for Head, the double political experience reflected in her statement, "My life spans two countries in Southern Africa, South Africa and Botswana. I acquired my education in South Africa but wrote all my books in Serowe, Botswana" (Alone 99). So positioned, the implications of Head's embrace of the concept of universality in A Question of Power are significantly enhanced.

First of all, although (given the American and French revolutions) nothing would seem so common to literature of the West as Head's notion of universality; for Head, the ex-colonial subject, the survivor of what Jacques Derrida called "the ultimate racism in the world" (330), the concept is charged with a new urgency essentially by virtue of its origination within the postcolonial context. The concept is enhanced because she experienced its denial and argued artistically for its attainment. One reference from the United States is perhaps sufficient to

illustrate the significance of this fact. The greatness of Martin Luther King was not in having originated the phrases beginning, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights . . ." but in having through speech and action injected them with new meaning and urgency. Because Head could not regard human rights as a *fait accompli*, her concept of universality bears the special stamp of vitality.

Secondly, Head's concept of universality, when refracted through the prism of postcoloniality, is further differentiated because it is a concept that has survived not only the historical contradiction posited by political oppression, on the one hand, but also, on the other, the threat of rejection posed by being regarded a Western "contaminant" by the community of the oppressed. This concern with contamination, a major concern of postcolonial theory, could, after Harold Bloom, be called an anxiety of colonial influence. Rather than respond, on the one extreme, with total rejection of the culture of South Africa and that of the Western *imperium* behind it, or, on the other, respond with an uncritical embrace of African nationalism or tribalism, it is significant that Head steers a course, instead, toward the universality of the human. In embracing this

Western-like universalist standpoint, Head seems to run afoul of fellow Africans who, like Achebe, warn against uncritical appeals to the universal. In his essay, "Thoughts on the African Novel," Achebe warns against judging African novels on the basis of so-called universal truths. The African vision is sometimes, he says "necessarily local and particular" (96). An African writer should be governed by an undue concern for universals neither in subject matter nor audience; to do so would be to put the novelistic vision on a Procrustean bed. Caribbean womanist Audré Lorde has suggested that new ways other than those ready-to-hand in the Western intellectual arsenal be sought to combat racism, for she asserts in her eponymous essay that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (98). Head counters this concern with contamination with a universalism with an Africanist edge, effectively subverting and appropriating the concept of universality by giving it an Africanist inflection and origin.

To refer again to the beginning of Head's novel, the fact that Sello is an African (that which has always been problematic or ambivalent in the conceptions and valuations of the West) is subsumed in the positive universal of mankind. Secondly, after that which is special and alien (African-ness) is subsumed in the

general, then the “laundered” special can be returned to offer what Head seems to think is its particular and peculiarly African truth: that is, that social and political evils can be mitigated if all people thought of themselves as just ordinary, and could be brought to say with Sello, “I am just anyone.” To Head, the African experience behind this universal statement is life in the slums of South Africa, where it was said behind the self-important person’s back, ““Oh, he thinks he’s *important*” with awful scorn” (26).

Head again asserts the universal in A Bewitched Crossroad (1984), her final novel. In her final major artistic assertion of the universal, Head is not, as she is in A Question of Power, primarily abstract, but concrete and historical. Head’s refuge in Botswana impressed her with her new country’s possession of a history and culture which, in contrast to that of South Africa, had survived the high tide of colonialism whole and intact. Largely, it had escaped the experience described by Fanon: “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (qtd. in Said “Yeats” 92). Largely by the person and efforts of King Khama the Great, the central character of A Bewitched Crossroad,

Botswana had escaped this cultural disfigurement. King Khama was able to triumph over the juggernaut of the colonial drive of Cecil Rhodes, only because of his reputation in England as a thoroughly Christianized African, by only, it is our thesis, the practical principle of universality latent in Christianity. Though Head herself was dubious of Christianity in many of its manifestations, the elevation of the protagonist of her historical novel to historical triumph over Cecil Rhodes and the drive to establish colonialism in Botswana reflect her recognition of the potent universalizing agency of Christianity.

Third, the penumbra of colonialism/postcolonialism has fallen even upon the United States. Returning to our earlier example, Martin Luther King recognized that the African-American struggle for political equality, was not struggle *sui generis*, but part of a global movement:

Consciously and unconsciously, he [the American Negro] has been swept in by what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. (297)

It is this global commonality that situates African-American

literature and African literature within the same theoretical frame, providing a theoretical basis for the variously conceived relationship between African-America and Africa always assumed in African-American literature.

Last, this dissertation will further explore what the ontological ground of Head's universalism is, whether it is an Enlightenment construct, a species of the "new universality" as envisioned by Edward Said (qtd. in Rose 401), or, again, as is evidenced in A Bewitched Crossroad, something at bottom pre-Enlightenment, pre-Classical, in fact Judeo-Christian, enduring, and transcendent of both the postmodern and the postcolonial frames.

The second chapter, "The Universalium of Politics: The Postcolonial Paradigm" establishes a theory of the conceptual priority of history in general, and the literary utility of the historical framework in the life of Bessie Head in particular. Born in Pietermaritzberg South Africa in 1937, Bessie Head entered neighboring Botswana on a one-way exit visa in 1964. Though she wrote in Botswana, which became independent in 1966, South African experiences underpin her narratives.

Randolph Vigne has edited A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965-1979. The Bessie Head archives in Serowe,

Botswana contain several thousand more letters that date from the publication of her first novel in 1970. Bessie Head's autobiographical writings appear in A Woman Alone. To the colorful story of her birth that she often told, an interesting alternative is given in Susan Gardner's "'Don't Ask for the True Story': A Memoir of Bessie Head," which in turn is questioned by Teresa Dovey's "A Question of Power: Susan Gardner's Biography versus Bessie Head's Autobiography." With Thunder Behind Her Ears, Gillian Stead Eilerson has produced the first full-length biography of Bessie Head, which work seems to give the best light on the question of Bessie Head's birth and indeed the entire span of her life.

As outlined by Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism, the half millennium of world dominance by the West which achieved its height in the early twentieth century when fully 85 per cent of the earth was in European and American hands ("Yeats" 71) was from the beginning attended by resistance on the side of the colonized which in the twentieth century "culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World" ( Culture xii). Whereas, Said continues, writing in 1993, few European or American universities included African literature in their curricula



thirty years ago, "Now a healthy interest is taken in the works of Bessie Head, Alex La Guma, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee as literature that speaks independently of an African experience" (239). Isabella Matsikidze attempts to include African women's writing within the tradition of the African political novel, regarding the work of Bessie Head as work undertaken in the "postnationalistic" phase of her African experience, thus attempting to explain the attenuated political protest of Head by the fact that she wrote in a nation that had gained its independence.

Matsikidze's efforts are predicated upon what she calls the "metapolitics" of Head's novel. Head traces politics to the inner spirit of the individual. That said, it is yet important on the normal scale of political matters that the major character of the novel, after Elizabeth and the figments of her dementia, is the American agriculturist, Tom, who alone is privileged to tap into her psychic world (24).

In the third chapter, "The Universalium of Philosophy," Head's appeal to philosophy as a universal interest is registered. Jacqueline Rose, for instance, speaking of Head's protagonist, writes: "Head presents Elizabeth to us as a woman philosopher for the whole world" (415). The very opening of A Question of Power

is cast in the form of a universal-particular paradigm of the sort brought into Western thought by Plato and Aristotle. The content of the paradigm, however, man himself, recalls the cosmopolitan brotherhood of the stoics of the Hellenistic age of Greece. Thus Head roots her theme, or artistic argument, in the very taproot of Western thought. The plot of A Question of Power unfolds because of the historical contradiction between philosophical conception and social practice. The philosophical tone of the novel can be gathered from the American, Tom, who says, "You're a strange woman Elizabeth. The things *you* draw out of a man! You know men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men" (24). This passage, incidentally, seems to sum up Head's views on the matter of feminism; she assumes it as an accomplished fact.

The universalium of psychology is the focus of the fourth chapter. The politico-historical and philosophical contradictions of universalism lead to the psychological effect of mental illness in the protagonist. The madness of the protagonist is a comment upon Apartheid and the philosophical contradiction within it *vis-a-vis* the Western ideals behind it. The fact that Elizabeth's white

mother was institutionalized for cohabiting with a black stable boy to beget her is the psychological *terminus a quo* of Elizabeth's dementia. Furthermore, the novel is written in a type of stream of consciousness in which sexuality and violence and issues of shifting personal identity are constantly in motion.

Chapter Five, "The Universalium of Mythology," notes Head's extensive appeal to the mythologies of the world. Elizabeth's descent into madness is figured as a descent of Persephone into the underworld, although the similar myth of Osiris and Isis is the one that receives direct mention. Within the underworld is Medusa. So is Al Capone from American cultural mythology. King David of the Hebrews is mentioned along with deities of the Indian pantheon. The results of this mythologic eclecticism and syncretism, revealing Head's universal borrowing, are demythologized by Head to their underlying spiritual essence, proving that they are all a code in deciphering the question of power.

In the sixth chapter, "The Universalium of Theology," Head's appeal to the concept of the divine is explored. The Gods of the major religions of the world are present in Head's story. There is the all-Father. There are Buddha and Krishna. The deities are replaced by Head's own theogony based upon her thematic

philosophical anthropology. This she formulates in the expression, “There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet” (206).

In the seventh chapter “The Ontology of Universality,” a summation is given of Head’s appeals to a rhetoric of universality. In accordance with the feminist theme of becoming voiced, Elizabeth’s emergence from the underworld is marked by the writing of poetry and the revelation of the name of her son, which is, until then, withheld.

In A Bewitched Crossroad, Head exposes a practical principle of universality in her narrative of the triumph of King Khama the Great over the designs of Cecil Rhodes on his people’s land during the heyday of imperialism. It is the Christian faith which, held in common (*koina*, the same word for “universal” in Greek) by both the metropolitan power and the colonized, provided for a transcendence of imperialist rapacity. What was abstract, classical, and Quixotically theological in A Question of Power, is disclosed as practical, historical, and theological in Head’s final novel, offering, therefore, ontological substance to her rhetoric of universality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bessie Head, A Question of Power. (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1974), 20. All subsequent references to this novel will be to this text and will be cited parenthetically within the dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>Of the two basic definitions of “postcolonial,” as designating the life of a country after independence from a colonial power or the life of a country from the very inception of colonialism, we choose the latter, without however failing to regard as very important the period after independence.

## CHAPTER II

### The Universalium of History: The Postcolonial Paradigm

Taken as a novel which, hypothetically, overcomes particularities of place, plot, and persona through consistent (though varied) appeals to “universality,” despite theoretical climates ostensibly averse to universal notions, A Question of Power (1974) by Bessie Head should for several reasons first be considered under the aspect of history, that is, under the rubric of the primary of the discrete ensemble of universals (*universalia*) to which Head appeals. Although so to begin may be regarded as part of the so-called “return to history” after the formalist and poststructuralist captivity of the text, it might at the same time be envisioned as a continuation of African American criticism, or humanism for that matter, which never left history at all (Kershner 84). The ur-scepticism of the monism of the text, I bypass for the present, although marking *en passan* how ironically assimilable it

is to the fideism of the monism of the Christian *Logos*. First of all, history *qua* time, as the medium and the measure of human activity, hence of its mimetic representations in art, claims an abstract conceptual priority. Second, the novel itself appeals, if not to a “popular,” then to a geopolitically critical aspect of the history of its time. Third, the particular nature of the history which the novel reflects and from which it emerges suggests a theoretical framework by means of which the novel can best be appreciated and its affiliations to African American literature best be discerned.

First, history as time claims a conceptual priority which it shares with space alone. However space and time are conceived--as external realities or internal constructs--there is a generally accepted priority of the two as expressed in the common concept “space-time continuum,” whereby we mean the site, both external and internal, of the conduct of our existence. Immanuel Kant writes on the subject, “Time is the formal *a priori* condition of all appearances whatsoever. Space, as the pure form of all *outer* intuition, is so far limited; it serves as the *a priori* condition only of outer appearances” (77). In Kant’s formulation, therefore, time is more basic than space. Therefore at its most abstract, history lays

claim to a conceptual priority which is not surrendered when history is considered in the concrete (as it is always found), that is, taken in experiential unity with the ensemble of the objects of space.

History, *ipso facto*, must be the history of something, that is, of some or other of the ensemble of objects which give expression, content, and meaning to the concept of space. On the stage of world history, as it has been well said, “the *Individuals* we have to do with are *Peoples*; Totalities that are States” (Hegel 14). The center and circumference of A Question of Power are appeals to history in this political sense. At the heart and on the horizons of the novel are matters political. The novel is both a little more political than the *politikon zoon* of Aristotle would imply when he declares that all men (therefore their productions) are by nature, political, and a little less politically prescriptive (missionary) in modern times than that of Terry Eagleton when he declares that literature, taken more specifically, is by the nature of things, indefeasibly political.

Beyond, therefore, sharing the abstract conceptual priority of history, by which consideration all novels as reflections of temporal experience are equally historical, A Question of Power appeals to



history in a way that some novels do not, as it is a novel which represents events in a region and era of the planet where the tectonic plates of political formations were in intense collision, and for that reason commanded much of the attention of the watchful portion of the world, given the peculiar nature of the conflict. Beyond the novel's generic historicity, there is then, a special historicity from which it emerges and which in return it reflects. Although the internal references of the novel to its historical context are not required to establish the special relation of history to the novel, this novelistic appeal to vital geopolitical history helps secure the novel a universal audience.

At the climax of A Question of Power, antagonist Dan Molomo, who, along with Sello, is one of the two primary psychic familiars who inform the madness of Head's heroine, is caught literally and metaphorically with his pants down. The tactics by which he has attempted to subjugate and destroy Elizabeth, the protagonist, having veered from false romance to open physical violence, come to a head at last in the psychological violence of nonstop sexual intercourse in the very presence of Elizabeth with several of his seventy-two good-time girls. When at the climax, then, Sello offers the heroine words which are the key to breaking

Dan's campaign,

Dan was still going on her bed with The Womb. He looked up at Sello with black shocked eyes. For a split second he forgot he was God. He scrambled to his feet. He looked like one of those Afrikaner Boers in South Africa who had been caught contravening the Immorality Act with a black woman. (198)

In this double exposure, both sexual and political, the political exposure itself is double, for at the moment, Dan who erstwhile stood for African power worship in the spirit of the Presidents for Life, bears the expression of an Afrikaner caught in contravention of the Immorality Act.<sup>1</sup> In Head's vision, therefore, Southern African politics makes for not only the proverbial strange bedfellows, but a strange composite bedfellow: the black powermonger and the Afrikaner supremacist. The two are identical in their abuse of power. Beyond the doubleness which relates Dan to at least two sides of the immediate opposition politics implied in the Southern African setting of the novel, Dan is also indefinitely multiple, representing, universally, any who would abuse power.

The rich signification of the exposure of Dan is further revealed in that, analeptically considered, it is just such a contravention of the said South African Immorality Act of 1927, which sets the plot of the novel in motion. The protagonist is born

as a result of such a union and is limited in her life possibilities because of it. Rather, however, than involving the Afrikaner male whose amours contributed prominently to the development of the population called the Coloureds, it was, ironically, the sexual union of a black stable boy and white woman which led to the birth of Elizabeth in the insane asylum where her mother was committed for having so conceived. The implied Gulag politics of internment under de facto apartheid exposed Elizabeth to a thousand shocks of fate which eventuated in madness.

Between Elizabeth's conception at the outset of the novel and the exposure of the destructive genius of her madness at its narrative center, there are several references to Southern African history/politics, some of which it will be expedient to give here. As a result of her birth, Elizabeth is racially categorized: "In South Africa she had rigidly been classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn't any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races not people" (44). South Africa's was a system that categorized all races, requiring them eventually by the Population Registration Act enacted soon after the accession of the National Party in 1948, to declare officially what they were

racially, thus causing trauma to many who were, as a consequence, separated from their families. Where Heraclitus said, "Character is fate," South African society said "Racial category is fate."

Categorization affected education: "There they said the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but they made sure to deprive him of the type of education which developed personality, intellect, skill" (57). Categorization worked on the nerves; living in South Africa

was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. (19)

Elizabeth's dementia was also related not only to South African political history but to that of the black Africa of her exile as well where "the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black and it was not local people. It was large, looming soul personalities" (57).

Extratextually, the novel is even more deeply political because it is very autobiographical; Elizabeth is a character who "we can almost totally identify with the author" (Eilerson "Social"

43). But before looking at how the life of Bessie Head was situated in South Africa and Botswana, it is best to look at how South Africa is situated in world history.

South African novelist Alan Paton, who for one of his purposes also found a brief history of his beloved country to be indispensable, begins his discussion of South Africa with a reference to Herodotus, who relates how Pharaoh Necho of Egypt “six hundred years before Christ, sent explorers down the east coast of Africa, with instructions to circumnavigate the continent and to return by way of the Mediterranean,” which feat, according to that father of history, was accomplished in three years. Says Paton, “We suppose that these mariners saw Table Mountain from the sea, and that they were the first men to do so” (Hope 11).

Two millennia later, Bartholomew Diaz received credit for discovering the South African Cape in 1486, naming it the Cape of Storms, but which King John of Portugal renamed the Cape of Good Hope because he felt it brought him close to his goal of reaching India, which hope Vasco da Gama made good when he did reach India in 1497 (11). This collocation of events is instructive for it is the very eve of the Age of Exploration, beginning with the encompassing of Africa in 1486, including the “discovery” of the

New World in 1492, and the establishment of sea contact with the Orient in 1497. These three regions of the world--the Americas, Africa, and Asia--became the setting of unprecedented European incursions and colonization, the end of which has taken place half a millennium later.

Antonio de Saldana entered Table Bay in 1503, climbed the distinctively flat-topped promontory and gave it the name Table Mountain. In 1580, Sir Francis Drake, on his circumnavigation of the globe, passed the bay and estimated it to be "the fairest Cape in the whole circumference of the earth." In the year of the Mayflower, "Captains Shilling and Fitzherbert annexed the Cape for King James, but the King refused to endorse their action" (11).

After the decline of Portuguese power, the Dutch East India Company which had been formed in 1602 by Holland as that maritime nation embarked upon one of the most prosperous economies of recent world history (Baumohl 54-55), established a refreshment station on the Cape in 1652, "where the sick could be left for attention and where outgoing sailors could leave letters to be taken back to Holland by the next homegoing ship" (Paton 11).

Although Paton says that the original inhabitants of the Cape were "not numerous" (12), Shillington places the number of the

Khoikhoi tribesmen (Hottentots to the Dutch) in the region at about 50,000 in the year of the Dutch supply station (21). It was, in fact, Khoikhoi retaliation on sailors for their theft of sheep and cattle, and Khoikhoi price hikes as the transcape travel increased, as well as the Dutch desire to make a profit from rivals such as the British East India Company, that motivated the establishment of the original Dutch station under Jan van Riebeeck. The rapid increase in calls at the Cape effected by this regularization led to Riebeeck's release of nine sailors in 1657 to set up their own farms "on Khoikhoi grazing lands south of Table Bay" (23). This move set the stage for the first of the two Khoikhoi/Dutch wars (Shillington 24) and the pattern for the eventual dispossession of the Africans. In 1658, slaves were imported from West Africa, and soon after from Malaysia. These two groups of slaves merged with the Khoikhoi who remained in the region, "thus producing, with the cooperation of white settlers and sailors, a separate people called the Cape Coloured people . . . who speak the same language as the Afrikaner people" (Paton 13).

The offer of free passage in Dutch East India company ships led to the increase of freeburgher "Boers" the Dutch word for "farmers." In 1688, 156 Huguenots arrived bringing new skills "to

a raw wine industry" (13). When the San or "Bushmen," the diminutive people who had from time immemorial raided Khoikhoi herds did the same to the Dutch, they were eliminated or driven into caves. With increased white expansion, they survived only in the Kalahari desert (12). By the end of the century, there were about a thousand white settlers in the colony, served by a similar number of slaves (Shillington 23).

The eighteenth century was the double story of trekboer expansion and the concomitant Khoikhoi dispossession. While most of the immigrant agriculturalists lived twenty or thirty miles from the Cape, where they competed for lucrative contracts with the company, the more adventurous settlers became herdsmen. Replenishing their stock by raid or trade, they moved ever farther away from the cape, taking with them their State Bible. Their increased isolation and new surroundings eventuated in a new language that came to be called "Afrikaans." Their practice of always being on the move with their wagons earned them the name of "trekboers," meaning "(wagon) pulling farmers." The Cape continually expanded its boundaries to keep up with the trekboers. By century's end, settlement had extended about 200 miles to the north and about 400 miles to the east. In 1795, the British had



seized control of the settlement and the settlers had come up against the strong resistance of the Xhosa tribes on the east. By then there were 16,000 settlers to 17,000 slaves (20).

The coming of the British permanently, in 1805, brought several shocks for the Boers that marked the century to them as the "Century of Wrong." With the British came Anglican missionaries with their idea that the "indigenous peoples were souls to be saved" (22). As a result, Khoikhoi flocked to the missionary stations to escape harsh treatment by the Boers. The British administrators, for their part, brought the ideas that the slaves and servants were entitled to fair treatment, as a result of which, to the amazement of the Boers, several of their number were prosecuted for ill-treatment of servants. In an attempt to seal the eastern frontier and thus prevent costly wars with the Xhosa tribes, the British sent 5000 English settlers in 1820. English became the official language. Next the civil rights of Coloureds were recognized. In 1832 slavery was abolished, and the speculation involved in the compensation process caused resentment. In 1834, astoundingly for the Boers, another frontier war with the Xhosas resulted in the British judgment that the attacking Xhosas had been within their rights.

This was the last straw for the farmers. They had had enough of British government, British missionaries, British public opinion. The Hottentots had been granted unheard of rights, the slaves had been freed, black men were being treated like white men, their whole patriarchal world was tumbling about their ears. So, party by party, beginning in 1836, they set out on the Great Trek, climbing the mountains onto the great interior plain, crossing the Orange River into the grasslands, in the direction of Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Pretoria, all yet unborn, crossing east over the Drakensberg into Natal where the missionary Gardiner had given the name of Durban to the little trading settlement at Port Natal.

The trekkers numbered about 5000. Among them was a boy of ten, Paul Kruger, who "sixty-three years later was to lead his Transvaal Republic against Britain in the Anglo-Boer War" (22-26).

The sealing of the eastern frontier had disrupted the natural southward and peaceful expansion of the Nguni tribes. The new pressures eventuated in the rise of Shaka of the Zulus from 1816 to 1828. His brilliant implementation of the best military techniques

of his day initiated the Mfecane or “crushing” or alternately the “Difacane” or “scattering” which sent African tribes radiating from the center of his centralized kingdom. As conquered tribes proudly called themselves Zulu, Shaka’s small tribe of 1,500 rose by conquest to having an army of 100,000. In 1828, Shaka was assassinated by his brother Dingane. The dislocations occasioned in turn by Shaka’s conquests generally facilitated the trekkers’ progress. When, however, the trekboers treated with Dingane for land, he slew them and all those at their encampment. On December 16, 1838, 500 Boers under Andries Pretorius, drawing their wagons into a defensive circle they called a “laager,” defeated Dingane’s armies at the Battle of Blood River. There at the cost of three wounded, the Boers slew 3000 Zulu, coloring the Mcone River with the blood of the slain (28).

The successful incursion of the Boers into the interior of South Africa resulted in the formation of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in 1852 and 1854, respectively. Despite the failure of Pieter Retief and Gerrit Maritz to carve out a third Boer state, as the state they called Natal in 1838 was reclaimed by Britain in 1843 because the land had been ceded by Shaka (McClintock 178); the two are memorialized in the name of Pietermaritzburg, the

town of Bessie Head's birth.

The final third of the nineteenth century in South Africa is the story of three interrelated phenomena: the discovery of the largest diamond and gold mines in the world, the total dispossession of the natives, and the reassertion of British control. The discovery of diamonds in 1869 under the Cape governorship of Kimberley on the farms owned by the De Beers family began to bring South Africa into the spotlight. The Africans who worked in the diamond mines made good wages. The ability of the Africans to come and go based on their almost self-sufficient tribal lives kept wages in the mines high. Any attempt to lower wages led simply to the departure of the workers. With their wages they bought, among other things, guns. Some distant independent tribes sent their workers to the mines expressly for that purpose. The possession of firepower by the most numerous population led inevitably to concerns for white safety. This double concern, ably taken in hand by the British, led to the destruction of African tribal military and economic power, culminating in 1879 in the smashing, albeit at great cost, of the Zulu empire Shaka had founded. The Zulu Mfecane had in the end succumbed to the worldwide British Mfecane.

The final dispossession of the Zulu is the subject matter of the opening scene of the movie Shaka. When the deposed Zulu King visits Queen Victoria to sue for the return of his kingdom, the Queen denies it because she fears the spirit of Shaka to inspire any Zulu nation toward independence. Although within the pages of his autobiography, Nelson Mandela is in general quiet on the praise of Shaka, he does portray a supreme moment when the memory of Shaka demonstrated the power to inspire that Queen Victoria feared. When the government cracked down on one hundred fifty-six protesters in 1956 in the Treason Trials, the detainees spent their two weeks of incarceration as profitably as they could, hearing lectures on various topics including the American Negro and African music. At one point, a man called Yengwa, reciting a song in honor of Shaka,

draped himself with a blanket, rolled up a newspaper to imitate an assegai, and began to stride back and forth reciting the lines from the praise song. All of us, even those who did not understand Zulu, were entranced. Then he paused and called out the lines "*Inyon' edl' ezinye Yath' isadl' ezinye, yadl' ezinye!*" The lines liken Shaka to a great bird of prey that relentlessly slays its enemies. At the conclusion of these words, pandemonium broke out. Chief Luthuli, who until then remained quiet, sprang to his feet, and bellowed, "*Ngu Shaka lowo!*" (That is Shaka!), and then began to dance and chant. His movements electrified

us, and we all took to our feet . . . all joined in the *indlamu*, the traditional Zulu war dance. . . . Suddenly there were no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or Africans, no rightists or leftists, no religious or political leaders; we were all nationalists and patriots bound together by a love of our common history, our culture, our country, and our people. (202)

This was seventy years in the future. At the time there was precious little to celebrate.

The need for capital which developed as the mines grew deeper and more difficult to work led to the rise of Cecil Rhodes. Using the riches gained from his company which pumped water from the deepening open mines, he, at age 27, established a monopoly over the diamond mines. This fabulous wealth he parlayed further into governorship of the Cape in 1890, from which he prosecuted his imperialistic dreams of the Cape to Cairo railroad.

In cooperation with the empire, Rhodes sought to keep the road to the interior of the continent open to English development. This road led through the central South African territory of the Tswana tribes. These tribesmen, fearing the landgrabbing Boer Republics on the east, had sought protectorate status in 1876, but had been rejected by the crown. When the Germans settled

southwest Africa and threatened to link up with the always anglophobic Boers in the east, thus cutting off Britain from the interior, the British acted in 1885 and established a protectorate under Khama the Great in which the chief was enabled to continue to rule his country. Ten years later, eager to escape administrative costs, the British Government agreed to the transfer of Bechuanaland Protectorate to Rhodes' British South Africa Company, which had already, through much brutality, carved out a land called Rhodesia. Fearing a similar fate, Chiefs Khama, Bathoen, and Sebele of the Tswana people of Bechuanaland traveled to London in protest. Denied a hearing by the colonial minister Chamberlain, the chiefs, with the aide of a London Missionary Society interpreter, appealed directly to the the British public. Owing to the strong opposition aroused, the transfer of the Protectorate to Rhodes was canceled and the Bechuanas remained a relatively free Protectorate until their independence in 1964 (Shillington 125). Bessie Head celebrated this escape from the heavy hand of imperial control by Khama, this most Christian of African Kings, in her last novel, A Bewitched Crossroad.

In the land dispute which followed the discovery of diamonds, the British who had begun only as mediator of the

conflicting claims, emerged as the possessor of the diamond fields. The discovery of the world's largest gold reef in the Witwatersrand in 1886, led to the influx of British fortune hunters and large capital into the Transvaal. The conflict between Britain and the Boer state over the franchise of these *uitlanders*, or outlanders, led to the Anglo-Boer War. Involving 500,000 soldiers from around the empire, it was Britain's most costly war between the Napoleonic Wars and WWI. Among the atrocities of the war, over 20,000 Boer women and children died in concentration camps, the climactic catastrophe of the Century of Wrong.

Although the British won the South African or Anglo-Boer War, the Boers won the peace. In 1910, the four states of South Africa--Cape Colony, Natal, Orange Free State, and Transvaal--were formed into the Union of South Africa. Boer dominance in the Union is reflected in the fact that "Three Boer war generals--Botha, Hertzog, and Smuts--were the only three prime ministers until a new generation of more conservative Afrikaners, under D. F. Malan, took over in 1948" (Anzovin 11). Each of the four combined states was to keep its own voting practices. While Coloureds and Africans could vote in the Cape, as previously, this was not to be extended to South Africa as a whole, nor abrogated except by a two thirds



vote. Neither could an African or Coloured sit in parliament.

Under the American influence of W. E. B. Dubois, Africans in 1912 formed the South African Native National Congress (to become the African National Congress in 1923) to protest the failure to extend the franchise and their exclusion from representation in parliament. They also greeted the Natives Land Act of 1913 with protest. In an attempt to quell resurgent black economic self-reliance, this act forbade the sale of land to blacks and ousted over a million of them and their herds from the land. Olive Schreiner, the first South African woman novelist, protested the reduction of this industrious "peasant proprietorship" into "a great seething ignorant proletariat" (qtd. in Sparks 141). Solomon Plaatje, the Secretary General of the Congress and the first black South African novelist, wrote Native Life in South Africa to publicize the suffering caused by the Native Lands Act. Written while he and a Congress delegation petitioned London in vain, his book is regarded as an early classic of African literature in English (Shillington 150). Bessie Head herself wrote a preface to a later edition of the book.

In the 1920's, the back to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey created a brief stir in South Africa, especially when James Thaele,

an ardent supporter, returned from graduate study in the United States. Rumors circulated that Garvey was sending the ships of his Black Star line to liberate South Africa. The South African government, fearing at least that Garvey himself might come "to put a match to the keg his ideas had primed, declared him a prohibited immigrant" (Sparks 253-54).

The Natives Land Act which reserved for Africans 7% of the land and prohibited the sale of land from whites to blacks, was, in time, followed by other segregationist legislation. In 1926, under Hertzog, The Mines and Works Amendment Act reserved skilled technical jobs in the mining industry to whites only (Shillington 154). The Native Administration Act of 1927, brought blacks in rural areas under more strict control. Because he could not muster a two-thirds majority to eliminate black and Coloured voters in the Cape, Hertzog extended the vote to white women, "thus effectively doubling the white electorate" (154). Finally, in 1936, the two-thirds majority having been attained, all Coloured voters, 15% of the electorate in the Cape, were put on a separate roll where they could elect three white MP's and four senators, each of whom, of course, had to be white (Anzovin 11).

In World War II, in which 220,000 whites, and 100,000

blacks served, black labor at home in the burgeoning war industries became so important that the pass laws were suspended for 1942-43 (157). Black urbanization exceeded the availability of jobs, resulting in huge townships like the Southwest Township (Soweto) near Johannesburg.

In 1948, inveighing against the *swart gevaar* or "black Peril" and deploring, among other things, the brief suspension of the pass laws during the war, the National Party under D. F. Malan achieved a surprise victory, making possible the first all-Afrikaner government in South Africa. They initiated immediately a policy of "apartheid" or "separateness," to wit, steps to ensure that the two million whites could maintain dominance in a country of eight million blacks. The entire population would be divided into "white" and "nonwhite." Nonwhites were divided into "Indian," "Coloured," and "Native" or "Bantu." The Bantus (meaning people) were subdivided into tribes which were each assigned a homeland or "Bantustan" carved from the 13% of the country reserved for them. Detribalization of the Bantu was to be stopped; retribalization within the mostly unarable Bantustans was to be effected, a transparent attempt to divide and rule a permanent labor class (Unesco 17).

The three legislative pillars of apartheid were the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, the Population Registration Act of 1950, and the Group Areas Act of 1950 (Anzovin 12). The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, which gave the Minister of Justice power to “ban” or silence any person or organization declared to be communist, became the great weapon used to suppress anti-apartheid protests (Shillington 158).

In a transparent attempt to develop a servant class through inferior education, The Bantu Education Act of 1953 (implemented in 1955), “took away black education from control of missionaries who had hitherto provided most of the schools for blacks.” In the words of Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of Native or Bantu Administration from 1950-58, author of the act, and Prime Minister from 1958-1966, there was no place for blacks “in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.” Past attempts at equality in education had misled the blacks “by showing them the green pastures of European society in which they were not allowed to graze” (Shillington 159). Directly as a result of this act, Desmond Tutu quit teaching in a high school in 1957 and entered the Anglican ministry (Wells 11).

The ANC, galvanized by young activists like Robert Sobukwe,

Walter Sisulu and the two lawyers Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela, launched the "Defiance Campaign" in 1952. The protest was timed to coincide with the tercentenary of the establishment of Jan Riebeeck's station on the Cape. Special volunteers defied petty apartheid laws like "whites only" on benches, in entrances to buildings, and conveyances. Fifty-two ANC leaders were banned. By January 1953, 8000 protesters had been arrested, and the campaign ground to a halt (Shillington 161). The Congress Alliance, formed of the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, and the white Congress of Democrats drew up the Freedom Charter in 1955, which called for a free and democratic South Africa. The charter, in turn, became the basis of the ANC's political philosophy in 1958. On the charge that the Freedom Charter was communist, 156 opponents of apartheid were arrested for treason. Among them was Nelson Mandela. All were eventually acquitted.

When the ANC adopted the Freedom Charter as an expression of its own political policy in 1958, the Africanists in the ANC, or the men who wanted an all-African movement, separated under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe, under whom they set up the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1959. When the ANC proposed a one-day protest for March 31, 1960, the PAC, eager to establish itself as

the very vanguard of resistance, set a protest of indefinite length to begin ten days earlier. When, on March 21, between 3000 and 5000 people marched on the Sharpeville police station demanding to be arrested for not having their passes, the police opened fire, killing sixty-nine protesters, most of them shot in the back as they fled; 180 were wounded.

As multinational corporations began to withdraw their investments for fear that a revolution would begin, a State of Emergency was declared a day before the planned ANC demonstration. A week later, the PAC and ANC were banned and thousands of their members arrested. Only the support of the United States and Britain kept the country from universal economic sanctions in the United Nations (Shillington 162-4). South Africa responded by declaring itself a republic and withdrawing from the commonwealth in 1961.

The PAC and the ANC went underground, the latter forming Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), a military wing under Nelson Mandela. After travels in Africa and Europe seeking support for Umkhonto, Mandela was arrested in August 1962. Put on trial with several of the Umkhonto High Command who were captured later in a suburb of Rivonia, Mandela had said in his own

defense:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.  
(Shillington 165)

For this point of view, he was sentenced to life imprisonment and was driven away eventually to the prison in Robben Island to shouts, "Amandla! Ngawethu!" (Power! To the People!).

The General Laws Amendment Act of 1963 gave the government the power to detain people without charge in solitary confinement for 90 days; in 1965, this was extended to 180 days. Though the Union of South Africa had come close to revolution and collapse after Sharpeville, a complete suppression of opposition seemed to have been attained by mid decade (164-6). On May 31, 1966, as assorted military materiel streamed past the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria, and jets flew over, striping the sky with the colors of the flag, Willem "Wimp" de Klerk, brother of the F. W. de Klerk who would become Prime Minister in 1989, captured the moment of triumph: "We thought we were on top of the world. We

had conquered the English, we had sorted out the black situation via apartheid, we had affirmative action, all the generals were Afrikaners. So the mood was, at last we have arrived" (Waldmeir 13-14). When later that year, Prime Minister Verwoerd was assassinated by "a demented parliamentary messenger" (22), and replaced by Vorster, the death of that architect of apartheid seemed merely incidental, but Verwoerd's death marked the beginning of the end of ideology and the start of a pragmatism which had the unintended consequences of undermining the system (25).

At the end of the sixties, Steve Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), successor to the PAC Africanist movement, took center stage. In addition, a successful labor strike in 1973 won significant concessions which led eventually to the legalization of black trade unionism in 1979 (Waldmeir 27). The BCM was the leading inspiration of the Soweto Uprising of June 1976. Shouting "We are not Boers" and "Afrikaans is the oppressors' language" (Pheko 169), 15,000 school children protested the compulsory use of Afrikaans in African schools. Although 600 died and 3000 were left wounded in the revolt, compulsory Afrikaans was dropped and promises of reform were



made (Shillington 183). Biko himself was murdered in custody on September 12, 1977, one of the hundred or so activists who died in detention from 1963 to 1986. The Black Consciousness Movement survived in the Azanian People's organization (AZAPO). The United Democratic Front (UDF), thought to be "the internal political front of the banned and exiled ANC," was organized in 1983. They demanded the release of Nelson Mandela and saw the rise to prominence of his wife Winnie Mandela. In 1985, Desmond Tutu, who had risen to become Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, living in the very palace of Jan Riebeeck in contravention of the Group Areas Act, won the Nobel Peace Prize and continued to use his position to argue for the dismantlement of apartheid before the country was torn by revolution. He was joined by significant white South African intellectuals and some members of the the Reformed church. Under P. W. Botha, who succeeded Vorster as prime minister in 1978, the Immorality Act was abolished in 1985 and the hated pass laws in 1986. Those who felt Vorster was being too soft with the black opposition formed the "Afrikaner Resistance Movement" (AWB) modeled on Hitler's Nazi Party. On the other side, the white opposition, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) accepted the inevitability of black majority rule. In 1985, leaders

of major South African industries, traveled to Zambia to talk with exiled ANC leaders (184-85).

Despite highly publicized repressive moves at home and abroad that made any significant change unimaginable, the monolith of apartheid was imploding. As early as 1973 when blacks were allowed to do skilled industrial jobs in white areas, apartheid faced its fatal economic contradictions. It was then that the country faced the dilemma of being pure and poor or rich and mixed. It chose to be rich, and "as the far right warned at the time, jobs could not ultimately be shared with blacks without sharing power as well" (Waldmeir 26-27).

After P. W. Botha suffered a stroke, F. W. de Klerk was elected National Party leader in February of 1989. In February of 1990, he legalized the ANC and released Nelson Mandela from his 10,000 day imprisonment. In April of 1994, the ANC won South Africa's first democratic election, and in another May, as Mirage jet fighters streaked the sky, this time with the colors of the ANC inspired flag, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President (Waldmeir xvi). Thus the history of South Africa takes on the appearance of a morality play--a long story of dispossession, economic exploitation, and racial segregation culminating in what

Jacques Derrida called the ultimate racism in the world (331) suddenly giving way, when so few in the world expected it, to the voluntary, if reluctant, handover of power to the majority because “International approval and internal stability” required it (Hain 182).

The life of Bessie Head in South Africa stretches from her birth in Pietermaritzburg in 1937 to her departure on a one-way exit visa in 1964. Her death in 1986 came four years before the most astonishing of the recent changes became apparent. The question for us now is how did the life of Bessie Head fit into the life of the nation in which she lived for twenty-seven years.

In Bessie Head’s account, even her conception was affected by the segregationist laws of the Union of South Africa. She was born in an insane asylum in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa in 1937, where according to Head, her white socialite mother had been hospitalized for begetting her by a black stable hand. This view, conjuring notions of a South African gulag where people were declared insane for daring to reject apartheid doctrine, seems not to have been accurate in every respect. The first to cast doubt on Bessie’s account of her birth was Susan Gardner, who charged Bessie with the sin of creating the “ideal biographical legend,” just

the sort of past she wanted to have for her literary purposes (115). According to the speculation of Gardner, Bessie Head's conception took place while her mother was hospitalized for dementia, probably in a park near the hospital. Teresa Dovey responded with a counter charge that Gardner's insinuations that Head's mother was already a ward of the institute when she became pregnant was serving the myth of racial purity, to wit, that a white woman must needs be insane to cohabit with a black male. Gillian Eilerson, in the first full-length biography has gives the most illuminating account of Head's origins.

Bessie Head was the third child of Bessie "Toby" Birch, whose family immigrated to South Africa from England in 1892 where the paterfamilias built a successful painting and decorating business in Johannesburg. Born on March 13, 1894, Toby married an athletic Australian immigrant, Ira Garfield Emery on March 23, 1915. A first son, Stanley Garfield was born to them on December 1, 1913; a second, Ronald Irwin was born on February 14, 1919. An incident that occurred on December 17 of that same year seemed to doom Toby's mental stability and marriage. While Toby was in the house, perhaps tending to Ronald, she heard the squeal of brakes and the scream of a child. Rushing out, she found four year-old

Stanley in a pool of blood, as the Johannesburg Star reported, "neck broken, legs broken, head smashed." (Eilerson Thunder 3-4).

Although the family moved and Toby took up gardening to assuage her grief, Ira blamed her for the death of Stanley. Years of quarreling led to Toby's increased withdrawal and her request for the divorce that was granted on April 22, 1929. Ronald's enrollment in a boarding school in Johannesburg, from which he visited only on weekends, increased her isolation and withdrawal. When, despite attempts to prevent it, Toby discovered that Ira was remarrying, she went without invitation, cutting a tragic and mournful figure. By 1933, she was so in need of help that her mother Alice Birch became *curator bonis* of her estate. In August of 1933, she was committed to the Pretoria mental hospital. Although discharged in September of 1935, she was readmitted at the end of the year and discharged again six months later.

At the end of 1936, Toby went to Durban to live with her sisters. In April of 1937, it was discovered that she was pregnant. Says Eilerson, "There is no record of how it happened or where. Perhaps it was in Johannesburg before she left for the coast; or shortly after her arrival in Durban." Apparently because of the pregnancy rather than because of any exacerbation of her mental

condition, she was hospitalized in the Fort Napier mental institution in Pietermaritzburg on May 16, 1937. There she gave birth to a girl less than two months later. Bessie Head was apparently incorrect on the notion that her mother was hospitalized because of her involvement with an African man, for on the birth certificate, the baby girl was described as "white." She was given the full name of the mother: Bessie Amelia Emery (5-8).

Although immediately adopted, the child was soon returned owing to telltale indications of African blood. A Coloured welfare worker named George Heathcote and his wife, Nellie, became the foster parents of the child. The grandmother made payments to the child welfare agency at the rate of three pounds per month. When Toby died in Fort Napier hospital in 1943, Ronald was informed for the first time of his little sister. Though he never saw his little sister, he set aside 300 pounds from the family estate for Bessie's future. After a final visit to Bessie to deliver her mother's toys, the grandmother, who had been the most forward to show concern, never again had dealings of any sort with the child and never again "allowed the scandalous family event to be discussed in her presence" (10).

The final veil had come down between Bessie Head and her

mother's family. Besides whatever genetic endowment and the 300 pounds laid aside for her future, she carried only the name of her mother, to which in the absence of much else, she later attached much value. The racism of the people codified into the law of the state, notably the Immorality Act of 1827 which criminalized sex between whites and blacks precipitated Bessie into a hermetically sealed social world. Although the initial rehospitalization of Toby cannot be attributed to South African racial policy, the rigorous separation of the family from the child once her mixed blood was discovered, cannot be separated from the fact that, at bottom, sexual contact between blacks and whites had been a crime since 1928.

Bessie's life with the Heathcotes lasted until she arrived at the age of thirteen. She grew up thinking that Nellie Heathcote was her mother. George Heathcote died at about the same time Toby died in the asylum. Although Nellie seems not to have been tolerant of a child who preferred to read rather than engage in empty chatter, Bessie did develop affection for the woman who was the only mother she knew. Bessie enjoyed her presence and enjoyed her Catholicism, probably traceable to Irishmen in her ancestry. Although the election of 1948 led to the speedy erosion

of the marginal rights enjoyed by Coloureds over the Africans, and to the increased alliance of Coloured with blacks, Nellie

suffered the increasing indignities with patience and taught her daughter to do likewise, while the segregation of buses, public conveniences, beaches, post offices, public libraries, and municipal parks was institutionalized. The hated "Slegs Blankes/Europeans Only" appeared everywhere. (14)

Despite the desire of Bessie to continue living with Nellie, an official of the welfare agency thought Bessie was being worked too much. On January 23, 1950, she was removed and sent to St. Monica's Diocesan Home for Coloured Girls (11-21).

At St. Monica's, an Anglican girls' school, Bessie finished her schooling and took two years of training for elementary teaching. It was there for the first time that she learned the story of her parentage. It was there, where consistently at the head of her class, she opted for the life of books (28). In December of 1954, when Bessie visited Nellie Heathcote, she found that Nellie was forced to move under the implementation of the Group Areas Act, because the neighborhood had been re-zoned as an Indian business area (31).

Upon her graduation in January 1, 1956, Bessie worked at the Clairwood Coloured School in Durban, where, denied access to the



public library because of her ethnicity, she patronized an Indian library, as a result of which she became attracted to Hinduism and the thought of Mohandas Gandhi. Because of the rapidity of change occasioned by her embrace of Hinduism and the difficulties and disappointments occasioned by teaching, she resigned her position in June of 1958, and went to Capetown to pursue a career in journalism (35).

In Capetown, while working on the Golden City Post, Bessie experienced for the first time a large community of Coloureds in Capetown, in the legendary District Six, and found their snobbery and colorism, that is, discrimination among themselves based on the lightness or darkness of their skin color, difficult to stomach. When she transferred to Johannesburg, she became acquainted with the celebrated writers of Drum Magazine--men like Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, and Can Thembo. Above all, she became attracted to the PAC, joining the party a few weeks prior to the fateful date of March 21, 1960. While she worked on a fund raising project for the organization in March, she was introduced to Sobukwe himself. On the morning of March 21, she met Sobukwe again at the Orlando police station and was there when he and the other leaders were arrested. When at last the others who lingered

at the station were arrested, Bessie was not present. Not many days afterwards, however, Bessie was scooped up for raising aid for the families of those who had been arrested. In her possession was a letter from an Indian collaborator deploring what the PAC officials who remained had done with the money. Bessie turned state witness. At the end of April, she attempted suicide (49).

After a brief period of hospitalization, she returned to her post in Capetown, which she soon resigned. Bessie maintained her political attachments and orientations. On September 1, 1961, she was married to the writer, Harold Head. Both succeeded in publishing in the New African, a new journal that sought to overcome African national barriers. A son, Howard, was born on May 15, 1962. Bessie and Harold lived at various locales. She eventually came to love Capetown. After November of 1963, she lived first with Harold's parents in the Atteridgeville township, and finally with a neighbor of his parents. Because the marriage was not happy, because so many of her friends had been arrested or had gone into exile, and because South Africa stifled her creative expression, she decided to leave the country. Unlike most of the others in this general South African diaspora, Bessie sought to remain on the continent and in a free African country among the

“new Africans.” Nigeria was considered, but was soon supplanted by another destination. When she noticed that Bechuanaland, “the huge semi-desert British Protectorate lying west of the Transvaal border was advertising for teachers” she sent in an application and was accepted. When her application for a passport was rejected by the South African government, she sought the intervention of white friend Patrick Cullinan. Prudently meeting him outside the township, she attained through his aid a one-way exit visa and went as a teacher to Serowe, Botswana (52-62).

The one-way exit visa meant she could never return; it was the strongest possible commentary on her experience under apartheid. Although she figuratively shook from her feet the dust of South Africa, it would take a long and arduous artistic process to expunge South Africa from her psyche. In 1964, when she and her son crossed the border into Bechuanaland, a country whose independence was set, Bessie Head became postcolonial. Although in light of the resistance which always attended it, it is useful to date postcoloniality from the very onset of imperialist incursion (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin Empire 2), it is also useful to mark the moment of postcoloniality when direct political dominance ceases. When Bessie Head and her son crossed the border into

Bechuanaland, a country whose independence was set, Bessie Head, therefore, became postcolonial in the narrowest sense. It was her life as a colonized person in a South Africa, home of “the ultimate racism in the world” (Derrida 331), that impelled her to an exploration of the power relations that had resulted in such a political nightmare.

Just as she was not the only South African who experienced the government’s oppression, non-white South Africans were not the only people who experienced group/racial subordination to an oppressive power. On the African continent alone, where, although only portions of the coastal fringe were under European domination in 1880, only Liberia and Ethiopia remained free by 1914 (Christopher 27) as a result of the so-called “scramble for Africa” that followed the Treaty of Berlin in 1885. Just as precipitous a reversal of the trend followed WWII. In the quarter century after the war, almost thirty former colonies had gained their independence and formed their own governments (McClellan 5). In 1993, Edward Said counted “over forty-five states in Africa and at least fifty more elsewhere containing formerly colonized peoples” (49).

Much of this trend both inside and outside Africa is,

ironically, traceable to South Africa, and to the very city of Bessie's birth. In 1893, a twenty-three year-old lawyer was thrown out of the first class compartments of the train to Pretoria. In the waiting room of the station, the young British-educated Indian lawyer resisted the temptation to return to India and decided to endure the assaults, pursue his profession, and, on the side, take whatever steps he could to fight such appalling discrimination.

By such small twists of fate is history made. The decision taken in the waiting room of the Pietermaritzburg train station that winter's night not only affected the course of events in South Africa but led to the founding of a strategic philosophy that began the great groundswell of postwar decolonization that may be seen in retrospect to have been the most important event of the twentieth century, which inspired the American civil rights movement, and which still permeates nationalist, dissident, and humanist movements three-quarters of a century later. (Sparks 89)

The lawyer was, of course, Mohandas K. Gandhi. While in South Africa, he founded the South Africa India Congress. After deportation to India, he began in India the movement that deprived Britain of the jewel in its colonial crown in 1948.

The history of the world in the last half millennium, beginning with the establishment of *magna-Europa* (after magna

Graecia) by the voyages of Colon, climaxing with the European control of 85% of the earth after four hundred years, and ending in the *fin de siècle* that concludes the second Christian millennium with the liberation of almost all of those lands, certainly bears the historical marks of postcolonialism. East Indians, Africans, Vietnamese, Caribbean Islanders . . . all take their place in a portion of the world that is postcolonial.

Just as with due qualifications, history and the history of literature have always already been divided into periods for sake of convenience and because of shared salient characteristics, so the writing of Bessie Head and others of colonized or once-colonized countries may be regarded as postcolonial. There is certainly the presence of sufficient historical and literary scale. How do the literatures of these who have emerged from the various species of colonialism bear significant marks of this emergence?

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins, after Edward Said, point out the generally acknowledged fact that European imperialism had two indivisible foundations: power and knowledge (1). In fact, the brief career of English studies in academe as (it is the view of Frederic Jameson) a surrogate for religion, is theorized to have had a test run in India where the need was seen to produce an

interface with Empire (2). Speaking in the British Parliament on Indian policy in the 1830's, Lord Macaulay said. "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (430).

In fine, to secure the grip of power, or as Jean-Paul Sartre says, to "invest the naked power relations with clothing," as it were, the Empire sought to manufacture a native elite.

They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed. From Paris, from London, from Amsterdam we would utter the words "Parthenon! Brotherhood!" and somewhere in Africa or Asia lips would open "...thenon!...therhood!" It was the golden age. (Sartre 7)

Sartre's satirical account of the production of what he called the "Greco-Latin Negro," goes on to recount that in time, to the surprise of Europe, the echolalia came to an end and Europe was confronted with searching new voices.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins emphasize this linkage of power and knowledge by an apt military metaphor when they state “Education, whether state or missionary, primary or secondary (and later tertiary) was a massive cannon in the artillery of empire” (425). This tight relation of knowledge to imperial power is artistically and tellingly extended in Judie Newman’s reference in The Ballistic Bard, to J. G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur*, where besieged colonials during the Sepoy Rebellion in India shore up their defenses with pianos, books, etc., a veritable raft of the cultural artifacts associated with Victorian civilization. They supply the lack of ordinance by using the electroplated statuary heads of English artists for cannonballs:

And of the heads . . . the most effective of all had been Shakespeare’s; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard’s success in this respect might have had a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness. (1)

As before adumbrated with Sartre’s “Greco Latin Negro,” Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins reprise the fact that using the “cannon” of knowledge had unintended consequences for the colonizing powers:

As a result of this complex development, something occurred for which the *plan* of imperial expansion had not bargained: the immensely prestigious and powerful



imperial culture found itself appropriated in projects of counter-colonial resistance which drew upon the many different indigenous local and hybrid *processes* of self-determination to defy, erode and sometimes supplant the prodigious power of imperial cultural knowledge. Post-colonial literatures are a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices. As a consequence, “post-colonial theory” has existed for a long time before that particular name was used to describe it. Once colonised peoples had cause to reflect on and express the tension which ensued from this problematic and contested, but eventually vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience, post-colonial “theory” came into being. (1)

Thus the writers of the seminal The Empire Writes Back identify the origin of postcolonial literature.

Offering what Kershner calls a “powerful positive argument” (85), Frederic Jameson attempts to move the category in a yet more specific way. For Jameson, who prefers the appellation “third world literature” (68), there is a reason for the general judgment that the books of the third world possess a certain alienness, and do not fit in well with the Western canon. There is a different principle by which they ought to be judged. He writes,

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of

representation, such as the novel. (69)

He says further: "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society." It might be questioned whether Jameson allows, then, only for oppositional postcolonialism and not also the collusive? This question, among others was raised by Ahmad Aijaz.

In a response to Jameson's article, Aijaz criticizes the Three Worlds Theory, preferring the notion of one world united "by the global operation of a single mode of production, namely the capitalist one, and the global resistance to this mode, a resistance which is itself unevenly developed in different parts of the globe" (10). Aijaz is in part jealous for the integrity of his Marxist vision of the world as he continues, "What gives the world its unity, then, is not a humanist ideology but the ferocious struggle of capital and labor which is now strictly and fundamentally global in character" (10). Jameson and others of the "U S left intelligentsia" have forgotten "the ferocity of that basic struggle which in our time transcends all others."

Beyond this exception-taking with Jameson's view, Aijaz concludes on a rather conciliatory note, stating:

even if I were to accept Jameson's division of the globe into three worlds, I would still have to insist, as my references not only to feminism and black literature but to Jameson's own location would indicate, that there is right here, within the belly of the first world's global postmodernism, perhaps two or three of them. (24)

It would perhaps seem that Jameson is too totalising in his account, as is Aijaz in his rejection.

A major recognition of the postcolonialists is the vastness of their field of study. After noting the service performed by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in mapping out the terrain of the study in especially their The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989) White writes, nevertheless:

For once the very notion of expertise (in any case too often offered as a kind of imperialistic control over areas of interest on the part of the critic) lapses, for want of an object *discrete* enough to be held *fixed* enough for *long* enough to act mandarin about! So, happily, a kind of "enforced democracy" of interests settles on any who would write about aspects of postcolonial literatures. (17-18)

Postcolonialism, then, is a grouping of a vast, indeed global, set of political phenomena. Though Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffins also note "the great scope, the rich heterogeneity and vast energy of the field" (xvi), it remains their concern, nevertheless, not to let the

field be so vast as to surrender the existence of an actual colonial setting, as the inclusion of feminism *per se* would seem to entail. This limitation would not, however, exclude African Americans for several reasons, the primary being that in the long historical view America is a postcolonial polity.

Sally Keenan writes in “Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,”

That the inclusion of Native and African American histories in postcolonial discourse has not been axiomatic in the past signals a failure to address the processes of colonization on which the foundation of the United States rests. That it is a postcolonial society can no longer be in question. Furthermore, in the United States, as elsewhere, the *post-* of that term should not be regarded as a sign that the processes of colonialism have ended; rather, their legacy continues to exist as a lived reality for many citizens. (45)

Keenan calls to her support Mohanty, Russo, and Torres in the introduction of Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, where, again, the term “Third World” is preferred to “postcolonialism” as it refers, they say,

to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latino, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia. Thus, the term does not merely indicate a hierarchical cultural and economic relationship between

“first” and “third” world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and third world peoples. (ix-x)

In respect to his view of African American literature fitting the parameters of Jameson’s national allegories, Aijaz is precisely to the point, failing only to take into account the possible expansion of the concept of the Third World to include members of “internal colonies,” which though they may exclude the exogenies of colonies properly, include the endogenies of colonial oppression and economic exploitation.

A more direct route to the inclusion of African American literature among the postcolonial literatures is to look as Keenan suggests at the colonial foundations of the United States. What, for instance, Jefferson in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, deplored in King George III and the British Colonial Office, that is, the foisting of slavery upon the colonies, the independent United States continued for almost another century, and denied equal rights for the century after that. This suggests the double colonialism of the settler colony . . . which marks precisely the longer-lived involvement of Britain in South Africa. Whether Africans were indigenous to the United States or not, is as

irrelevant as whether the Indians transported from India to South Africa in the nineteenth century were not as a result colonials in that latter place.

In Prophetic Fragments, Cornell West has remarked the tardiness of African Americans, except for a few Marxists, to look at the international effects of imperialism (74). Perhaps because, after all, he had a narrower, more technical meaning in mind, he overlooks, however, the great generalists of African American thought. In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), W. E. B. Dubois clearly placed the black experience in America in the context of world imperialism:

From the shimmering swirl of waters where many, many thoughts ago the slave-ship first saw the square tower of Jamestown, have flowed down to our day three streams of thinking: one swollen from the larger world here and overseas, saying, the multiplying of human wants in culture-lands calls for the world-wide cooperation of men in satisfying them. Hence arises a new human unity, pulling the ends of the earth nearer, and all men, black, yellow and white. The larger humanity strives to feel in this contact of living Nations and sleeping hordes a thrill of new life in the world, crying, "If the contact of Life and Sleep be Death, shame on such Life." To be sure, behind this thought lurks the afterthought of force and dominion,--the making of brown men to delve when the temptation of beads and red calico cloys. (270-71)

Martin Luther King, the individual whom West calls “the most significant and successful organic intellectual in American history” (3), explains the change in the consciousness of the African American evident in the upsurge of the civil rights movement by saying,

he has watched developments in Asia and Africa with rapt attention. On these vast prodigious continents dwell two-thirds of the world’s people. For years they were exploited economically, dominated politically, segregated and humiliated by foreign powers. Thirty years ago there were only three independent countries in the whole of Africa--Liberia, Ethiopia, and South Africa. By 1962, there may be as many as thirty independent nations in Africa. These rapid changes have naturally influenced the thinking of the American Negro. (146)

The degree to which this was a constituent part of this thought is clear from references to the Hegelian *zeitgeist* in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (297) which he clarifies into the very hand of God in “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” the last speech of his life:

And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding--something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee--the cry is always the same--“We want to be free.” (280)

Literary postcolonialism offers to African American criticism the opportunity to treat both African American literature and African literature within a common framework without falling into the pitfall of a racial essentialism such as was espoused by W. E. B. Dubois.

In addition, whereas Henry Louis Gates in The Signifying Monkey, draws in some sense upon the African trickster Esu Elegbara to produce a theory of African American literary criticism, while it achieves an African American literary theory with some sense of connectedness to Africa, it is a theory for which Gates does not claim any applicability to the literatures of Africa itself. It would seem that the postcolonial paradigm affords a more comprehensive framework that might remain true to what Gates has discovered and yet place the practice on a true global basis. What then are the methodological characteristics of postcolonial theory?

As literature, it involves first a consideration of language. For some theorists, to write in the language of the post-colonizer is “to write from within death itself” (Hodge and Vijay 100). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o of Kenya occupies the extreme in his rejection of English



and return to his native Gikuyu. Audre' Lorde expresses the same concern with her notion that the master's house can never be dismantled with the master's tools (98).

Just as with the indigenous language, the postcolonized might affect to look at the status quo ante of their nation. There would be a pre-Columbian look in the Americas . . . a return to Aztlan or Maya (Valdez xiii-xvii). There would be a look at pre-Raj India as the character Aziz takes in E. M. Forster's A Passage to India, a novel in which, a colonial writer imaginatively affiliates himself with a culture on the verge of postcoloniality. Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart imaginatively conducts us to Nigeria before the incursion of Britain, ending the novel after the death of old Okonkwo with the book title ruminations of the administrator. We remember Okonkwo's heroism and glory and shudder to hear the colonial view of his tragedy in the prospective title: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. Maxine Hong Kingston looks at pre-imperial China. The Irish returned to Gaelic tales prior to conquest by Britain. Bessie Head herself, in this context, situates A Bewitched Crossroad in the time prior to the coming of missionaries to the Bamangwato tribes that became known later as Botswana.

It may involve wishes for the future, or assessments of what should be kept and what should be rejected of the colonial period once political independence is achieved. So it is we hear from Frantz Fanon: "If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to the Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us . . . . we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (315-16).

It is this aspect of the matter--the postcolonialist author looking at the future--that brings us to the topic of Bessie Head. It is a future in which the former colonizers maintain a part. It is a future, however, that attempts to elide what went wrong in the prior colonization. The look at the future brings a reassessment of political existence given the acquisition of political freedom. Here there is an expression of hope for the new governments, or of dismay at the failures of the new governments to reach those hopes. In truth, Appiah has called postcoloniality a condition of pessimism (353). As India celebrates its fiftieth year of independence, the responses are mixed. Happily, or ironically, Botswana and South Africa are doing well.

Of the numerous concerns possible, we have elected to deal

with the concept of universality, which as a purported concept of the colonizers, Bessie Head seems to accept despite the fact that other postcolonial writers are suspicious of the notion. Chinua Achebe, for one, is outspoken in his opposition to the concept. Some theorists take the notion of universality to be precisely the means by which the colonizers wrong the colonized. Edward Said, however, comes down squarely on the side of universality as nothing less than the duty of the intellectual:

To this terribly important task of representing the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reasserting its enduring presence, reinforcing its memory, there must be added something else, which only an intellectual, I believe, has the obligation to fulfill. After all, many novelists, painters, and poets, like Manzoni, Picasso or Neruda, have embodied the historical experience of their people in aesthetic works, which in turn become recognized as great masterpieces. For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others. (44)

In A Question of Power, Bessie Head takes a stand, from the very first words of her novel, not only to universalize the the suffering of Africans, but also to appropriate the meaning of “universal” itself and offer it back in a manner that makes the term truly embrace all mankind.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Additional details of this event are also given on pages 11 and 12, where Dan is described as “flaying his powerful penis in the air” and having “pulled up his pants too late saying that ‘he had become uplifted.’”

## CHAPTER III

### THE UNIVERSALIUM OF PHILOSOPHY

By etymology, a philosopher is “a lover of wisdom,” the word having first come into use because the Greeks found the term “lover of wisdom” less immodest than the term “sophos” or “sage.” The three Greek superphilosophers were unanimous in their view that philosophy, “the love of wisdom,” originated in wonder.<sup>1</sup> In the Theaetetus, Plato has Socrates say, “This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin, and he was a good genealogist who made Iris the daughter of Thaumas” (860). In his Metaphysics, Aristotle writes: “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize . . . ” (692). A Persian of about the time of the Norman invasion in a work later translated into English by an Anglo-Irish bohemian, delineated that wonder perhaps better than anyone:

Into this Universe, and *Why* not knowing  
Nor *Whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,

I know not *Whither*, willy-nilly blowing. (Khayyam 72)

The “why,” the “whence,” and “whither” strive toward the central question of philosophy, the two latter interrogatives serving to accentuate the former. John Burnet has said, “If we look at Greek philosophy as a whole, we shall see that it is dominated from beginning to end with the problem of reality (το ον) [11]. When the Faustus of Christopher Marlowe considers and rejects “ον και μη ον,” (being and not being), he rejects the central question of philosophy.

Martin Heidegger reformulates the question with Shakespearean overtones, “Why are there essents rather than nothing? That is the question” (1). It is the question at the heart of metaphysics, and because metaphysics is the “pivot and core” (5) of all philosophy, the question at the heart of philosophy as well. In fact, to philosophize is nothing other than to ask this question (7).

“Why are there essents rather than nothing?” is the question of first rank for three reasons: “first because it is the most far reaching, second because it is the deepest, and finally because it is the most fundamental of all questions” (2). It is broadest because it includes everything past, present, and future. “The range of this question finds its limit only in nothing, in that which simply is not

and never was . . . . Our question reaches out so far that we can never go further" (2). It is deepest because it inquires into the ground of the essent, that from which it derives, and upon which it stands. The question

does not move on any one plane but penetrates to the "underlying" realms and indeed to the very last of them, to the limit; turning away from the surface, from all shallowness, it strives toward the depths; this broadest of all questions is also the deepest. (3)

It is the most fundamental question because its "why" recoils upon itself. Confronting the entire essent, it *ipso facto* confronts itself. In the thorough permeation of all things by the "why," a man thrusts aside "all the previous security, whether real or imagined, of his life" (6). In what Heidegger terms a "leap" this question "opens up its own source" and the source of all things: "It is because the question 'Why are there essents rather than nothing?' breaks open the ground for all authentic questions and is thus at the origin of them all that we must recognize it as the most fundamental of all questions" (6). Although "Why are there essents rather than nothing?" is indeed the broadest, deepest and most fundamental of all philosophical questions, it is not the only question which philosophy asks.

In addition to metaphysics, or the question of “What is?” philosophy is traditionally concerned also with Axiology, Epistemology, Logic. Axiology is concerned with the question, “What is valuable?” and includes the studies of ethics, aesthetics, and economics. Epistemology asks, “What can we know, how do we know it?” Logic asks, “How do we think correctly?” Taken together, they provide a thoughtful approach to all reality. Therefore, Bessie Head’s appeal to philosophy is an appeal to the most universal of disciplines.

The very opening lines of A Question of Power conduct us into the heart of Western philosophy, and hence into the heart of our contention that Bessie Head uses philosophy as a means both of appealing to a global audience and of undergirding her theme. The opening lines are cast in the form of a Universal-Particular paradigm of the sort brought into Western thought by Plato and Aristotle (Russell “Universals” 17). Head writes:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: “I am just anyone.” (11)

While the form of the paradigm recalls classical Greek philosophy,



the content of the paradigm--man himself--recalls, it would seem, not the classical Greeks, but the cosmopolitan brotherhood of the stoics of the Hellenistic age of Greece. Head thus slyly exploits a tension within the Western tradition for her own rhetorical purposes. The plot of A Question of Power may be said, at one level, even to unfold because of the historical contradiction between this philosophical conception (as applied to man) and historical practice, for our purposes, especially with respect to the Occident in the last half millennium and, more particularly, to the life of Elizabeth in Southern Africa. Thus Head roots her theme, or artistic argument, in the very taproot of Western thought.

Inasmuch, however, as the character to whom the narrator attributes the philosophically pregnant statement above is, according to the particular structure of the novel, not a real person at all in the ordinary sense but a figment of the protagonist's psychosis, it might be expedient to consider first of all, any other references to the universal spirit of philosophy, which it is my contention, forms a constituent part, a *universalium*, of Head's rhetoric of universality. For this, a closer attention to the text recommends itself.

As we have said, Head's character, Elizabeth is one whom "we

can almost totally identify with the author" (Eilerson "Social" 43). Elizabeth, like Bessie herself, is born in an asylum in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. She too is raised by a Coloured family until she reaches the age of thirteen, after which time she becomes the ward of a missionary girls' school where she pursues a course of study that leads to the teaching profession. Although a time of apprenticeship as a journalist, like Bessie's own, is denied Elizabeth, she is given contact with a political party which was banned almost immediately after she joined. In the State of Emergency which followed, like that which occurred in South Africa after the Pan African Congress initiative in the Spring of 1960, Elizabeth as well has a slight run-in with the authorities because of a letter found in her possession. Although the disposition of the case in the novel is almost laughable in that the judge says to the policeman bringing the charge, "Can't you read English? The two people involved in the writing of this letter are extremely critical of the behavior of people belonging to the banned party" (18), one can only, after Eilerson, recall Head's suicide attempt after her case. Interestingly enough, however, the deep impact of the experience upon Elizabeth is not spared, as Head writes, "It might have been the court case which eventually

made her a stateless person in Betswana” (18).

Like her creator, Elizabeth also takes a husband in the closing years of her residency in South Africa. What is of unique interest is the reason why Elizabeth marries. While Bessie herself married the respectable writer Harold Head for suitably private and respectable reasons, Elizabeth was espoused to a member of that colorful and storied product of South African townships: the *tsotsis* or gangster figure.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth’s was

a gangster just out of jail. He said he had thought deeply about life while in prison. What really made her talk to him was that he said he was interested in Buddhism, and she knew a little about it from her friendships with Asian people. It seemed perfectly all right, a week later, to marry someone interested in philosophies, especially those of India. (18)

What appealed to her was not the money, cars, or fine clothing with which gangsters could usually be identified, nor the distinctive gangster personality. No doubt, in spite of that, she married the man because he was “someone interested in philosophies.” Elizabeth who is not otherwise a fatuous character, is not merely fatuous here, but responding to a dominant principle of her character: the philosophical. No sooner than the gangster nature of her husband resurfaces--molesting women, having a

white boy-friend--than she leaves the country, “the never to return” of the marriage contract being superseded by “the never to return” of the one-way exit visa. What she sought unrealistically and unsuccessfully in her husband, she will have to find in her exile.

Bertrand Russell pointed out that philosophy exists in the “No Man’s Land” between religion and philosophy (History xiii). Though Buddhism can be regarded, most strictly speaking, as a religion, in terms of its non-dogmatic peripheries, it can be regarded as a philosophy. This is a view Bessie Head indicates when she uses the word, “philosophies” (41). The plural of the word, paradoxically, establishes an interest in philosophy in the singular. Elizabeth is not a Buddhist but one interested in the Buddhist philosophy among other “philosophies.” Thus philosophy is rescued not only from a possible Eastern hegemony, very important given Bessie’s Head’s deep fascination with Indian philosophy, but also, what is perhaps even more important, from a Western hegemony, which does not recognize the qualification that should come to mind when it is said, for instance, that Thales is the father of philosophy. By pluralizing philosophy and, further, showing the versions clearly to be not coterminous with any

regional or national speculative traditions, Head presents philosophy as at once universalized as an interest and protected from the frequent error of isolation to any one region of the world, as it has proved so easy to do. Greek philosophy is usually given a preeminence because Greek philosophers first sought first principles of the cosmos, as in Thales' "all is water." Writing from the standpoint of Persia, Ruhi Afnan has called Thales' *παντα υδωρ* but a half innovation, for thinkers of the East also attributed all things to one source: the spiritual (19).

As an extension of this line of thought, the novel is narrated in an atmosphere of the great teachers, a universal designation for the most influential philosophical thinkers in the history of the world. Because of the unprecedented profusion of seminal world thinkers between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C.E., Karl Jaspers called this epoch in which the world was changed, an "axial" period (36). For Bessie Head, here are brought to mind not only the celebrated company of thinkers of the sixth century B.C.--Confucius of China, Zoroaster of Persia, Gautama of India, Jeremiah of Judah, Thales and Pythagoras of the Greeks--but also the eminent intellects and spirits of all the ages. Again, of Sello, she writes, "If there had been a Sello in India, would the poor of India

have had the courage to challenge him? Types like Sello were always Brahmins or Rama there” (15). In her first encounter with this mental specter in the guise of a monk, a name for him

had instinctively formed itself in her mind. He was . . .

He was . . . But it was too impossible. . . . He looked like a man she had seen about the village of Motabeng who drove a green truck, but the name she associated in her mind with the monk robed man was that of an almost universally adored God. (22, 23)

Who might this adored anthropomorphized deity be? It would be difficult not to identify him with Jesus.

Despite the seeming disclaimer in her statement that the fruits (presumably) of her shared experience with one of the characters “did not bear comparing with the lofty statements of mankind’s great teachers” (12), Head nevertheless makes rhetorical capital of the notion. In fact, she means that what the other Great teachers had said could not compare to what she had learned with Sello. They had been indistinct about evil whereas Sello had personified it. When she later attempts to explain her relationship to Sello, she finds it almost inexplicable, ineffable:

The nearest example she could give to it, was that of a Teacher and his favourite disciple, such as many

religious men had had. There were so many impressions of Sello as this religious man that she had a feeling that he was somewhat of a gymnast concerning these things. That his past life had pervaded the whole world. The best way she could present her argument was this: Say Einstein, for instance, had, at some dim beginning of his soul, decided that science was the best profession for him. And over the centuries, throughout all his incarnations, he had worked the same process applied to Sello. He had chosen religion. (25)

The notion of the "great teachers" then is the company in which Sello can alone be comprehended.

Even Dan, the less sanguine of the pair of specters who hold sway within Elizabeth's sometimes madness, was not far from being a great teacher:

He raked the personality over with the eyes of a hawk and grasped hold of all the weak spots. The great teachers had done the same. They had sent their mousy little disciples into corners shuddering over character defects. But they had said, tenderly: "Overcome the weakness, brother. Rise up from the mouse to God." The accent was on repairs, on gentle remodeling of personality. (136)

Dan taught by the *via negativa*, and though his negative way almost takes Elizabeth's life, she felt after survival had been assured that he

was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with, but he taught by default--he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he

taught the extremes of love and tenderness through the extremes of hate; he taught an alertness for falsehoods within, because he had used any means at his disposal to destroy Sello. (202)

Head's continual reference to the company of the great teachers, then, especially with respect to the two major characters of the novel, places her narrative within a rarefied region where the Occident does allow a high degree of heterogeneity. By tapping into this rarefied stratum of what Chardin would call the noosphere, Head invests Elizabeth's madness with the quality of the universal, if tortured, quest for truth on the cosmic scale. Her acquaintance with the most significant characters of the novel begins, of course, with her date with destiny in Botswana.

Three months after her journey to Motabeng in Botswana, Elizabeth's "life began to pitch over from an even keel, and it remained from then onwards at a pitched-over angle" (21). In the village night *sans* streetlights, she had the feeling one night that someone had entered the room of her hut and sat down in her only chair. When she lit the candle, she saw no one. When she got the same visitations night after night, she was minded to let whatever it was sit if it wanted to, as it seemed harmless, but:

Oh, no; whatever it was wanted to introduce itself at some stage, because one night she was lying staring at



the dark when it seemed as though her head simply filled out into a large horizon. It gave her a strange feeling of things being there right inside her and yet projected at the same time at a distance away from her. She was not sure if she were awake or asleep, and often after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused. (22)

In time, the form of a man filled the horizon. Wearing the white flowing robes of a monk, he sat sidewise: "He stared straight at Elizabeth in a friendly way and said, in a voice of quiet affection: 'My friend'" (22).

Thereafter her life was turned inside out. The dreams became dominant; reality became incidental. She was like the man sneaking drinks in a bathroom and on occasion looking out the door, who drank so much, that he soon drank in the open and looked into the bathroom to see if anyone was coming. Her conversations with the figure in the chair became "a full-time activity" (23) She prepared tea for him and was on the way to the chair before she caught herself: "Agh, I must be mad! That's just an intangible form" (23). She directed visitors not to sit in the chair, and while in the heat of discussion would turn to the chair and include its occupant in the conversation. The occupant for his part responded with a loud "ting" when excluded from

conversations or when a particularly good point had been made.

Tom, the American Peace Corps volunteer who had become a fixture in Elizabeth's life since the first day they had met, shares with Elizabeth a love of philosophy: "They soon began imagining they were solving all the problems of the universe together, and it was their habit to sit for hours, heads bent, working away at the deep philosophical problems" (24). It is this shared orientation that vouchsafes for Tom sole entry into the inner world of Elizabeth. One night,

just as he was about to leave, he laughed and turned towards her and said: "You're a strange woman Elizabeth. The things *you* draw out of a man! You know men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men." (24)

At that statement, Sello, the intangible visitor said "Yes that's right," and off went the chair with a "ting." This indicates that the remark about philosophy is one the intangible visitor approves of. He, apparently, is a connoisseur of philosophy as well.

Another aspect of this incident marks for us the importance of philosophy. When the intangible occupant speaks and the chair goes "ting," Tom, as if this were the proverbial music of the spheres

which only a philosopher could hear, “looked around the room with wide, alert eyes : ‘Did you hear something?’ he said quickly. ‘I distinctly heard someone say ‘Yes that’s right,’: and he kept very still, his eyes roving curiously about the room” (24). Tom alone is vouchsafed this experience of sensibly apprehending the events of Elizabeth’s dementia. In fact, this might be regarded as a magic-realist moment giving to accent not so much the relationship as the criterion of the relationship, to wit, philosophy.

Philosophy is the universal manifested in the realm of thinking. It is traditionally the attempt to find what is true for all men by the use of reason alone. Socrates is credited with saying that the “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Plato, of course, regarded a knowledge of philosophy as the *sine qua non* of good government: “Until philosophers are kings or the kings of this world have the spirit of philosophy and political power and wisdom are brought together . . . nations will never have a rest from their troubles, no, nor the human race.” (qtd. in Loeper 17-18) Aristotle, no doubt equating educated men to philosophers, said, “Educated men are as superior to uneducated men as the living are to the dead” (23). Confucius wrote, “There are three things of which the superior man stands in awe. He stands in awe

of the laws of heaven. He stands in awe of great men. He stands in awe of the words of wise men" (34). Immanuel Kant, surprisingly like Confucius, had put on his tombstone: "The starry heavens above me and the moral law within." The latter was contained in his categorical imperative: "Act only on that rule which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (73). This concatenation of the *loci classici* of just a few thinkers illustrate the esteem which philosophy is held not only by the great teachers but by a significant portion of men. It is to this "high spirit converse" to which Bessie Head appeals.

Sello's approval of the point that Tom makes, marks as we have adumbrated, the familiar's own interest in philosophy, which can be seen, most notably, in the very first lines of the novel. Although Sello must be regarded as a projection of Elizabeth's personality, it must be noted that the first of the two parts of the novel is named for him, and the key to the triumph of the protagonist is offered by him. The approbation with which he is viewed by the narrator and the protagonist is evident in the initial passage of the novel:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet,

as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: "I am just anyone." (11)

Beyond the basic orientation implied by the universal-particular paradigm, Sello is credited with a "most perfect statement" which in turn becomes the leitmotif of the novel. The very heart of the novel's philosophy is here at the beginning.

Just as Hegel in the Philosophy of History represented all of history as a sort of concrete syllogism (27), Head represents it all as the single concept: the universal-particular paradigm. As said before, considered abstractly, Head's first words are cast into a philosophical form which Bertrand Russell apprises us "was brought into philosophy by Plato" ("Universals" 17). The philosophical notion of universals and particulars is implicit in the Platonic concept of eternal "ideas," the things most real in which Plato believed visible things somehow participated. Russell explains:

The word "idea" has acquired in the course of time, many associations which are quite misleading when applied to Plato's "ideas." We shall therefore use the word "universal" instead of the word "idea," to describe what Plato meant. The essence of the sort of entity that Plato meant is that it is opposed to the particular things given in sensation, as a *particular*, by opposition to this, a *universal* will be anything which may be shared by many particulars. ("Universals" 17).

In Head's formulation, of course, "mankind" is the universal while Sello, the "African," is the particular. By indirectly but clearly invoking Plato, Head taps deep into the intellectual soul of the West. It is apposite in this context to recall that Alfred North Whitehead described all subsequent Western philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato (qtd. in Lovejoy 24). What is true in the whole is true in the part.

By birth and by philosophy, Plato was an aristocrat. In his depiction of his ideal commonwealth in the Republic, he advocated the myth of the rings to ensure the maintenance of his caste system. Citizens were to be told that their ranks in life were settled forever through the agency of a Big Lie.

Plato and the classical Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. were impressed by the supposed dichotomy between Greek and barbarian as is evident in Aristotle's infamous utterance in his Politics. "among barbarians, no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female" (1128). To the question, "Is anyone intended by nature to be a slave?" Aristotle answers, "There is no difficulty in answering this question, on grounds both of reason and of fact. For that some should rule and

others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule" (1132). Though Aristotle, the pupil of Plato was a master of the concept of universals and particulars, it was not for him to employ it as Bessie Head has.

Head's choice of "mankind" as the universal with which she begins has deep and venerable philosophical roots which it is significant to note. "Mankind" has been regarded as a positive and honorific universal since the cosmopolitanism of the Stoics after the breakdown of the great Greek city states (Russell, A History 220). Head follows the Stoics and other Hellenistic philosophers. Huston Smith notes the significance of this epoch, as opposed to classical Greece and, indeed, most of the world when he writes, "Twenty-five hundred years ago it took an exceptional individual like Diogenes to exclaim, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world" (13). Though she uses a concept of the classical Greeks, she invests it with the content of the Hellenistic Greeks, a liberating content approved by egalitarians everywhere and especially, says Head, of Africans.

Head therefore deftly uses the Western tradition against itself for the advancement of her "African" viewpoint. The wisdom

of this, or on the other hand, the possibility of this has been disputed by Ghanaian novelist Chinua Achebe and feminist Audre Lorde, respectively. In his essay, "Thoughts on the African Novel," Achebe warns against judging African novels on the basis of so-called universal truths. The African vision is sometimes, he says "necessarily local and particular" (96). An African writer should be governed by an undue concern for universals neither in his subject matter nor his/her audience; to do so would be to put the novelistic vision on a Procrustean bed. Head has certainly targeted a universal audience, but at whom else ought she have directed this broadside against man's inhumanity to man . . . and woman? Lorde has suggested that new ways other than those ready-to-hand in the Western intellectual arsenal be sought to combat racism, for she opines in her eponymous essay, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (98). Head's use of the Western philosophical tradition is powerful, to be sure, although its efficacy is difficult to judge. Rhetorically considered, however, an approach like Head's can influence those individuals who are yet susceptible to persuasion. It might be remembered that The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, while it was (and is) a tool of the fathers of the United States was, nevertheless,



mightily used by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his speech that became known as "I Have a Dream."

In Head's formulation, again, first the Africaness of Sello (that which has always been problematic or ambivalent in the conceptions and valuations of the West) is swallowed up in the positive universal of mankind. Secondly, after that which is special and alien (being an African) is subsumed in the general and venerated, then the "laundered" special can be returned to to offer what Head seems to think is its particular and peculiarly African truth: that is, that social and political evils can be mitigated if all people thought of themselves as just ordinary, and could be brought to say with Sello, "I am just anyone."

Head's commencement of the novel with precisely this wedding of the particular and the universal is important in the sense not only of making what she has to say more engaging and palatable to the West, but especially and specifically because it is this connection between universal and particular (or rather the practical denial of it) that is at the bottom of her protagonist's woes and is therefore the ultimate motivation for the novel. It is essentially because Elizabeth's black African father was not really regarded as a part of mankind that her white mother was regarded

as insane for cohabiting with him to beget her. This is at once the problem of the novel and of the contemporary world the novel reflects. Intellectually the West accepts "mankind" as a positive and valid universal, but in practice, it often does not. Lance Morrow, back-page guru of the most prestigious weekly magazine in the United States, regards this inconsistency as merely a sad platitude when in writing of the American character in 1994, he says, "It may be that life is unfair. The American people try not to be. Fairness is a kind of American fetish (except where race is concerned)" (94). Head therefore uses the intellectual apparatus or rhetoric of the West to move the West to resolve the contradiction between conception and conduct.

The focus of the philosophy of Head, beyond the metaphysics of the universal-particular paradigm, or rather at the back of it, is a concern with ethics. Not surprisingly, the point of her ethical focus is the equality of man. When Sello shows Elizabeth a company of people with "fire-washed faces" (31), she realizes after a while that the looks on their faces signify the repeated deaths they had died "for the liberation of mankind." The people presented to Elizabeth by Sello in a beatified state

turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that

they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings. All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else; and her most vivid memories were the memories of those souls who stated this with the most impact. (31)

The novel is a novel of advocacy and not argument. The great humanistic principles of mankind can only be advocated, not proved.

The philosophical appeals of Head's novel serve to secure a thoughtful audience for the novel and its theme of the "anyoneness" of man. Although philosophy has traditionally laid claims to be the most broad of intellectual pursuits, the relatively recent study of psychology and psychoanalysis has claimed no less prominence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Plato, Theaetetus, Plato: Collected Dialogues. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Harrington Cairns. Princeton, 1961. Plato uses Socrates as interlocutor in this dialogue, thus credit must be given to both in this citation. Aristotle in his Metaphysics, subscribes to the same idea. (Theaetetus 155<sup>d</sup> Metaphysics 982<sup>b</sup>)

<sup>2</sup> Bessie Head places gangsters in the background of Life Morapedi in the short story, "Life," in Collectors of Treasures. In her Tales of Tenderness and Power, the short story "Oranges and Lemons" present a *femme fatale* who is a moll of gangsters. Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, makes frequent references to these well-dressed dangerous denizens of the South African townships.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE UNIVERSALISM OF PSYCHOLOGY

With the writing of A Question of Power, Bessie Head is credited with accomplishing “almost single-handedly . . . the inward turning of the African novel” (Larson qtd. in Rose). This distinction, by virtue of its concomitant complexity, is thought by some to mark a further decline from the political protest thought incumbent upon the African novel (Nkosi qtd. in Eilerson Crossroad 43). Cecil Abrahams marks this epochal inward turning of the “African” novel achieved by Head with the words, “she has chosen an angle which, although frustrating to the more militant oppressed, is new in its context” (qtd. in Beard “Syncretic Fictions” 577).

This new departure of Bessie Head seemed to others to mark a welcome maturation of the African novel (Berner 233). It might serve to modify the view of Jameson that the

third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; what is more damaging than that, perhaps, is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that “they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson.” (65)

Some of the distance implied in the statement of Jameson that there was an oddness about the third world novel because as a "national allegory" it concentrated on Marx rather than Freud (65), might be thought to be reduced through such a consistent appeal to psychology as Head makes. Through a consistent appeal to the universalism of psychology, Bessie is so much on the side of Freud, that, though the novel is, despite its psychological subtleties, nevertheless political, and political in an effective way, it is as much at home in the first world as in the third.

It might be mentioned in advance that Bessie Head herself did have experiences with mental illness, a fact about which, it is obvious, too much or too little can be made. Linda Beard detects in Headian scholarship before 1991, a preoccupation with three foci-- "the autobiographical madness, more or less reconfigured in her work; Head's feminist ideology; or her seemingly apolitical commentary"--which are usually treated as "isolated, monochromatic lenses" (577). Such narrowness is therefore to be avoided.

As for the leading facts of her mental history, she was born in an insane asylum because her mother was hospitalized at the time, not for the reason however that she had become pregnant by a

black man as Bessie Head herself thought and said, but because she had become pregnant at all. This fact in her past, though it may or may not have contributed to some genetic disposition to nervous disorders, certainly subjected her to life experiences that might have produced mental imbalance. It was a great blow to her when she learned at thirteen that her foster mother was not her real mother and that her real mother had in fact been insane. To her claim that the missionaries used that newly disclosed information clumsily and insensitively, she traced her determination to never attend church again. To that same trauma might be traced some of her nervous condition. Certainly when she accepted her first job as teacher, and as a result of apartheid had to resort to an Indian library, her subsequent embrace of Hinduism led to the first known manifestation of her nervous strain (Eilerson Thunder 35).

After her brief involvement with Robert Sobukwe's PAC during the time of Sharpeville, she apparently attempted suicide. Within Botswana, where she exiled herself and her son in 1964, she had run from the school screaming when the principal had sought sexual favors of her. When she was asked to take psychiatric screening, she refused out of terror, and so lost her job (77). In March of 1969, she lived the scene described in A

Question of Power, when reeling from the perceived Batswana hatred of Coloureds, she retaliated by screaming out insults against the Batswana while shopping for a transistor radio in a store. For this she was hospitalized for about a day (110). In 1970, she lived the essential scene also presented in the novel when she struck an old Christian lady and later went into town to post a libel against a citizen. In the novel, it was Sello; in reality it was Seretse Khama a member of the royal family and currently the President of Botswana. As a consequence, she was hospitalized at Lobatse, “the country’s only mental hospital” from March until the end of June (135-38).

In August of 1975 she wrote a long letter to Sir Seretse Khama apologizing for the libelous placard she had placed on the post office wall, explaining to him at the end that she had used A Question of Power “to pull that paper down. I am extremely sorry for it and had no intention of dying with such a crime against my name” (qtd. in Vigne 192). Although the novel, then, is a sort of apology for this psychotic attack she made upon the ruler of Botswana, it is clear also by that the fact she sent the novel to a publisher rather than to the President, that it is much much more than that. Adetokunbo Pearse seems to capture the probable



balance at work in her use of psychology: "Bessie Head's thrust into the insane mind and her ability to speak the highly symbolic language of madness derives, it seems, from a combination of the painful personal experience of mental aberration and an interest in psychoanalytical theories" (81).

No less than the opening instance of the novel is patently philosophical because of its invocation and complication of the universal-particular paradigm, it is also psychological, because the personage who exemplifies and reexpresses the philosophical theme of universality and ordinariness, is at the same time, a manifestation of the protagonist's psychosis. Sello, the character who is credited at once with an identification with mankind, and, paradoxically, an Africanness that enriches and secures the universality of the universal of mankind, is a figment of Elizabeth's madness. Thus as the binary opposition of the universal and particular is overcome by the essence of that concept, so the binary opposition of madness and sanity is overcome by the truth that is common to them.

A key to understanding the volume of the psychological content of the novel is given by Head herself. To explain the psychotic change in her protagonist's life, Bessie Head has Elizabeth

call upon a story from the teaching profession, through the agency of which, of course, she was able to commence her exile in

Botswana:

There was only one way to explain it. The principal of a school had a teacher on his staff who was fond of brandy. He took a bottle of brandy into the toilet, intending to have a few sips. Well, he kept on taking a few sips and peeping around the door to spy out the whereabouts of the principal. Soon he became quite drunk and reversed the activity. He'd open the door, take a few sips, close the door and look for the principal in the toilet. Much the same applied to her. She began by waking up on the tail-end of absorbing conversations with the white-robed monk who sat on the chair beside her bed, and it wasn't long before the discussions became a full-time activity. (23)

Elizabeth's psychosis begins to manifest itself with the appearance of Sello, who comes to the bedside chair as a white-robed monk.

The inebriate of the anecdote indicates in a real sense the proportion of the novel devoted to the psychosis of Elizabeth. In a novel of 206 pages, the encounter with Sello and a blurred reality begins on page 22 and only on page 203 does Elizabeth triumphantly defenestrate the "packet of tablets" that she used to get to sleep. Over the four-year period that the novel covers, Elizabeth undergoes two nervous breakdowns, one in the first half of the book, and one in the second (Johnson "Metaphor"199).

At any time, Elizabeth is subject to the dream-visions that comprise her psychological underground. As she begins to doubt the beneficence of Sello because of the powerful delusion of Dan, Elizabeth swallowed some sleeping pills as she prepared to get some sleep, but her mental state did not cooperate:

Instead, her mind swirled out into a vast horizon. Sello rose on it, very much as he had done in her first perception him, but this time as a huge satanic personality. His face had greenish blotches on it, his mouth was a swollen mass of sensual depravity, his ears rose to sharp, pointed peaks. Like Thoko, who had suddenly been presented at her lands with the Mamba snake, she rolled out of bed, flat on the floor mat, dead with shock. A short while later her sanity returned.  
(139)

In a way similar to this, Elizabeth moves between reality and dream. The dream however is the realm in which she truly works out her personal and philosophical conflicts and eventually becomes a better integrated personality.

The character Sello gives his name to the first half of the novel; his psychic opponent, Dan, provides the title for the second half of the novel. Both characters correspond to actual Motabeng men. Although Elizabeth is coherent enough to know the men bear little relationship to the familiars of her mind, when she comes upon the two of them conversing around the corner of a building,

she was on the verge of asking Sello, "Why are you sitting in my house?" (27). Sello is

a crop farmer and cattle breeder who is generally admired by the villagers. In Elizabeth's dreams, he alternates between the roles of prophet and ordinary man. His appeal is spiritual and Elizabeth associates him with the power of the creative imagination. The other is Dan, who is an entrepreneur and politician who is "greatly admired for being an African nationalist in a country where people were only concerned with tribal affairs. (Johnson "Metaphor" 200)

Later, however, as we have said, Elizabeth actually does accuse the real Sello of a crime, much as Bessie Head herself once railed upon Lenyeletse Khama (Vigne 192). The village men are therefore more acted upon than actors in the novel.

Charles Larson has noted the closeness of the novelistic point of view to the point of view of the protagonist:

Although A Question of Power is told in the third person, the point of view is always Elizabeth's. The reader understands the events in the story the same way that Elizabeth does, which is to say, that when she is confused (which is often) he is confused. The extended passages of introspection are depicted primarily through the use of the internal monologue. (165)

Margaret Tucker extends the notion of Larson, theorizing that, fictively considered, A Question of Power is precisely the story that

the character Elizabeth tells (171). Tucker notes that at the end of the novel “Elizabeth begins ‘to jot down fragmentary notes such as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life’ (204). These notes, in turn become the text” (171). This rather persuasive view, in turn, raises a number of issues.

First, as Tucker herself points out, drawing upon Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the fact that Elizabeth becomes a writer, the writer of the text is a mark of Elizabeth’s empowerment. Cixous defines writing as “precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (qtd. in Tucker 171). Within the text, Elizabeth is written upon by the horrors of her oppression; as a “recorder of the text.” it is she who is the inscriber, the one who is to that extent more free. In order for Elizabeth to examine her sufferings, says Tucker, “she must find a text on which to inscribe it so that she can *see*, rather than be consumed by, herself as Other. . . . Living the nightmare was not enough: she must write it and, thereby, cease to be a mere receptacle for the horrors of others” (172).

Second, the positive reference to a figment of her psychosis in

the beginning of the retelling of her experience speaks, to a certain extent, of the persistence of a disturbance of the psyche, although it might be thought that the end of the imagined retelling does seem to point toward greater health and wholeness at which such a manifestation of the psyche is behind the character in the sense of having withered away.

Third, Elizabeth as the recorder of the text brings the reader close to her dementia. Larson has mentioned how the reader is confused when Elizabeth is confused. What Elizabeth sees in her dreams, the reader also sees. Head's use of the "stream of consciousness" technique identifies her with the literary modernists, Jameson's Joyce, of course, among them. Although Head's technique can indeed be considered a species of the stream of consciousness technique, the sheer amplitude of Head's approach is redolent of the wish of the Hebrew prophet Amos for justice, to wit, that it "should flow down as a mighty waters and a rushing stream" (5:24). By what she calls the peculiar "filmic" presentation of the workings of the mind of Elizabeth, Tucker says "We are forced not only to share the horrors, but to see them" (172). Jacqueline Rose writes, "One of the reasons I do not want to discard the term *madness* too quickly in relation to *A Question of Power* is

because I am not sure that it is possible to read this book without feeling oneself go a little mad" (404). Head's technique then extends a unique opportunity, it would seem, to vicariously experience madness.

The psychological nature of Elizabeth's torments, though on the one hand posing a danger of diminution of her appeal to a general sector of the world public, one critic suggesting that as a result of its complexities in no small part owing to the mania of the Elizabeth, the novel "risks literary dismissal" (Beard "Syncretic" 583), on the other enhances it in that it provides an opportunity to appeal to the psychoanalytical insights that have in the present century become the property of the world.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Head's psychological concerns are not purely an appeal to an occidental preoccupation. Bessie Head refers to the destructive power directed toward her in her dreams as coming from a master of "the psychology behind witchcraft" (21, 137). Africa indeed had a theory of inner conflict through dreams. Monica Wilson makes the point that

long before Freud analyzed the dreams of his Viennese patients, it was understood that dreams were an expression of inner conflict, before Erikson spoke of the loss of identity, African villagers talked of those

with majestic authority, casting a shadow (*nesitunzi* in Xhosa) and those torn within casting no shadow. (qtd. in Johnson “Metaphor” 200)

Drawing upon the ideas of anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, Maggi Phillips also notes the African difference of dream, such as what constitutes much of A Question of Power:

The manifold dimensions found in African dream activity are significant when considered alongside Eurocentric perspectives, where dreams are basically aberrant fragments of experience which may elucidate problems previously encountered in waking life. Throughout the ethnic diversity of Africa, dreaming is a gift passed down through a multitude of forebears and the dreaming received is full-blooded experience. Dreams predict and torture or protect; dreaming alters other realities and is the site of ritual psychic healing; dreamself travel out of bodies, and sorcerers, gods, goddesses, spirits, and the dead physically enter the dreamer’s presence; finally dreaming transgresses and contacts the highest sacred authority. This dream activity is beyond Freud and Jung. (1)

Not only is there in the African concept of dreams that which has not been imagined in the Western schools of psychoanalysis, but even the pre-western ideation of the book of Job regards dreams as the site of the encounter with the ultimately real: “In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; then he openeth the ears of men, and



sealeth their instructions, that they may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man" (33:15-17). Even the New Testament, in its narratives of Joseph and the three wise men, regards dreams differently from the present psychoanalytical model. The existence of an African or third-world psychology which can be related to the hegemonizing occidental psychology or other psychologies is precisely what it means to appeal to "universality."

In accord with the more elaborated Western lines, the etiology of Elizabeth's dementia, as deftly if briefly sketched by Head, is traced to Elizabeth's successive alienations from her mother, surrogate mother, political passion, husband, beloved country, and even her country of exile. After she is taken from her mother at birth when her mother is hospitalized for madness, she is separated at the critical age of thirteen from the lady who she had grown up thinking was her mother. It is then, ironically at a mission school, that she is tactlessly and traumatically told the story of her mother's madness, and is meted out the punishment of isolation that assumed a future of dementia for her:

The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth's isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. They took to kicking at her with

deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book. None of the prefects would listen to her side of the story. (16)

Soon Elizabeth regarded this unearned suffering as a subconscious appeal from her dead mother to share her suffering: "Do you think I can share the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me" (17). Next, after she had become a teacher, she makes a bad marriage with an ex-con because "he said he was interested in Buddhism" (18). From the disastrously dysfunctional marriage in which her husband, as it were, tries to make up for his life without women by chasing every dress he sees, she flees with her small son to Motabeng, a city in an all black country in which she, as a Coloured, is an alien. Thus, through these successive frustrations of her need for identity and belonging, she is more than ripe for a descent into madness.

As her alienation from the state of South Africa is also the root cause of her alienation from her biological mother, there is a level at which Elizabeth's madness is uniquely a metaphor of and commentary upon the influence of Apartheid. Trenchantly, Head writes in one place that Elizabeth had been prepared by her life in South Africa for her initial experiences of the blending of sanity and insanity which she began to experience in Motabeng. Femi

Ojo-Ade in her article "Madness in the African Novel" explores the connection of madness to state oppression: "The master-slave relationship that exists in such a society . . . provides a classical setting for the dissipation of sanity and its displacement by dementia" (qtd. in Tucker 170). Her madness is, at bottom, state-induced, for Apartheid is viewed as a form of stark madness. Elizabeth's benefactor in Botswana, himself a South African refugee, at one point extended great sympathy to her because he worked "on the simple theory that South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration" (58).

Patrick Hogan concurs with this political genesis and significance of the madness:

The political and social background of Elizabeth's madness is explicit in the novel. She is a woman without a country (she is a refugee in Botswana), a race (she is neither black nor white, but colored), a culture (she is neither African nor European). Her political situation has repeatedly denied her any social identity whatsoever. It is for this reason that her personal identity warps and cracks under the pressure. (96)

Hogan does not think, however, that politics and ethics are able to assess the content of the madness.

Though the political situation provided a matrix in which Elizabeth's psychic condition could develop, its structure is nonetheless that of psychosis, which is to

say, a mental structure open to psychological understanding. Indeed, to anyone familiar with psychoanalytical theories, one of the most striking things about Head's novel is the way that Elizabeth's delusions fall into a clear pattern in accordance with Lacan's account of psychosis. (97)

He offers therefore a Lacanian analysis of the madness of Elizabeth that does indeed seem to cast light on the easily bewildering world of Elizabeth's dementia.

According to Hogan, Lacan's psychology consists of two stages of the "constitution" of the ego. In the first, or Mirror Stage, a child between six and eighteen months achieves the ability to recognize himself or herself in the mirror, that is, the child is able to conceive or "constitute" itself as the possessor of just such a physical body as the mirror would reflect. In the second stage, the *Nom/Non-du-pere*, the child enters the Symbolic or social order. This stage, which marks the end of the exclusive relationship between child and mother commences with the child's recognition of paternity, and the entry into the larger society. Although the relationship between child and mother may be immediate or "Imaginary," the relationship between the child and the father is mediated symbolically, with words (*logos*), as in the reception of the name of the father. It is also sexual because of the maleness (*phallus*) of

the father, hence “phallogocentrism.” As this is a socially constructed constitution of the self, the influence of society weighs heavily in the constitution of the selves of individuals:

In its foundations, then, the ego is a social construction. Personal identity is, at bottom, a set of ascribed social relations--not relations elected or desired or intuited by the subject, but relations which have been attributed to him/her by the society which has defined and hierarchized those relations. Our constitution of ourselves is developed through the categories and upon the presuppositions of the ways others have constituted us. Thus, in *A Question of Power*, it is crucial to Elizabeth that she is “coloured.” but that is because she has been told that she is colored, verbally and practically assigned to that category, treated as people treat a “coloured,” and so on. In this way, her personal identity is a function of her ascribed or assigned personal identity; her self-constitution is founded not on self-experience (it is not a natural development), but on social attribution--beginning with the *Nom-du-pere*. (Hogan 101-02)

In this way it is clear to see the potential for a societal impact upon the mental health of subjects.

The *non* or “no” of the father refers to the threat that marks and maintains the greater separation of the child from the mother that comes with increasing infantile socialization. As with Freudianism, this threat produces the fear of castration in males, and, in females, the fear of having already been castrated.

Whereas, according to Lacanian theory, the castration complex is repressed in healthy individuals, when the castration complex has been foreclosed as a result of a faulty self-constitution, psychoses result. To the psychotic, “the foreclosed element of castration will become an important element in his/her delusions” (102). Since the individual has not been able to properly fix sexual identity, the delusions will also “tend to be marked by shifting and androgynous sexual identities.” And last, the delusions will include the Oedipal fantasies of “sexual possession and murder” (102).

Hogan correctly notes that the name of Elizabeth’s father has been at once “socially foreclosed” and “socially determinative” for her. She does not know his identity or his fate; she only knows he was black and a “stable boy” (16). Denied the positive presence of this paternal center, Elizabeth’s self-constitution has been faulty. Thus her identity splits and sometimes falls apart. For instance, she

frequently has a sense of doubling, of a split in herself which disallows unification: “as though I am living with a strange ‘other self’ I don’t know” (58). Clearly, Elizabeth is unable to maintain a singular, unified self-constitution. Her ego is too “loosely knit” (12). It tears apart; something comes loose. More exactly, this other self appears out of what would have or should have been repressed, but has instead been foreclosed, just as Medusa appears out of Sello’s “subconscious” where she

should have been “hidden away” (58).

While that which is repressed may surface in a neurotic symptom, that which is foreclosed “reappears in the real” (Lacan, *Psychoses* 21); it faces the subject . . . as a palpable thing, an object in the world. (Hogan 103-04)

This explains the psychotic texture of most of A Question of Power, as so much of the the content of the novel is the content of Elizabeth’s mind appearing in the real.

Hogan later demonstrates that the instability of Elizabeth’s ego is clearly linked with the Lacanian *Nom/Non-du-pere* concept in the delusional figure of “the father.” Shortly after the beginning of her delusions, Elizabeth has a visitor:

A tall big-built man wearing only short khaki pants and boots came walking along the pathway to Elizabeth’s house. He stood for a moment at he door. As she turned to look at him, she sprang to her feet with an exclamation of surprise and wonder. The sun had directly transferred itself to his face and its light was flying in all directions. She heard Sello say: “He is the Father, the Father.” (30)

Hogan notes that “the Father” is closely linked with names and naming. That the appellation is printed in quotes implies “that his real name is unknown or unutterable--foreclosed, in effect” (105). He claims that “Dan is fooling around with my name” (107), that is, that the name of the father is absent and unstable. In addition,

when "The Father" shares a name with Elizabeth, she forgets it (105).

After the incident of the lost name, in keeping with Lacan's dictum that the foreclosed reappears as the real, the delusional "Father" reappears, having behind him "a gruesome woman, with no head . . . . The headless figure had slowly walked straight into Elizabeth" (107). According to Hogan, decapitation is one of the most common symbols of castration (105). The decapitated woman

is almost undoubtedly a figure of Elizabeth's infantile fantasy of her own castration, as well as that of her mother. By entering into Elizabeth, the figure manifests their identity, but also indicates that this is the identity of Elizabeth and her "other self"--what cannot be repressed through a stable self-constitution, what is instead foreclosed, precisely because the *Nom-du-pere* has been lost. The "forgetting" of the name conjoined with the appearance of this figure of castration is not a coincidence, for, according to Lacan, the "forgetting" of the name and the foreclosure of castration are, again, one and the same (105).

The foreclosure of castration resulting here in the decapitated woman strolling into Elizabeth also points to instability of her own sexual identity.

The delusional figure of the Medusa compares Elizabeth to homosexual coloured men who are depicted "lying on their backs,



their penes in the air" (45). Although their posture is prototypically female, their anatomy is male, which is to imply "that beneath her skirt she too has a penis; it is to repudiate castration or sexual difference, yet simultaneously to manifest it (105-06). In another instance, says Hogan, of this

simultaneous repudiation and manifestation of sexual difference, Elizabeth's double or "other self" appears at one point in the guise of David, "a man who slightly resembled her." This David is not facing Goliath, but a "monstrous woman . . . with teeth about six inches big" (33). This is a common image of the so-called "phallic" mother, the mother whose castration is denied, who thus has the phallus--here symbolized by the clearly phallic teeth--but who threatens her children with castration. It is the task of Elizabeth, in her male form as David, to destroy this threatening mother: "Elizabeth turned to the man at her side and said: "David, kill her" (33).

The Medusa, also a phallic mother, Hogan credits with the most significant indication of the unstable sexual identity of Elizabeth. The Medusa claims that Elizabeth has no vagina. Elizabeth responds to the accusation with indifference, as "it was not maddening to be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on" (44). The psychological etiology of this indifference to sexuality sheds light on a controversy about the sexuality of Elizabeth.

A key part of the universalism of psychology is evident in the displaced sexuality of the novel. If Sello is primarily imaged by the monk, Dan is primarily imaged “flaying his powerful penis in the air” (13). This is reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence’s phallic imaging in Lady Chatterley’s Lover,<sup>1</sup> in keeping with the modernist movement toward frankness in sexuality. Where Elizabeth is concerned, the sexuality within the novel is curiously displaced. Joyce Johnson takes exception to Lewis Nkosi’s view that this is because Head feels sex is unimportant (“Metaphor” 204). In the view of Johnson, the political symbology of the sexually potent Medusa, of whom Head says the libidinous Dan “was simply the extension” (168), precludes positive representations of sex. Nevertheless, the ostensible absence of any positive portrayal of sexuality in such a sophisticated novel as Head’s is a strange phenomenon. Nkosi’s criticism maintains its force; Elizabeth is strangely sexless. The novel itself reads, “Sex had never counted in the strenuous turmoil of destiny behind Elizabeth, but long years of prison confinements had, loss, suffering and sacrifice had, or else what did love really mean?” (63).

There is in this, however, the implicit view that in the madness that was South Africa, sexuality was warped out of its

natural orbit. It was certainly so for men. Elizabeth had lived for a time in a South African town where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexual and wore feminine attire:

They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high falsetto voices. It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. They and the people in general accepted it as a disease one had to live with. No one commented at these strange men dressed in women's clothes. Sometimes people laughed when they were kissing each other in the street. (45)

An African man gave Elizabeth the most reasonable explanation why there were so many of them, "How can a man be a man when he is called boy? I can barely retain my own manhood" (45). Just as apartheid had deflected these men from the "natural" course of sexuality, it had done the same for Elizabeth, who was not, however, interested in the same sex, but in no sex at all because of her all-consuming preoccupation with survival.

Nevertheless, it is the mind of Elizabeth that produces the hypersexuality of Dan and the Medusa. All the sexuality of the novel is Elizabeth's. Therefore sexuality is not something she is devoid of but something about which she also has to struggle in order to become a whole person. Her deliverance from Dan the

oppressor is also her deliverance from a sexuality that is similarly dysfunctional. It is a sexual identity that she recovers along with the political and the personal. It is a definition of love that liberates her--one given in contradistinction to the debaucheries of Dan on the bed beside her. Hogan's analysis supplies a credible psychological explanation for the putative sexlessness of Elizabeth.

Because Elizabeth's father was even more absent in her life than her mother, under the Lacanian theory the delusionary figures of paternity should be that much more prominent. As with the mother figures, the delusionary fathers could have positive or negative imagos--chaste images that represent the child's fantasies of sole possession of the parents, and promiscuous images stemming from the child's "fantasies of parental intercourse" (103).

"The Father" and Sello represent the positive imagos. All Elizabeth knew of her father was that he was a "stable boy, who was a native" (16). Hogan makes the significant connection that "sounds and images of horses recur in Elizabeth's hallucinations."

He also notes that

at one point the beginning of a hallucination is marked by a sound 'like the hard pounding of horses' hooves" (36), a rhythmic pounding which is not only violent, but sexual, clearly linked with the powerfully phallic imago of her unknown progenitor and the 'primal scene' of

her own conception. (109)

Hogan also catches the fact that “the Father” as if, he says, “the connection with the paternal imago were not already clear from this character’s title” (109), at one point “flung his head back like a wild horse” (30). Later he, as well as Sello, the “alter ego of ‘The Father’” (Beard “Journey” 269), throws back his head in what appears to be a characteristic gesture, indeed, identifying himself and his alter ego as Elizabeth’s positive father(s).

As additional evidence of the procreational relation of “The Father” and Sello to Elizabeth, each is represented as connected to her with umbilical cords. Regarding “the Father,” Head writes of him while he is under the savage attack of Dan:

He was standing in an open space confessing his evil. The roots of it were uncovered. She suffered too, because he had attached to her a long thread-like filament like an umbilical cord. It was pitch-black in colour, supposedly signifying evil or darkness. As he confessed in agony, this dark thread separated. An outraged Dan stood near him. He said indignantly: “He said he was the King of the Underworld, didn’t he? Then that’s where he’s going.” Dan uncurled a long rope and flung it in lasso formation over “the father’s” neck. (117)

The lasso over the neck Hogan calls an “overdetermined image” which refers among other things, perhaps to “a fantasy of the real

father's lynching" (110). He continues,

This uterine connection implicitly represents "the Father" and Sello as pregnant, and thus not definitively male or female, paternal or maternal. Moreover, the umbilical cord is ambiguous; either end could be the fetus and either end could be the mother. Hence the image also indicates that, just as Elizabeth's father was both man and boy, "the Father" and Sello are not determinably parent or child, that in fact all fundamental divisions of the Symbolic Order are lost or confused. (109-110)

It is interesting as well to note that "the Father" is depicted as Caucasian, a fact which in the racially binarist imagination tends to foreclose the idea of his paternal relation to Elizabeth. Yet as her mother was indeed Caucasian, this might easily be seen as a obvious case of imaginative transference. Whereas then, as Dan is evil, one would not think that he would be the father figure to Elizabeth although he is black, the notion of positive and negative imagos allow us to make the connection.

Dan represents, then, the negative imago. If "fantasies of parental intercourse" is a moment of the madness of a child in which the Lacanian *Nom/non du pere* has been foreclosed, then the hyperbolic orgiastic activity of Dan is greatly accounted for. It partially explains the quantity. It partially explains the location, which is often right beside Elizabeth and on occasion actually on

top of her. It is not mere excess, but an expression and measure of the pain of the absence of the real father caused by South African racism.

As for the affliction of the desire to possess the parent that also besets the improperly socialized child, Hogan notes that

father/daughter incest is a recurrent motif in Elizabeth's delusions. Sometimes it is an accusation against the father; sometimes it is the desire of the child. For example, we find another double of Elizabeth in the "weird little girl who rolled her eyes with mock innocence and said: 'I like to sleep with my daddy'" (64)--an Oedipal desire which Elizabeth may both express and deny by placing the words in the mouth of this double. Later, Elizabeth implicitly generalizes from her own unknown father to the "African male": "this filthy environment, where men sleep with the little girls they fathered" (137). Recalling the horror she glimpsed in her own mirror image, the horror she could not escape because it was the horror of her own mind, Elizabeth refers to such incest as "horrific"--thereby, once again implying and denying her own incestuous fantasies. (106-7)

Hogan fails to say that the defects of the generalized "African male," among which incest is one, is represented by Dan, the negative imago: "He was a super-combination of . . . these defects, casting aside as useless the broad hazy body of social goodness and strength. To sex he added homosexuality<sup>2</sup> and perversions of all

kinds" (137). Finally, in his campaign against Sello, the positive imago, Dan represents Sello as evil, and guilty of the rape of his own daughter. It is this, on the occasion of Elizabeth's second and greatest nervous breakdown, that she writes on the placard that she signs and posts on the post office bulletin board. She wrote of the real Sello, "SELLO IS A FILTHY PERVERT WHO SLEEPS WITH HIS DAUGHTER" (175). Dan perfectly represents the negative imago and climaxes his attack on the positive imago by casting him as a perpetrator of incest, which so shakes Elizabeth that she acts out in reality.

Although to initial readings, much of the psychic imagery of Head is impenetrable, it is a significant contribution of Hogan's to trace out some threads of clarity; it is an achievement to show that there is certifiable madness indeed in Head's method.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A major influence on Bessie Head was D. H. Lawrence. It might be noted that Head uses a quote from Lawrence's poem "God" as her epigraph, and portions of his "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through" at the very end of the book (204). Rhetorically, Head is here appealing to readers with sensibilities that can psychologize phallic symbology.

<sup>2</sup>Femi Ojo-Ade makes the assertion in "Bessie Head's Alienated Heroine: Victim of Villain?" that "like women's liberation, homosexuality is un-African." Certainly Head is unequivocal in her view that homosexuality is a perversion to her.

## CHAPTER V

### THE UNIVERSALIUM OF MYTHOLOGY

Another area in which Head appeals to the universal in her attempt to communicate her African gospel of ordinariness is that of mythology. When a “tall-built man wearing only khaki pants” appears on the walkway to Elizabeth’s house, subsumes the sun in his face, “its light . . . flying in all directions,” Elizabeth hears Sello, the familiar who has taken up residence on her bedside chair, say, “He is the Father, the Father” (30). She notices that he and Sello “seemed to be easily interchangeable souls, because Sello stood up, walked straight into his person and disappeared” (30). When this estimable personage speaks, he adds two more titles to the one given him by Sello: “‘I am the king of the Underworld,’ he said. ‘My other name is Wonder There’” (30). Within this psychological underworld, also resonant of Dostoevsky’s underground, Head brings to life a labyrinthian syncretism of mythologies from several cultures.

The notion of the underground or underworld, complete with its own king is a dominant structure of A Question of Power. The

underground has been a metaphor for psychological experience since before the psychoanalytical revolution. Dostoevsky anti-hero in Notes from Underground is an individual afflicted with too great a degree of self-consciousness, too great an experience of interiority. In T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the epigraph from Dante's Inferno connects Dante's world of the dead with Eliot's indecisive persona. In the Richard Wright story, "The Man Who Lived Underground," a fugitive from a police frame-up becomes mad, that is, develops a psychological underground, because of his experiences in his refuge beneath the streets. For Bessie Head, the underground becomes the space in which Elizabeth faces her "demons" and comes through.

Although "the Father" bears the name of the monarch of the Underworld, he himself does not make a sustained appearance there. It should be noted that his "presence," as it were, *in absentia* is very strong. For example, his characteristic sound of horsehooves marks one of Elizabeth's visions (36). In addition, since Sello is interchangeable with him, and is called "the alter ego of 'the Father'" (Beard "Journey" 269), "the Father" might be understood to be present in the dreams and delusions of Elizabeth through proxy, although the primal difficulty of even this primary

construction of the underworld warns the reader of too simplistic a reading of any parallels.

Sello introduces to Elizabeth his spiritual wife, and to the reader the concept that Sello, the spiritual Einstein (25), always has some relation to women:

Her face was upturned. Though her eyes were opened, they were abstracted like those of one who lives in a permanent trance. Her long straight black hair clung like a wet mat around her shoulders and down her back. It was almost the extreme of spirituality. She was frighteningly unapproachable. (37)

Out of Sello is projected "Sello in the brown suit." Out of his wife stepped a pitch-black woman dressed in white who aggressively brushed past Elizabeth and

swung around near the man in the brown suit who looked like Sello, and looked at Elizabeth like a wild-eyed Medusa. She started shouting in a shrill, high voice: "We don't want you here. This is my land. These are my people. We keep things to ourselves. You keep no secrets. I can do more for the poor than you could ever do." (38)

This implies that the woman with the Medusa eyes has some knowledge, previous or immediate, about Elizabeth: one, she can keep no secrets, and two, that she has as her object to help the poor.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth awakes in the dark from her dream-vision to meditate on the nature of the Medusa. She was “expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut-in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow shut-in worlds” (38). This interpretation of Medusa is quite realistic and has clear references, it seems to recent history, to the Ugandas and Haitis of the world without the advanced institutions to protect them from “power-lusting presidents for life with the ‘my people’ cult” (39). When Elizabeth returns to sleep, the reader discovers along with Elizabeth that the Medusa within the vision is all too real:

Suddenly, a terrible thunderbolt struck her heart. She could feel wave after wave of its power spread over her body and pass out through her feet. As the last wave died down, she simply shot up into the air. There was a quick movement from the indistinct form who forever sat on the chair beside her bed. He caught hold of her in mid-air and began stuffing her back in something that felt like a heavy dead sack. (39)

So begins the reign of terror of Medusa, who, as Oladele Taiwo points out, “does more to torment Elizabeth than any of the other figures” (qtd. in Tucker 176). As for the original Sello, he expresses his regrets for Elizabeth’s pain, assures her of her ability to defeat the Medusa, and in time offers her an explanation which includes

expanding the mythological references in Head's underworld. First, however, a general theory of mythologies is given.

Elizabeth herself explains this gathering maelstrom of mythologies to which she is subjected:

There was a strange parallel in her observations to mankind's myths--they began to seem vividly true. Nearly every nation had that background of mythology--looming, monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods,' personalities who formed the base of their attitudes to royalty and class; personalities whose deeds were hideous and yet who assumed powerful positions, presumably because they were in possession of thunderbolts, like the Medusa. Then again the story was shaded down to a very personal level of how a man is overwhelmed by his own internal darkness; that when he finds himself in the embrace of Medusa she is really the direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance, and these dominate him totally and bring him to the death of the soul. (40)

If Head is consistent, Elizabeth's temptations and tribulations at the hands of Medusa are at base Elizabeth's struggling with and within herself. As the Medusa is above defined by Head as "expressing the surface reality of African society," that of a shut-in world which "had a strong theme of power worship running through it" (38), it is this parochial notion of Africa which the heroine of ordinariness must combat in herself, and vicariously, for the

continent and the world.

Sello explains that he and Elizabeth had been Osiris and Isis: "He had been the Osiris who had been shattered into a thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of the Medusa. She had been the Isis who had put the pieces together again. The details did not unfold" (39). Although it is said that for Elizabeth "The details did not unfold," and that she only learned to understand why Sello had the tell-tale "fire-washed face"<sup>2</sup> of martyrdom, the mention of Osiris and Isis, as well as the Medusa, requires some elaboration.

Osiris was the most popular of all the Egyptian deities (Frazer 420). Although Frazer thinks that like Adonis and Attis, Osiris ought to be regarded as a "personification of the great yearly vicissitudes of nature," his very popularity resulted in the accretion of a great many other attributes from which it is difficult to separate him. Conceived in the illicit relationship between the earth-god Seb and the sky-goddess Nut, he was born out of time. When Ra, the cuckolded sun-god, decreed that Nut's offspring could be born in no month and no year, Thoth won from the moon a seventy-second part of each of the 360 days of the Egyptian calendar, and compounded these parts into the five extra days

which completed the Egyptian year Osiris and his four siblings--Horus, Typhon, Isis, and Nephthys--were born on the five days successively. Osiris married Isis and became king. Isis discovered wild grain and Osiris taught the then cannibalistic Egyptians to cultivate it. This proved such a success that Osiris spread the discovery to other nations. Upon his triumphant return, he fell victim to a plot led by his brother Typhon. Campbell traces the problem to Osiris' accidentally sleeping with Nephthys (177). Tricked into an ornamented coffin that had been secretly made to his measurements, he was sealed into it and cast into the Nile. Recovered by Isis from Byblos in Syria where the coffin had floated and been incorporated into a tree, the body was rediscovered by Typhon and torn into fourteen pieces (Frazer 421-23).

There are several unique aspects in the way that Bessie Head uses myths. First to draw the Greek myth of the Medusa together with the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis is in a sense to collapse categories--allegorically and mythically to do what Head wishes to be done in society. With these radical literary displacements, however, Head is not entirely without surprising subtleties. To have transported Medusa into the underworld, for instance, would



seem on the surface to be pure imaginative license. Kirk, however, points out that the myth of the Medusa bears the marks of having at one time been a myth of the underworld. The name of the king who ventures Perseus against Medusa is Polydectes, which means "many-receiving," a title much like that of Hades, who received his many into the underworld. The name of the hero, Perseus, means "destroyer." Those who could show him the whereabouts of the Gorgons, were the ancient Graiai, those gray ladies with their communal eye and tooth, to wit, those most toward death. The Medusa by her ability to turn into stone any who gazed upon her ably represents death (148). That Bessie Head's Medusa is black, however, further alters the Medusa in a way consistent with Head's postcolonial purposes, making her not only African in her association with Osiris, but sub-Saharan as well. In addition, as a mother figure, a negative imago for Elizabeth, the Medusa could be imagined as the one who summons Elizabeth to the underworld. This would also serve to explain why, after causing Elizabeth so much suffering, the Medusa is in the end viewed with such surprising leniency that it is thought that she too might have attained "the fire-washed face" of martyrdom (99).

Second, Bessie Head assumes transmigrational structure

drawn from Hinduism. Not only is Medusa translated from Europe to Egypt and again to Southern Africa, but she is given an Indian identity as well. Head writes, "Hadn't they a name for her in India-Mahamaya, the Weaver of Illusions, the kind that trapped men in their own passions? It was the trap of death" (98). Elizabeth had been Isis in her first existence. Sello's "only comment on the Osiris-Isis story was: 'It was the first work we did together and the first life you lived after your soul had been created. My death at that time broke the hold she [Medusa] had over me'" (40). Second, it was Medusa who tore up the body of Sello/Osiris, not Typhon. Deities like the Medusa issued from the cloistered cells of the Egyptian priesthood. Such power and cruelty thrive in closed societies. In her first incarnation, Elizabeth had presented a principle contrary to the priestly cloisters. She had opened up the philosophies to all people and because, true to the charge of the Medusa, she kept "no secrets" had earned the name "Blabbermouth." If the moniker is so gratingly common, then commonness and ordinariness is Head's point stylistically as well as thematically. Over time, the Medusa complex, although it had destroyed several civilizations, had also been thwarted in some. Women of Medusa's kind, somehow always an aspect of Sello's

“deity,” no longer generally rampaged

through towns hissing thunder and lightening out of their eyes and mouths. They were beautiful women who cried and wiped his feet with their long black hair. They seemed strangely soft and docile, but it had taken hell to break their power. (42)

A spiritual progression is established between Sello as Osiris and Sello as “the almost universally adored God” or Jesus. Nevertheless, Medusa has returned. It is now the time of emergent postcolonial Africa to struggle with her. The closed society of African tribalism is her element.

Her attack on Elizabeth has to do first with her sexuality, and second, with that which was obviously regarded as the obverse, her problematic identification with black Africans. Regarding the former, the Medusa turned tele-orgasmic:

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation traveled out of her towards Elizabeth. It embraced Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow deep sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled. (44)

This, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has partly to do with

her status as a South African Coloured,<sup>3</sup> but what follows has all to do with her status as a coloured among the Batswana. It eventuates in Elizabeth's first nervous breakdown.

Medusa opens her most fateful attack on Elizabeth with a sort of sadistic declaration that outlines her attack: "Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages" (44). Medusa plays on Elizabeth's "experiences in South Africa," her rigid classification there as Coloured, rather than as "a human being with a personality" (44). It is to this categorization that she traces the homosexuality of so many South African Coloured men, with whose "dubious" sexuality she cannot, in her present situation, but identify (47). Elizabeth sees a vision of Coloured effeminates on their backs, dying slowly, some toppling into the river and drowning, "Medusa's mocking smile towering over them all" (45). After the Medusa says that Elizabeth would have to die the same death, Elizabeth "collapsed flat on her back. She just lay there nearly choked to death." Sello attempts to help by ineffectually burning an effigy of Medusa, in response to which a voice says loudly, "I told him not to bring the doll to the altar."<sup>4</sup>

When she awakes after a deep sleep, someone is playing a record in her head. It is not that she hears a *voice*, but it is a record player stuck in the same groove, saying over and over again, "Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death" (45). The record was the work of Dan who, painfully in love with Elizabeth, felt that she should suffer too, "so when Medusa put her in the torture-chamber he decided to add to it with the record" (46).

In an unguarded moment on a Sunday evening, Elizabeth thinks quietly to herself, "Sello, after all, is just a fool, and he looks like a monkey." Medusa immediately relays this intelligence to Sello in the brown suit, and while Elizabeth watches, "his face slowly changed to the shape of an owl. He said, 'Oh no, I'm not a monkey. I'm a wise old owl'" (48). Going out for water to make tea in the morning, Elizabeth becomes transfixed with terror when she finds a dead owl on her doorstep. After that shock, when she prepares to go into town, her child plays an insolent echolalic game by repeating all her words until she breaks into tears. In a radio shop in town, when she is told to take her purchase to an office where her purchase can be recorded, she begins "pitching and heaving mentally in a crescendo of torture." Her mind is swamped

with the “insistent hiss” of the record blossoming in horror:

She was choking for air. The clerk had told her to sit down opposite him. A loud wail of counter-protest was arising in her. The insistent hissing was mean, stifling, vicious. Whom could she accuse to end it? She sprang to her feet, slamming the chair back against the wall, and shouted: ‘Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!!’ Then she opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream. (51)

She awakes in the private ward of the Motabeng hospital. Sello comes to her bedside, and after his metaphysical ministrations inclusive of his becoming a great sky-bird and showing her true nobility and love, she formulates her own definition of God:

God is the totality of all great souls and their achievements; the achievements are not that of one single individual soul, but of many souls who all worked to make up the soul of God, and this might be called God or the Gods. She floated slowly back to everyday reality on this huge tidal wave of peace. (54)

When a nurse enters with a chart, Elizabeth swings out of bed and secures her discharge on the strength of her experience that “the evils which had begun to dominate her mind had a soaring parallel of goodness” (55).

As a result of the one-day nervous breakdown, Elizabeth is relieved of her job at the school three weeks later (66). A South African exile whom she calls, perhaps with special meaning, the

“Eugene man” (68), had kept her son during her hospitalization and promised her help should she need it. When given a choice of jobs in the self-help operations that he heads, Elizabeth is indifferent, and chooses to farm because of a pumpkin that an African named Thoko had brought back from her farm.

Immediately after her first major breakdown, Elizabeth discovers the soil. The mud hut in which she had lived had slowly and insensibly produced in her a closeness to the soil: “It was like living with the trees and insects right indoors, because there was no sharp distinction between the circling mud walls of a hut and the earth outside” (60). When Elizabeth later becomes a participant in the Motabeng farm project she muses significantly, “It is impossible to become a vegetable gardener without at the same time coming into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature” (72). At the start then, we see foreshadowings of the significance that agriculture will have for her, and which the fertility myths both of Osiris and Isis and Persephone and Demeter will serve to intensify.

In the process of becoming a farm worker, however, Head uses another interesting appeal to mythology. Among the volunteers from several nations, there is a contingent of Dutch

agriculturalists assisting in the Motabeng farm project. These individuals with college degrees are generally unhappy that they have only illiterates to work with. While Elizabeth satisfied her curiosity about the project very enjoyably with one of the young Batswanan men, a Dutch lady named Camilla “came speeding toward them” (74). Next, “she sped around to where Elizabeth was seated on the ground” (75). She “whipped” a pencil from her person and “rapidly began sketching something” (75). The images of celerity proliferate in one of the rare comic interludes in the novel. Camilla is a maiden from an Italian myth given to us through Virgil. She unsuccessfully led the Italian forces against Aeneas. Camilla “could run over the fields of ripe grain without bruising the crops and over the waves of the sea without her feet touching the water” (Morford and Lenardon 594). When in the Art of Criticism, Alexander Pope demonstrates how closely the sound of poetry should reflect the sense, he depicts poetic speed by referring to Camilla:

When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw  
 The line too labors, and the words move slow;  
 Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,  
 Flies o’er the unbending corn, and skims along the  
 main. (370-73)



The comedy with Camilla soon runs its course, however, for two reasons. Having taken Elizabeth under her wing because of Elizabeth's higher degree of education relative to the other Batswana, Camilla treats her to a nonstop diet of patronizing loquacity. First of all, she nettles Elizabeth because she claims as a matter of pride that civilization is so advanced in Holland that no one can understand the novels of their writers without "a certain level of education." She says further, "The ordinary man can not understand them . . ." (79). In accordance with her theme of ordinariness, she assails the idea that literature should be marked by incomprehensibility. Elizabeth thought that it had never occurred to Camilla that "those authors had ceased to be of any value whatsoever to their society--or was it really true that an extreme height of culture and the incomprehensible went hand in hand?" (79).

Second, when Elizabeth shares with Birgette, a young serious Dutch teacher of math, the racism she feels she has suffered at the tongue of Camilla, the response Elizabeth receives is illustrative of one aspect of racial relations when the power differential is so absolute. Looking at Elizabeth "accusingly," Birgette says, "Why don't you tell Camilla she's a racist? You ought to tell her."

Elizabeth is "taken off guard," suffused with guilt. She thought:

How did it work out in real life? Did one really go around saying to any white man or woman: 'You are a racist? Where would it end? One would go stark raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of suffering, such as one could encounter in Southern Africa, were really brought to the surface. Subterraneously it was a powerful willing of the total extinction of the white man. He aroused a terrible hatred.

Elizabeth took refuge or subterfuge, as the case may be, in the consideration that speech was not necessary: "'They know,' she said helplessly. 'They know they are racials. If I really had to tell her what I think, I'd jump up and strike her such a hard blow in the face she'd fall stone dead at my feet'" (83). Hardly a more instructive index of the effects on human interrelations of the colonial experience is possible, perhaps, than the difference between the responses of Birgette and Elizabeth to Camilla's personal slight.

To Birgette, who sees the three of them as equals, telling Camilla, if not an altogether pleasant matter, is a relatively simple one, because equality is a matter of practice for a member of the metropolis. Although Elizabeth also sees the three as equals, or, if anything other, Camilla, because of her "racialism," as actually less,

her notion of equality is a *wish* or *idea*--something yet to be attained or brought to the surface and fully realized--because long practice has shown inequality to be the rule. For Birgette, on the other hand, inequality is an *idea*, something she has seen but not "suffered" (84). As a consequence, she cannot correctly gauge the psychic distance Elizabeth must negotiate to speak on terms that presume equality when that very equality is precisely the matter in question.

Elizabeth is concerned with where the matter would stop. Such a beginning, she feels, could very well lead down like a fuse to a powder keg of resentments. Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" is an expression of the restraint that the non-metropolitan American has traditionally and typically exercised. This phenomenon also explains the vogue of bold speakers who will say just what they feel, who articulate resentment. This is the vogue in the United States of Malcolm X and Lewis Farakhan. Though they say more than many of their "race" will agree with, they say much that those who wear the mask, or the muzzle, very much appreciate being said. Despite all the rationalizations that Elizabeth gives, however, there is still the taint of bad consciousness when an insult is allowed to pass. Such a challenge

as Elizabeth's can become a litmus test of racial courage. Speaking on terms of equality across the color or colony line is what, on the one hand, killed Emmitt Till and Steve Biko, and what, on the other, raised Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King to imperishable glory.

Margaret Tucker explains the psychosis of Elizabeth as precisely the resurfacing of the oppression Elizabeth had suffered in South Africa (171). At the least, this shows the danger of the contrast that Head here draws. To resolve the dilemma, Birgette says that she, herself, will tell Camilla everything Elizabeth has said. "There was," says Head, "a short sequel to that lovely evening." Two days later, it was a different Camilla that Elizabeth met. She was soft, subdued, and brooding. She says, "I told you in the beginning that vegetable gardening isn't really my line. I'm a landscape gardener in my country" (87). For closure, they walk down slowly to the vegetable garden: "Camilla no longer exclaimed about nature. She walked quietly between the plots, and the small waterfalls tinkled softly" (87).

After the garden interlude, the Medusa returns with a vengeance, loosing lightning bolts, methodically intent upon accomplishing the murder of Elizabeth: "I'll let loose another bolt

here. I'll let loose another bolt there. Ahah, look how she topples over!" (87). The bolts were aimed at Elizabeth's soul. Under the persistent onslaught of the Medusa, Elizabeth fell back "into death." Then on Christmas day, Kenosi, an erstwhile woolspinner in the Motabeng farm project, comes to visit Elizabeth, planning to work with her in the garden. All the other workers had deserted Elizabeth, as it was strictly volunteer work. As she gives Kenosi tea, the pain in her head eases. Later, "she was to look back on this strange week and the Kenosi woman's sudden appearance as one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life" (89).

It might be wondered if by the name Kenosi--very similar to the theological concept of the "kenosis" or self-emptying of Christ--and the arrival of the one who bore it on Christmas Day, some Christ symbolism is not intended. Certainly Elizabeth credits her with saving her life. How? Not by talking, for this is what the cat-like Kenosi manifestly does little of. Not by friendship, for Kenosi, although she accepts Elizabeth's son right away, subjects all adults to lengthy scrutiny (94). It is by getting Elizabeth back into the garden that Kenosi saves her. While they work setting up poles in the garden, Elizabeth "has a blinding sense of light and liberation in her head. She had hung over a cliff of death and obliteration and

had been flung back into life again" (95). Clearly the garden is symbolic of safety and health for Elizabeth. Because of her return to it, she escapes death of the soul. If Christianity saves her, it does so only as she moves to another salvific paradigm.

Because of the rejuvenation of Elizabeth in the garden, Medusa realizes that she has failed. When she and Sello in the brown suit commiserate together, Sello in the brown suit, speaking of Dan, says, "Don't worry, he'll kill her" (92). Medusa finds consolation in the coming of the one who is the "real magic" to succeed her, but sadist that she is, prepares for Elizabeth a final thunderbolt. The bolt oozed out of her hand. She shaped it into a ball and said,

"Here's the last of them," and the black bolt came hurtling towards Elizabeth. It was about to explode in her face. She put both hands before her and jerked wide awake with a scream. She was trembling so violently that the bed shook. With no clear plans, she pushed her legs out of the bed. As she tried to stand, they wobbled like rubber. She fell down on her knees and began crawling across the floor. The chair on which Sello, the monk, eternally sat, was in her son's room. She crawled to the chair and looked up. She could clearly discern the outline of his form in the white cloth. (93)

She informs him that she can take no more. "All right," he said.

Crawling back to her bed, she collapsed into sleep. When she awoke, her son was lying beside her, staring into her face, wanting to know why she was sleeping on the floor and why she had been burning things. Thinking perhaps she had left a cigarette alight, she rushed to her bedroom in alarm:

There was the drama of a death-throe on the floor. Charcoal-like footprints dragged each other across the floor and in the centre of the room was a heap of charcoal dust. She half muttered aloud to herself:

“Is this the last of Medusa?”

From the room behind her Sello said: “Yes.”

“What are you saying?” the small boy asked.

This passage that gives the putative end of Medusa moves from dream to reality to delusion to a mysterious intersection of dream/delusion and the reality of the boy himself who wants to know to whom the mother is speaking. Strangest of all in this multi-tiered reality, is that the message of the madness is invested with the truth. As Linda Beard points out so clearly, Head achieves a “marriage of assertion and counter assertion” such as is common to “contemporary critical discourse” (581) although she wrote “before and outside the ferment of Gallic- and Anglo-American post-new critical discourses and gender theory promulgations” (582). Although, for instance, nothing should be clearer than the

evil of Medusa, Elizabeth ponders the mystical madonna who was an avatar of Medusa and speculates, "Perhaps at some dim time Medusa had encountered Perseus and, out of the death he had inflicted on her, risen again with a still, sad, fire-washed face" (99).

Not even in the text, however, are we through with the Medusa's evil effects, for she had been consoled by Sello in the brown suit with the prospect of one who was to come. He comes with a tremendous display both of power and romantic love, so beguiling Elizabeth that she is moved to confess as blasphemy the belief that she had fortuitously formulated in the mental hospital, to wit, that people were God (109). "The Father" joins Sello in taking up residence in Elizabeth's household. Although Dan repeatedly casts him out of the house, he always returns.

Because Dan resorts often to the device of playing records in her head to make her think evil of everyone, Elizabeth catches on to the fact that it was he who had played the record in her head that precipitated her first nervous breakdown. Although this thought does not free Elizabeth from her thralldom to Dan, it does liberate Dan of his pretenses. Thereafter, he literally drops his pants and spends time with one or other of his seventy-one nice-time girls. His object, like the Medusa's, is to kill her. When



Elizabeth begins to believe her own nightmares (140), Dan, who has been represented as gangster among gangsters eager to “rub out” Elizabeth, sees his opportunity to move in for the kill: “*Prepare da cement*” (141)

While Dan awaits an opportunity to administer the *coup de grace*, the work with the vegetable garden continues. Tom the American makes his appearance and expends his New World energy in the village and laments his country’s invasion of Cambodia. He praises the black power salute, which Elizabeth condemns and uses as a pretext to preach universal brotherhood. The contrast between these passages of mundane clarity and the almost indecipherable nightmares is intensified.

The cycle from nightmare to garden to nightmare again duplicates for the reader the record that Dan plays in the head of Elizabeth. The point gets to be that the text is not crazy only because of the existence of stretches of vegetable garden lucidity. The lunacy of play is apparent in the parade of the nice-time girls, each of whom has the Medusa’s look of sexual superiority. As for fear of the nightmares, Elizabeth progressively loses sleep, she begins to mentally snap. She is curt with Tom, smearing him with the Ku Klux Klan of his native land. Only Kenosi escapes a head-on

confrontation with her (160). She comes to think an old lady who visits her is the mother of the nice-time girls. When she feels her very death is imminent, she determines not to die without inflicting pain on her tormentors. Dressed only in her nightgown, Elizabeth goes out into the night and finds old lady Jones coming home. Elizabeth slaps her and calls her the mother of the nice-time girls. Back at her house, she plans to kill her son and then herself, but her sons wise calmness deters her. Forgetting her son's presence, she mutters to herself all her confusions deriving from the perceived bipolarities of Sello:

What's wrong with you, Sello? Why must you alternate lives of sainthood with spells of debauchery? Why do you show me two worlds--the saints who died in prison and the dolls and prostitutes with Mary Magdalene in the lead? Do you think you're havin the biggest joke of all time--ha, ha, ha, I'm Jesus and the devil too? (175)

Afterwards, she bikes into the village of Motabeng and places a signed note on the post office wall accusing the village Sello of incest with his daughter. Soon after she returns home on her bicycle; at 8:00 in the morning, the police pick her up. To the officers' question as to why she had done it, she says, "It's Sello. He's both God and the devil at the same time" (176). Soon she is in the same hospital bed she was in before.

Although it is Dan who opens her skull, grows into it, and later takes a broken bottle and bashes it into her brain, she feels Sello is the root of all her sufferings. When she is transferred to another hospital far across Botswana, that Sello was both God and the devil remained her explanation for her hospitalization.

When she emerged from her victory over Dan, the suffering from whom had “sealed her Achille’s [sic] heel” (202), she returned with her gardening companion Kenosi to the garden. Kenosi, representative of both the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ, and the purgation of self-importance (ordinariness) that is of such importance to Elizabeth, remarks to Elizabeth/Isis/Persephone, “You left the garden. I don’t know how to do. We became poor. When you were here, we used to make R4.00 every week from vegetables; R4.00 from gooseberry jam. No one could do jam” (203).

Significantly, the gooseberry jam had been Elizabeth’s innovation (152). It was she who had made a trial run with fifty seedlings of the plant. When the transplanted Cape Gooseberry plants had borne a prodigious harvest, Elizabeth promoted it as a local-industries project to sell to the local housewives. The promotion was done so well that the village women who passed

her house on the way to collect firewood in the brush, “stopped, laughed and said, ‘Cape Gooseberry,’ to show how well they had picked up the propaganda. They did it so often that eventually Elizabeth became known as ‘Cape Gooseberry’” (153).

A week or two after Elizabeth’s triumphant return, the profits are up phenomenally, “They had ahead of them an income in a week or two of R10 from gooseberry jam alone” (204).

Isis/Persephone was back from the underworld and all was right with the world. It is to be noted as well, that just as Persephone was identified with grain, Elizabeth who was herself a transplant from Capetown, by virtue of being called “Cape Gooseberry,” is to be identified with that plant (Tucker 180). Head expands upon the identification:

The work had a melody like that--a complete stranger like the Cape Gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng. It loved the hot, dry Botswana summers as they were a replica of the Mediterranean summers of its home in the Cape. (153)

Elizabeth too, though she had gone through a hell of an adjustment, will do well in Botswana. Though the plant is now Batswanan, although it was once from Capetown, it also by climatic similarity, Mediterranean, that is global or cosmopolitan.

In the Osiris Isis myth, it is Isis who discovers agriculture and Osiris who propagates it both in Egypt and the world. Although Osiris, after his revival became god of the Underworld, Isis remained connected with agriculture. It is she who remains most powerful. It is Elizabeth's unknown power that is used to defeat Dan. Osiris and Isis were sibling deities before their marriage. This perhaps underlies the reasoning of Elizabeth when she asks of Sello that in their next incarnation they should be born in the same human family as brother and sister. It should be said in concluding, that by close association with the Medusa, Sello, Dan and even Elizabeth become mythic characters.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The martyrs with the “fire-washed faces” were mentioned earlier. These are they who, throughout history, died for the liberation of mankind.

<sup>2</sup>The chapter entitled “The Universalium of Psychology” covers this point. The relations of coloureds to blacks in Botswana is the problematic of Head’s novel Maru. There it is seen that the lighter skinned tribes are discriminated against by the darker.

<sup>3</sup>As Elizabeth suffered discrimination in South Africa because of the darkness of her skin, she suffers it in Botswana because of the lightness of her skin. To Head these are equivalent racial sins. Her second novel, Maru, deals extensively with this Botswanan variety of racism.

<sup>4</sup>This is apparently the voice of Dan given (45), as it were, off-stage and preparatory to his most dramatic entrance in the “Dan” section of the novel.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE UNIVERSALISM OF THEOLOGY

What Elizabeth had learned through her experiences in the Underworld from the taxing passivity of Sello and the malevolent attacks of Dan is given theological form:

If there were any revelation whatsoever in her own suffering it seemed to be quite the reverse of Mohammed's dramatic statement. He had said: There is only one God and his name is Allah. And Mohammed is his prophet. She said: There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet. (205-6)

On this last page of the novel, Elizabeth prepares for sleep by reading a Hindi novel about heroes and heroines. For her, says Head, Africa was different: "She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man" (206). From this, it is clear to see the two foci of Head's theology as she presents it at the end of the novel: divinity and anthropology. In fact she exhibits an ethical theogony. Who the gods are is generated not from a certain view of reality

but from her desire for a certain quality of interpersonal relationship between men. The nature of God is made a function of her ethical predisposition. The brotherhood of man is the paramount object. It was that, as she said, that she “fell into”; it preexisted other concerns. What conception of divinity fits best into the plan of that brotherhood of man? To Head’s Elizabeth, not to overly identify author and protagonist, it was the conception of the divinity of man, the man-god, or rather the men-God.

No metaphysical evidence is adduced for the support of such a view. The view seems wholly a function of the desire to secure the brotherhood of man, divinity being entirely instrumental. It is as if, since in the lives of men and women the concept of God is universally important, she places this honorific concept precisely where it will maximize its rhetorical impact for her particular purposes. What she is interested in above all else is that men would love each other. This seemingly transparent expression of theological viewpoint may be analyzed under several points: its origin, its narrative articulation, and the efficacy of the formulation.

The first of the preceding issues raises the question of how brotherhood becomes the *sine qua non* of her *weltanschauung*. Elizabeth makes the claim that she fell into it. This too is rhetoric



that conflates effect with probable cause. Elizabeth was brought up in a country that projected precisely the opposite. This was so with respect to *de facto* and *de jure* apartheid to be sure, but also in the sense that Coloureds among themselves were afflicted with colorism, that is, the belief that the greater their percentage of white blood, or what is not the same thing, the lightness of their skin, the better they were as human beings. Then too, the Coloureds did not automatically identify in their political interests with the black Africans. What Elizabeth could have meant is that there existed a deep appreciation of brotherhood somewhere in her surroundings. The brotherhood of man is operant as a criterion here as well; it informs the mythos of its own origin. There was however in Elizabeth, in so far as we can identify her environment with the historical South Africa, a condition that was so much the opposite of this view (again to recall Derrida's view that it was the "ultimate racism in the world") that almost by the Newtonian law of equal and opposite reactions, Elizabeth's view is the most *natural* of all. Because the view was logically and psychologically apropos, it can be thought that those numerically few who were able to articulate such a standpoint might be regarded as the ones who truly perceived the situation. The truth therefore, that is, the

“reality and power” (Russell History 784) of opposition to Apartheid is brotherhood; equality, then, in this sense becomes the implication of oppression. Elizabeth traces the provenance of the view or, rather, a key instance of its general reality to the slums of South Africa, where, “He’s thinks he’s somebody” became the worst of all criticisms within the dominated class. This statement was never, of course, directed to members of the the dominant class . . . only of the subjugated class. It is, as such, an indirect criticism of the worst aspects of a class system; it is an acknowledgment and protest of oppression. It is also the sort of thought that can, in its misapplication, turn into a “crab” factor, a social mechanism whereby the achievement-minded among the oppressed are brought down to the level of the others by the oppressed. Moses, for instance, when he first goes among his oppressed brethren to impress them not to display self-destructive behavior among themselves, is not appreciated: “Who made thee a prince and judge over us? intendest thou to kill me as thou killedst the Egyptian?” (Exodus 2:14b) On the positive side, again, the Jews after Egypt are forbidden harsh treatment of the stranger because they were mistreated in Egypt. This sensitivity to rank and a hatred of it that can easily be spawned by a repressed political condition, is that to

which Head appeals.

The philosopher Freidrich Nietzsche in his speculations on the genealogy of morals has also theorized the origin of the moral views of the oppressed:

Suppose the violated, oppressed, suffering, unfree, who are uncertain of themselves and weary, moralize: what will their moral valuations have in common? . . . those qualities are brought out and flooded with light which serve to ease existence for those who suffer: here pity, the complaisant and obliging hand, the warm heart, patience, industry, humility, and friendliness are honored--for here these are the most useful qualities and almost the only means for enduring the pressure of existence. (397)

Nietzsche opposes Head and Elizabeth directly. Of Nietzsche, Aiken makes clear, "He hated the 'slave morality' of which he thought the Jewish people were the originators" (203). Although Aiken makes the argument that Nietzsche's philosophy is not only ethical but has some concern for ontology in its own right (206), it is safe nevertheless to agree with Russell that "Nietzsche's criticism of religions and philosophies is for the most part dominated entirely by ethical motives" (Russell History 762). If in declaring his stand on the supreme matter of the existence or non-existence of God and the incarnation of Christ, Nietzsche is thought to be "ontological" then the manner in which he expresses it shows the

view to be more so ethical. Aiken himself quotes Nietzsche via his mouthpiece, Zarathustra, "If there were Gods, how could I bear to be no God? *Consequently* there are no Gods" (206). Why the ontological determination that there is no God? It would seem unfair, that is unethical, if there were a God.

Whereas Head was certain that a feeling of superiority or "greatness leads to a dog-eat-dog fight and incurs massive suffering" (39), Nietzsche relished the contests of will for almost the same reason,

I test the *power* of a *will* according to the amount of resistance it can offer and the amount of pain and torture it can endure and know to turn to its own advantage; I do not point to evil and pain of existence with the finger of reproach, but rather entertain the hope that life may one day become more evil and more full of suffering than it has ever been. (qtd. in Russell History 763)

In this way only can there be a development of the hero--of men like Napoleon and Caesar Borgia. He wrote, "The Revolution made Napoleon possible: that is its justification" (763). Saying the same thing negatively, he writes, "Everything that pampers, that softens, and that brings the 'people' or 'woman' to the front, operates in favour of universal suffrage--that is to say, the dominion of 'inferior' men" (763). To Elizabeth, Dan had "ambitions, like Hitler

and Napoleon” (140). As such, Nietzsche would love him, but Elizabeth had a personal definition of hell: “she called it Dan” (12).

In a broadside against the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, whom he regarded as “a blockhead,” Nietzsche gives a further expression of his ethical orientation:

I abhor the man’s vulgarity when he says “What is right for one man is right for another”; “Do not to others that which you would not that they should do unto you.” Such principles would fain establish the whole of human traffic upon mutual services, so that every action would appear to be a cash payment for something done to us. The hypothesis here is ignoble to the last degree: it is taken for granted that there is some sort of equivalence in value between my actions and thine. (782-3)

The ignobility of the golden rule is true by definition. Head is so little concerned with Nietzsche’s supposed equivalence of actions that one of Elizabeth’s most perfect statements in the world assumes an equivalence of a lot more. To Head, “I am just anyone” assumes an equivalence of “heart” (26). The golden rule agrees perfectly with such a formulation.

It is important how Head develops her ethical concept of divinity as the novel moves towards the conclusion. As has been pointed out, A Question of Power may be considered as the novel that Elizabeth writes, and so begins with much of the conclusion.

The novel begins with the triad of Elizabeth, Sello, and Dan. Sello, however, marks the true beginning of their experiences together because he introduced his soul to Elizabeth “softly like a heaven of completeness and perfection” (13-4). He was a deity who could be criticized in Africa, although in India, the poor would not “have had the courage to challenge him . . . . Types like Sello were always Brahmins or Rama there” (15).

After his initial appearance as monk, Sello, the proposer of the “beautiful world of the future” presents himself as a switchboard operator, “plugging in lines to all the beautiful people he had on call” (28). He instructs Elizabeth about divinity:

“You must have suffered a lot in South Africa,” he said, by way of introduction. “But you are not to hate white people.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Most of the Gods are born among them,” he replied, calmly.

“Some of them come here for a while, then go away again.” He turned his head in the direction of the Motabeng Secondary School and suddenly put in one of his plugs. (29-30)

Although it is indeterminate from the immediate context whether what happens after the turn of the head toward the school is mere sequence or consequence, the broader context makes it clear that gods, as they are subsequently defined, do come to work at the

Motabeng Secondary School. As a variation of a deus ex machina, there is a deus ex PBX. After Sello put in a plug, "The Father" appears from the direction of the school, "walking along the pathway to Elizabeth's house" (30). Although he wears "only short khaki pants and boots," he looks the part of a credibly majestic divinity because it is said of him, "The sun had directly transferred itself to his face and its light was flying in all directions" (30). Significantly, he picks up the ragged garments of the poor that he finds at the foot of Elizabeth's bed. "He stood up and put them on" says the text, then turned "to the bed again and found a crown there, exceedingly beautiful and glittering with an intense white light" (30). This God of majesty that "the Father" represents is interchangeable with Sello, identified with the poor, and concerned that Dan "is fooling around with" his name.

When Sello seemed to "put in the plugs all at the same time" (31) Elizabeth was confronted with the host of martyrs to the liberation of mankind. Beholding their "still, sad, fire-washed faces" provokes her to the thought: "There are several hundred thousand people who are God" (31). The narrator then tells us that "the types of people Sello referred to as 'the Gods' turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their

only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings" (31).

A short time later, an "Asian man" appears and berates Elizabeth for not having in her previous life or lives, identified with the poor. When he summons the poor of Africa, and they assemble with their cut and bleeding feet, they see "the dazzling array of prophets which was Sello's achievement" and immediately criticize Sello: "You are not yet ready. Our king is standing over there. He has taken off his vesture garments" (32). The identity of their king, although he is not shown here, is "the Father," who had earlier not only dressed himself in the garments of the poor, but had divested himself of the clothing he wore (105). Elizabeth, amazed at the poor's rebuke, returns to the thoughts of Indian theology:

If the poor of India had seen that Sello was also their Krishna and Rama, would they have told him to take off his vesture garments and become the same as everyone else? Sello's favorite hunting ground had been India, and she privately accused him of being the originator of the caste system, alongside his other theories on the heavens. (32)

They then turn and strip Elizabeth of any vestures she had acquired. From the difficulty apparent in the fact that Elizabeth,



though, amazed at all she sees, yet betrays memories of lifetimes of associating with Sello, it seems the path of prudence to make the sense one can of what is presented and merely observe the rest. So we see that Sello, is not perfect. He and Elizabeth need to spiritually divest themselves and become more ordinary. The caste system of India, the very institutionalization of inequality, is therefore something of which Sello has been guilty. There is an evolutionary principle at work in things divine, a sort of process theology or, alternately, what the Hindus would called karma. In their souls, people were “forces, stars, planets, universes and all kinds of swirling magic and mystery.” As Head quotes Darwin, it is to be understood that from simple theological beginnings, “endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being, evolved” (35).

What precipitates the first of Elizabeth’s two mental breakdowns is a preeminently ethical breach. Responding to the open attacks of the Medusa, and the hidden attack of Dan, Elizabeth breaks out in a cry of race hatred against black Africans: “Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!!” This was a cardinal sin against the brotherhood of man. As was the ingress, so was the egress theological.

Sello appears to her and shows her a cesspit “filled almost to the brim with excreta.” After he presses her nose close to it, he says, “She made it. I’m cleaning it up. Come, I’ll show you what you made” (53). At that, Sello became a great sky bird and made her recall visions of humility, nobility, and love:

And love was like a girl walking down a road on staggering legs with the wind blowing through her hair. And love was like a girl with wonder in her eyes. And love was like a girl with a flaming heart and impulsive arms. And love was so many things, so many variations on one theme: humility and equality. (54)

The “she” of the cesspit is the Medusa. The references to love that the sky-bird Sello makes, are instances of the inner principle of Elizabeth. Sello had transmogrified into an old man with a ring of sparse white hair. Elizabeth was, he said, a member of a second generation dreamed up by his failed generation:

We had to dream a nobler dream, and the people of that dream belong to your age-group. Everything was wrong. Everything was evil until I broke down and cried. It is when you cry, in the blackest hour of despair, that you stumble on a source of goodness. There were a few of us who cried like that. Then we said: “Send us perfection.” They sent you. Then we asked: “What is perfection?” And they said: “Love” (34).

In light of this we can both see why Sello speaks of love and why her failure to love the Batswana, and later Tom and old Mrs. Jones,

was such an acute failure; it was absolutely against her spiritual principle.

The climax of her recovery from the breakdown, as pointed out before, is also theological. It is her own formulation of a definition of the divine:

God is the totality of all great souls and their achievements; the achievements are not that of one single individual soul, but of many souls who all worked to make up the soul of God, and this might be called God or the Gods. She floated slowly back to everyday reality on this huge tidal wave of peace. (54)

This definition sounds much like what she had thought earlier when Sello had summoned the beautiful people from the divine PBX. It signifies a coming to grips with, and a progressive movement toward a certain concept of God.

When the Medusa, consoled that her determination to destroy Elizabeth would be carried forward by Dan, had, at the desperate plea of Elizabeth, somehow been dispatched by Sello. Dan appears namelessly, dressed as a monk, his hands clasped before him in an attitude of prayer. From beside the mystical madonna he picks up a crown and places it on the head of the mystical madonna, whom he claims he has always loved, just as he has always loved Sello. This crown, significantly, "was unlike the crowns worn by "the

Father” or the wife of Buddha. Those had glowed with an unearthly light. The crown he gave her resembled that of earthly Queens” (96-97). When Elizabeth asks Sello the name of the new monk, Sello, in a shrewd bit of indirection, merely points to an area of light:

It was the opening of the cesspit he had once shown her. She stared down it. It was like a crater that had opened up in the earth, and so deep. So endless was the fall to the bottom of it that it seemed bottomless. It was quite clean and empty now, so much so that its jagged stone walls seemed to be made of marble, yet it might only have been the effect of light. It was full of light. As she stared down it, a shape formed and eased itself up out of the hole. As it fell in a heap outside the hole, she recognized her bath-towel. (97)

This scene which has at once the feel of hopeless bathos and the look of surrealism represents both those things and more. This is the cesspit filled by the obscenities of Medusa. From her experience with Medusa, Elizabeth had become acquainted with “deep perversion” and shame. Sello had promised to clean it. The towel is a device for cleaning; that the towel is Elizabeth’s is compatible with the general understanding that Elizabeth does more than she can comprehend when she works with Sello or “the Father” (106-107). Into the clean cesspit, like into the hell of the Christians, go those who have cooperated with evil, or as Head puts

it, "had jumped on the bandwagon of willful evil." It begins to offer dramatic closure to the "Sello" episode of the novel:

She sat trembling a little at the side of the hole. A loud slithering noise reached her ears. There seemed to be an endless procession of dead bodies, flat on their backs. One after the other they pitched in until the hole was full. She had brief glimpses of their faces as they hurtled past her. (97)

On the pile was the little Caligula that had been part of Sello's past and indeed all the evil of the past. Whatever Elizabeth had not liked, Sello had destroyed.

In the beginning of the second half of the novel, which bears his name, Dan, "the real magic" that the Medusa promised, comes from the heavens with divine pomp and panoply: "He came along in clouds of swirling, revolving magic, with such a high romantic glow that the whole of earth and heaven were stunned into silence before the roar of his approach" (103). He came with what Rudolph Otto would call the "mysterium tremendum" or what would be called a great display of the numinous (12). He produced the "sort of concentrated atmosphere that had made mystics fall to their feet in frightened awe and exclaim: "Woe is me. I have seen the glory of the Lord" (103-04).

Elizabeth is, for a time, not immune to these divine

blandishments. She had forgotten the warnings of “the Father” that Dan was playing around with his name (107). When among the phenomena produced by Dan, she hears Christmas music from an unseen choir in the air above her house, she begins to doubt the conception of the divinity that her experiences with Sello had been helping her to shape. The words of the song sung by the unseen choir are the same words that the angels sang to the shepherds in Luke’s account of the advent, one of the clearest paradigms of a God that is “up there.” It is precisely this notion of a heaven above that disturbs her:

The insistent record was shattering. It went on and on. The first thing she thought was that she had committed some terrible form of blasphemy against the unknown God by thinking people were he. The female chorus returned him to his absolute supremacy. (109)

The mechanical device of the record player reveals the origin of the display, though the Elizabeth who is being inscribed upon by the events is not aware of it. In fact, the next day she finds herself sinking into depression. Kenosi who had “saved her life” on the previous Christmas Day, comes to Elizabeth’s on the day after Christmas with news of a Peace Corps worker who had arrived in Motabeng the day before. Christmas Day, this time, marks the

advent of Tom. The three work together joyously in the vegetable garden.

Within Elizabeth's nightmares, Dan initiates a systematic campaign to discredit everything that Sello had presented as positive. After he presents the notion of a transcendent deity, thus attacking the concept of God as the people, Dan attacks "the Father" himself. Head writes, "A comic side drama was to be played all throughout that year between Dan and "the Father" (118). After a scene in which Dan attempts to drag "the Father" down to hell (117), the burlesque of the diminution of "the Father" continues. Dragged into view from the perch he had taken up, *a la* Sello on Elizabeth's bedstead:

"The Father" passively allowed himself to be shoved out of the house. A short while later he was back again. "The Father" was frantically pushed over cliffs, sent hurtling to his death in a wildly out-of-control motor car, but he had nine-thousand soul lives. He always showed up again. (118)

After a series of such misfortunes, he warns Elizabeth about the dangers of Dan, and informs her that she must find some way to protect herself. After that he disappears.

Next Dan paraded Sello's beautiful people before Elizabeth as "chain-gang slaves." Like Nathaniel Hawthorne's young Goodman

Brown, Elizabeth is seduced to believe in the secret evils of these of whom Sello was proud. As for Sello himself, "he just sat there in his scarecrow's rags, indifferent to everything" (119).

The Asian man who had ushered in the African poor to berate Sello and Elizabeth for their previous lack of concern for them, and who was regarded by Elizabeth as "second in impact to 'the Father.'" He is exposed by Dan as well:

He was pounced on by Dan and pulled to the forefront and made to confess his crime. His brilliant, glittering black eyes were changed to an imbecilic docility. He had on a white shirt; the sleeves were torn; four grinning smirking Asian men clung to his arms. He was a homosexual. (120)

The poor represent the peculiarly African nature of Sello's and Elizabeth's experience. As Elizabeth says, in Africa, humility generally recommended by the saints "could be acquired far too drastically" (99). Now their spokesperson was discredited. Only Sello and Elizabeth remained.

For the both of them, Dan plotted death. Sello in the brown suit is brought in, in a coffin. Dan is among the pall bearers:

He had his face screwed up with torture, but screwed so prettily it still looked handsome. Someone else turned her face towards Elizabeth. It was a little girl who was one of Sello's children. Elizabeth recognized her because she often rode beside him in his green



truck through Motabeng village. (120)

The daughter of the real Sello of Motabeng is to be used in the supreme attack on Sello and Elizabeth at once.

There followed another episode in the vegetable garden where, among other things, Elizabeth and Tom share their love of the African American novelist, James Baldwin. There is also an incident in which Elizabeth's son has been taught by his teacher that the correct spelling for "evaporation" is "ivaporation."

Elizabeth uses the incident to remark on the adaptability of English. She had said, "Wherever English travels, it's adapted. That's Setswana English. Setswana is an entirely phonetic language" (126). This indicates that Bessie Head does not shrink from using the colonial language. Far from believing she is writing from "within death," she finds a welcome humor in the thought.

To Sello's switchboard, and his own record player, Dan now unveils another electro-mechanical device. It was

his electrical wiring system (her whole body was a network, a complicated communication centre); everything depended on the efficiency of it. He couldn't get the wires in the right place if she was nervy or jumpy. As soon as the stage was set, he let loose. This was his version of God. (126)

This indicates the importance of control to Dan. In fact the

electrical wiring was an expansion of the record player, for when he pressed several buttons at once, to the intent she would feel jealous, feel inferior as a Coloured, and sexually inadequate, the “records went round and round in her head the whole day” (127). When she begins to recognize a similarity between the incessant record playing and the one that precipitated her first breakdown, Dan admits it, drops his pants and become ithyphallic Dan with his parade of nice-time girls.

In the succeeding vegetable interlude, Tom laments the invasion of Cambodia by the United States. He added “I don’t know why they bother to involve themselves in world affairs. . . . Wherever America goes she only hands the poor Coca-Cola and chewing-gum. They don’t care a hell for rapid economic development” (132). This, he felt, was a matter that only the Black Power people in the United States were taking seriously in 1970. When he executed a smart black power salute and shouted “Black Power!” Elizabeth was alarmed. She thought they were Hitlerian. Tom responded, “Are you mad? People are demanding their rights. I admire them.” Tom is amazed at Elizabeth’s truculence:

“Just what is wrong with you” he asked. “Why do you have to go opposite to everyone else? Why do you have to sound different?”

“I’ve got my concentration elsewhere,” she said. “It’s

on mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind.” (133)

When Tom says that the situation in America is different from what she knows, Elizabeth does not relent but waxes dramatic. If not “freaks and oddities” black people are people of unparalleled suffering. Because of their suffering, says Elizabeth, “They’re ahead of Buddha and Jesus and can dictate the terms for the future, not for any exclusive circle but for mankind in general” (134). The vision of the African poor had opened her eyes and made her see Africa in a different way. The poor in the vision knew that any given historical oppressor was not the very factory of evil. Elizabeth had learned from the poor to place the stress on the power of the soul: “If it’s basically right there, then other things fall into place. That’s my struggle and that’s black power, but it’s a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all mankind can share” (135).

After the vegetable interlude, Dan continues to work his plan. As she continues to doubt the beneficence of Sello under the powerful delusion of Dan, Elizabeth swallowed some sleeping pills as she prepared to get some sleep, but her mental state did not

cooperate:

Instead, her mind swirled out into a vast horizon. Sello rose on it, very much as he had done in her first perception of him, but this time as a huge satanic personality. His face had greenish blotches on it, his mouth was a swollen mass of sensual depravity, his ears rose to sharp, pointed peaks. Like Thoko, who had suddenly been presented at her lands with the Mamba snake, she rolled out of bed, flat on the floor mat, dead with shock. A short while later her sanity returned. (139).

Shaken, she prayed to God that Sello wasn't really Satan, but this is subverted by the question, "To which God was she praying?" When she returned to sleep, the demonic Sello returned to her mind. She saw him stalking "his small girl, the one who had been holding on to his coffin." Crying "Don't! Don't!" she awoke at 3 a.m. and did not return to sleep until after late Saturday afternoon. As soon as she did, the nightmare resumed. A transcendent umbilical that connected her to the Satanic Sello, similar to a black one that had connected her to "the Father," snaps in the center and shrivels, whereupon, Sello attacked a small boy herding goats. When she turns on the news on Monday evening, she hears that a small goatherd had been found dead in the bush: "She began to believe her own nightmare" (140). As the daughter of Sello was in the hospital with a nervous breakdown and people were talking, Dan

flies at Elizabeth in a rage as if angry that she could ever have associated with Sello: "He raised his hand and struck her a blinding blow on the head. Her head exploded into a thousand fragments of fiery darkness. For two days she lay, barely conscious, in bed" (141).

The alternations between the dream/delusion underworld and the vegetable temenos continue. Again she is rescued from the ravages of her nightmares by the ministrations of Kenosi: "The way this woman brought her back to life and reality!" (143). The attacks on Elizabeth's conception and image of Sello continue with the relentlessness Head has attributed to African witchcraft. In addition to the attacks upon Sello, Dan continues as well the attacks upon her sexual inadequacy. Referring to one of his nice-time girls, he says to Elizabeth, "I go with all these women because you are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level because we are not made the same way" (147). When he feared the smear of Sello became too transparent, Dan switched the emphasis to her rejection of his handtouch: "She had to pay for it, and pay for it through feverish nights of insomnia, when his activities with the girls crashed through heavy doses of sleeping tablets" (149).

It is at this stage in the novel that the work at the vegetable

project rises to supreme symbolism. We have seen the garden experience as a recurrent touchstone of "life and reality" for Elizabeth. It is a touchstone of "sanity" for the reader because the relentless circularity of the protagonist's movement into and out of madness works, perhaps by design, like Dan's own records stuck in a groove. It is only here where the various nationalities of people work together in selfless harmony that we see her theme of human universality, or egalitarianism, attain any sort of concrete reality. Working with the penniless Batswana was the shy "Eugene man" which name Head insists upon because he is to be taken as the "beautifully begotten" or "begetting" man who could selflessly lead such a project. In addition to the Danes, there was the American, Tom. There was also a youth from London who took up residence in a hut in a Batswana family's lodge and proudly said, "This is the first home I've had to myself in all my life" (158). The English volunteers in general "were just as mad about vegetables as the village ladies. They like to walk up and down the garden, their hands behind their backs with amazed expressions on their faces" (157-8). At the center of the English amazement was the magical product. Head writes then,

There were a thousand such stories to tell of life in Motabeng of tentative efforts people of totally foreign

backgrounds made to work together and understand each other's humanity; that needed analyzing-- intangible, unpraised efforts to establish the brotherhood of man. (158)

Despite the unremitting encroachments of Dan, the vegetable garden maintained the nature of a sanctuary whenever Elizabeth possessed the strength to go there, but Dan's attacks were without letup.

As has been said, only Kenosi remained exempt from Elizabeth's burgeoning distemper brought on by Dan's attacks. Dan did, however, attack her notion of Tom, insinuating that the young man was a latent homosexual. The two had talked about it openly, like the great friends they were, but Elizabeth could not share with Tom the extent of her inner deterioration; she could only think it:

Sello is prancing around in my nightmare with his face full of swollen green blotches. There is a little girl with her face upturned in death. And last night Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor just raised her legs high in the air. There's no escape for me. There's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm going insane. (161)

Although she cannot share with him the specifics of her decline, the next time they met, "she turned on him and burst out into a tirade against the Ku Klux Klan" (162). After this racist outburst, this time against whites, Tom had left hostile and on the verge of

tears.

Her last coherent memory of the vegetable garden had been in September when a gigantic cauliflower had become the prize of an art teacher (161). Thereafter a terrific fatalism overcame her: she struggled through the morning work “with all its humour and weird drama, but the afternoons, which were set aside for seedling work and ‘specialities,’ she began to reserve for collapses” (163).

Dan commenced the “parade of the nice-time” girls,<sup>1</sup> with whom he engages in incessant copulations. There were seventy-one of them:

Who were they? Miss Pelican-Beak, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar-Icing, whom he was on the point of marrying, Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor where anything goes, The Sugar-Plum Fairy . . . Body Beautiful . . . The Womb . . . Madame Squelch Squelch, Madame Loose-Bottom--the list of them was endless. (148)

Each adored Dan, but to Elizabeth, they directed the mocking smile of the Medusa, the smile that said, “they had what she had not got” (164).

In the midst of the heavy blows received “under cover of the parade of the nice-time girls,” Elizabeth was able to make some determinations about Dan and Medusa:

The only two personalities who projected before her an overwhelming power were Medusa and Dan. There was



a vastness about them, the personalities who accompanied their activities were extended replicas of their own selves. The sum total of it was a world where no one loved anyone. (168)

One was simply an extension of the other. They were precisely antithetical to her principle of love, representing as they did, it bears repeating, "a world where no one loved anyone."

Elizabeth had finally been brought to a state of breakdown. Old Mrs. Jones, so-called, although she was only fifty-five, was a volunteer from England who served in the Motabeng project along with her three daughters. She had often visited Elizabeth and shared with her tea, her life story and her simple Christian faith, which Head/Elizabeth calls "platitudes." Dan turned on his "hiss record" and filled Elizabeth with the "top secret information" that Mrs. Jones was the mother of the nice-time girls: "Like Sello, she rose on the horizon like a monstrous cackling, old witch" (171). When Elizabeth does not come out to the garden one day, Kenosi considers and yielding this time to her feline sixth sense, does not knock on the door. Old Mrs. Jones comes two days later offering to pray for her: "'It depends on which God you're praying to,' Elizabeth said violently and closed the door" (173). Taking a drink of water she throws it up. Her condition worsens. The nice-time

girls crawl over her searching for fragments of her life: "Sello was there with a boyfriend. His swollen, lopsided, green-hued face grinned at her evilly. His little girl still lay with her face upturned in death. The cackling Mrs Jones egged her offspring on to take everything while the going was good" (173). Fearing death to be imminent, Elizabeth determines to take someone with her. The "mother" of the nice-time girls is nearest. Running out of her house in her nightdress, she encounters the old lady returning to her home after visiting a friend. After screaming, "You make your children prostitutes!" Elizabeth gave the woman a blow to the head, then screamed at the stars. Just eluding those who came to the scene, Elizabeth runs home, locks herself in, and plans to kill her son then herself. The trust the boy still reposes in her ended that idea. She decided instead to kill Sello. At 4:30 a. m. she rides a bicycle to the village post office where she signs and posts a notice which says, "SELLO IS A FILTHY PERVERT WHO SLEEPS WITH HIS DAUGHTER" (173-5). When she arrives home, the police arrest her.

Although the Christianity of Mrs. Jones is trivialized by the narrator, yet her choice as a victim must be understood as that which will do most to destroy Elizabeth. The option remains, it seems, that Elizabeth has more faith in Christianity than the author

can allow her to show for her rhetorical purposes. After her return from several months of hospitalization, she asks the forgiveness of Mrs. Jones by means of a note. Accepting the olive branch, Mrs. Jones comes to her house, where beginning with Mrs. Jones, this key dialogue ensues:

“You must not be afraid of evil. Jesus overcame evil a long time ago.”

“Yes,” Sello said so loudly that Elizabeth jumped.

The old woman appeared not to have heard him. She was sitting right opposite him, and he was staring at her intently. Most probably she thought Elizabeth had said it. (196)

The validation that Sello gives to the statement of Mrs. Jones seems tantamount to a validation of Christianity, that is, an acknowledgment of the uniquely decisive nature of the life of Jesus the Christ.

Despite her acts of contrition to the “old” lady and Tom (the real Sello is magnanimous enough to tell people that Elizabeth should not be hated) Dan refuses to leave her. Even the nice-time girls are back, only now they are all nude. Dan also “goes” on the bed beside her with the most insatiable nice-time girl called The Womb. It is only when Sello, observing this perpetual debauch, calls it ghoulish and offers a practical definition of love, that is

“Love is two people mutually feeding each other,” does she emerge for good from the underworld of madness. A glorified and transfigured Sello replaces the Sello in the scarecrow rags: “Sello, the soaring sky-bird, rose,” she says recalling her recuperation from her first breakdown, “but this time came walking towards her drenched from head to toe in light” (198). Dan is shocked by the sudden turn of events:

Dan was still going on her bed with The Womb. He looked up at Sello with black, shocked eyes, For a split second he forgot he was God. He scrambled to his feet. He looked like one of those Afrikaner Boers in South Africa who had been caught contravening the Immorality Act with a black woman. Sello only looked at him from a great height and said nothing. (198)

Dan is exposed and caught with his pants down. When he departs “slamming the door hard,” Elizabeth asks Sello who Dan really was. Sello said, “Satan” (198).

The affirmation of Jesus as the conqueror of sin and the identification of Dan with Satan by a Sello who had just conquered him and become suitably transfigured by freeing Elizabeth, seems to offer some promise of fitting rather neatly into the paradigm of Christianity. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, only eight pages further, in what might be regarded as the novelistic

denouement, Elizabeth offers her climactic theological utterance not in Christian form, but, as we have seen, in the form of the Islamic *shahadah* "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet."

Islam, not elsewhere referred to in the novel, in this way takes the chief place. What is referred to is well chosen. The *shahadah* is the first of the five pillars of Islam, coming ahead of canonical prayer, charity, ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. To mix religious terminology, this first pillar has a mantric power: "At least once during his or her lifetime a Muslim must say the *shahadah* correctly, slowly, thoughtfully, aloud, with full understanding, and with heartfelt conviction" (Smith 160). Thus this ultimate theological formulation by Head is fit, to consciously mix terms again, to be the chief cornerstone.

Although Islam is appealed to last and given the place of honor, it is also at the same moment subverted. The use of the *shahadah* is not, of course, compatible with Islam any more than it is with Christianity if we take the words at face value. Inasmuch as the notion of God being the people is one that recurs again and again as a definite leitmotif within the novel, we cannot dismiss the rhetorical intent of the dictum. What one might assert is that

Bessie Head intends the contradiction, intends to assert and counter-assert the better to not become exclusive in her theological rhetoric.

On the side of the identification of God with man, the consequent value accruing to man is evident. The truth of such an identification is that man would love man. If this is the paramount object of Head's theology, that man would indeed love man, then her dictum might be regarded as a sort of ultimate safeguard of this view minus any pretensions to theological correctness. Then, just as Head affirms universality by offering an Africanized expression of that concept to ensure the inclusion of Africans, she may also be affirming Christianity in a way that ensures that the golden rule is followed without exception.

This is, however, not likely to be the case, because of the statement that directly precedes the dictum. Amazed at how appropriate to her experiences a poem about flight that her son writes as she herself turns to write of her shipwreck, she expresses her faith that the souls and powers of men were like birds and planes. As the Medusa and Dan were extensions of each other, it could be that flight is a reference to the birth of Pegasus from the severed head of the Medusa. She felt that someday

there'd be a kind of liberation of these powers, and a new dawn and a new world. She felt this because the basic error seemed to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed. (205)

A transcendent God, then, what Francis Schaefer calls "the God that is there" is, to Elizabeth, the theological error *non pareil*. With this collapses any realistic idea that there is any serious identification of Christianity as a whole with the theology of the novel. Points of intersection with Christian doctrine and personae are merely that: intersections.

Another prominent feature of the novel is the doctrine of transmigration, evidence of Head's fascination with Indian theology that resulted from her exclusion from South African public libraries. It has been mentioned that Sello had passed through a billion life cycles while Elizabeth has passed through only two. After Dan had stormed away in defeat and Sello had thanked Elizabeth for her role, he had said, "Our friendship will never end" (200). Elizabeth uses this utterance also as a springboard to things of the future:

"Sello," she said. "If you say our friendship will never end, that means we are supposed to meet again in other lives?"

"Yes," he said.

“Would you like to be my brother?”  
 “All right,” he said. (201)

Within the “theology” of the novel, then, there are rebirths ahead. It does not seem that these aspects are any more Hindu, for instance, any more than the Biblical intersections are Hebrew or Christian. The lines that follow those above perhaps make this clear:

“I’ll look around for suitable parents for us,” she said cunningly. “I’m much better than you at organizing family affairs, and once I find the parents you will always be my favourite brother.”

She simply meant she wanted parents who did not believe in prophecies. They boiled down to bugger all, and they made a normal happy person, who loved birds, insects, vegetable gardens and people, the victim of Dan. (201)

Though the characters in Plato’s “Myth of Er” could choose what they returned as, the notion of choosing future parents was a stretch even there. This is not a part of Hinduism. Therefore it seems that the dictum of Elizabeth is to be taken at face value--it is a belief system of which she is the prophet. It fits under no pre-existing theology though it ostensibly intersects them in one aspect or another.

Although by the variety of the theological intersections, the



novel can be taken as syncretic and international, the end results are probably that it cannot be taken to be theologically unitary. It is not after all a book of theology. It is, however, a book about brotherhood. Theologies are therefore dismantled, deconstructed in order to leave standing only the brotherhood of man. The variety of religions--Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Secular Humanism--are used to establish a rhetoric of universality.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nice Time is the name of a character in a story within The Cardinals, Bessie Head's first long work of fiction, and the only written in South Africa. In this posthumously published novel, Nice Time is a taxi driver and pimp. He is mentioned on page 33.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION: THE ONTOLOGY OF UNIVERSALITY

The previous chapters have shown as hypothesized that Bessie Head makes a consistent appeal to certain universal interests in order to secure a global audience for her novel. The universal appeals have been shown to be at least complementary to the thematic burden of the novel, the notion of the universality of the human in essential respects. An investigation now of the ontology of universality requires a closer look at the relation of what we have called universalia, to the thematic notion itself. As the theme has not been at the forefront, hitherto, it is necessary first to establish beyond a doubt the fact of the theme, then the motivation, and lastly the ontology of universality.

Chapter Six ended with the recognition that the theology of A Question of Power is syncretic and idiosyncratic; it is not a religious view that is shared by anyone. Definitive here is the dictum Elizabeth fit into the Islamic formula: "There is only one God and

his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). There is no known religious sect that is a follower of the prophet Elizabeth. The theology with which the novel is replete is like the rain in Botswana because sometimes the "wind rushes through it and you get swept from head to toe by a cold, fresh rain-wind. That's about all you ever get in Serowe most summers--the rain-wind but not the rain" (Serowe x). The theology is like rain which evaporating before it hits the ground only gives off a scent. Although some of her views of divinity are inflexibly and repeatedly stated (like the denial of transcendence)<sup>1</sup> the theme of the novel is not a theological one *per se*. Theology is brought to bear, on the contrary, on what is essentially an ethical desideratum.

Unsurprisingly from a realistic point of view, although surprisingly from a consideration of the stand Head publicly takes, Christianity does contribute to the ethical view that seems to embody Head's *summum bonum*: the universal ethic of the brotherhood of man. Her upbringing in the Catholic household of her foster parents and her residence after the age of thirteen in an Anglican girls' school for orphans give the background to her statement regarding Christianity, that she "was steeped in it when

young.” While, she frankly admitted, “Christianity and church going were never going to be an expansive way of life for me,” she did acknowledge the influences of Christianity upon her:

I value that vivid, great short story teller, Jesus Christ, and the foundation he laid for such terms as mankind, the human race and love of one’s neighbor. It was a question often asked of him: “Lord who is my neighbor?” And he would reply with a little story about a Jew who was attacked on the highway by robbers. Many Jews passed by and ignored the injured man until a Samaritan chanced by and offered assistance of all kinds to the injured man. Or he would tell about being thirsty at a well and a foreign woman, would offer him a drink of water. It was as if, from then onwards, individual thinkers and philosophers expanded on this theme. Mankind never began as mankind but as small tribal groups and nations. (Alone 96)

Although Jesus is referred to as “a great short story teller,” the incident at the well with the Samaritan woman should more accurately be referred to as a story by the apostle John or, for the more skeptical, the writer of the Gospel According to John.

Interestingly, for it is relevant to her stated ethical project, Jesus is valued for the foundations he laid for universal brotherhood, which is the indisputable thematic thread from the beginning to the end of the novel. The intimation that the rise to a consideration of universality was counter to the parochial/tribal implies the irony

that brotherhood requires the destruction of tribal structures, which function, ironically, world-wide colonialism performed.

In view of Head's technique of assertion and counter-assertion observed in a study of her theology, just how truly the thread of brotherhood runs through the novel justifies a reprise. Emblematically, the notion is expressed in the first paragraph and the last. In the first it appears in philosophical form, as content of the classical and classic universal-particular paradigm, slightly altered and Africanized into the statement, "I am just anyone" (11). In the last, Elizabeth, once again able to sleep at night without fear of nightmares, meditates that, contrary to the caste systems of India, she "had fallen from the beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary, it was just another way of saying man loved man" (206).

The theme of universal brotherhood is also established by geopolitics and mythology. The African provenance of the "I am just anyone" of the character Sello is backed up by the personal experience of Elizabeth "in the slums and hovels of South Africa" where it was an "unwritten law" that one claimed self-importance only at one's peril:

They hated any black person among them who was “important.” They would say, behind the person’s back: “Oh, he thinks he’s *important*” with awful scorn. She had seen too many people despised for self-importance, and it was something drilled into her: be the same in others in heart; just be a person. (26)

The mythic underworld structure of the novel, though it includes the truth of the Persephone myth, centers upon Africa with the explicit reference to the Egyptian Osiris and Isis myth. Both the myths place extraordinary emphasis on the vegetable garden aspect of the novel which is represented in the matter of the agricultural cooperative. Drawn from the life experience of Bessie Head, the agricultural cooperative made its first appearance in her first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather. In A Question of Power, the multi-national, multi-racial volunteerism of the Motabeng project is invested with a symbolic signification as the site of “intangible, unpraised efforts to establish the brotherhood of man” (158).

The theme was supported by the mythic personalities of Elizabeth’s delusion. It was asserted negatively by Dan and the Medusa who with their overwhelming power created a world where “no one loved anyone” (168). Here, “I am just anyone,” the formula for ordinariness and love encounters its inverse. The words “no one loved anyone” are also affiliated, if not directly

filiated, with the poem of e. e. cummings entitled “anyone lived in a pretty how town.” In the pretty “how town” or the technopolis that the poem evokes, no one loves “anyone,” but since the “no one” or “noone,” like the indefinite pronoun “anyone,” doubles as a personal name, the person “anyone” finds fulfillment and transcendence through the love of the person “noone:”

one day anyone died i guess  
 (and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
 busy folk buried them side by side  
 little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
 and more by more the dream their sleep  
 noone and anyone earth by april  
 wish by spirit and if by yes. (523)

Although for Head the phrase “no one loved anyone” means the loveless universe made by the power hungry, the filiation with cummings’ use of the pronoun helps universalize “I am just anyone,” making it refer at once to the loveless status-conscious world of industrialization and the peculiarly African world of Dan and the Medusa--a remarkably dexterous accomplishment.

Positively speaking, after the collaboration of Sello and Elizabeth achieves its success over Dan, or as Head expresses it, makes “evil irrelevant” (201), Sello shows Elizabeth a traveling bag



filled with an incandescent light: “‘It’s the message of the brotherhood of man,’ he said” (201). Elizabeth soon gains a glimpse of the concealed majesty of her soul’s power in its past experiences with Sello:

They had roamed the world together as barefoot monks, and eaten strange food to sustain them through their monastic disciplines. No lover had caressed them in their solitary meditations on the soul, yet they had been lovers of mankind. She struck at the spring of it, the source of it, that night. They had perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and they perfectly shared everything with all mankind. (202)

This quasi-recollection makes her remember the exalted love they had shared when all “personal” love had died within them, when “there were no private hungers to be kissed, loved, adored” (202). Theirs was a universal love on the exaltation of which

they had moved among men again and again and told them they loved them. That was the essential nature of their love for each other. It had included all mankind, and so many things could be said about it, but the most important was that it equalized all things and all men. (202)

Clearly, the equality of man is the theme of the novel. Every aspect of the novel, then from experience to theological formulation reinforces the notion.

The focus now must turn to an investigation of the origin of

the theme of universality. Here, the postcolonial framework comes to the forefront. It would seem axiomatic that subjection to oppression such as Bessie Head experienced in South Africa, and the ostracism, if that is not too strong a word, that she experienced as an exile in Botswana are the motivating experiences behind her devotion to the human equality that she learned of in the teachings of Jesus. Certainly in 1975, she said: "nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person" (Alone 28).

Regarding the initial thesis, Head wrote,

Having no family to rear me I was reared in part by missionaries and had access to large libraries when young. I view my own activity as a writer as a kind of participation in the thought of the whole world. No other occupation provides for such an international outlook as writing. I have my national, my African side but I am also very much an international kind of person. (Alone 95)

The pattern this inner autobiographical view presents is that of a "bookworm" (Eilerson Thunder 25), who, deprived of immediate family closeness, finds it wherever she can, including a broader conception of the world as imbibed through books.

To her life in the orphanage referred to above, Bessie Head also traced her rejection of one form of surrogate community:

Christianity. At the age of thirteen, her intense desire to see her foster mother led to an encounter with a magistrate who impressed upon her the fact that her real mother had died in an insane asylum. According to her, the mission use of the information was a travesty:

On arriving back at the mission, the missionary opened a large file and looked at me with a wild horror and said: "Your mother was insane. If you're not careful, you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native." The lady seemed completely unaware of the appalling cruelty of her words. But for years and years after that I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and the Christianity which they represented, and once I left the mission I never set foot in a Christian church again. (Alone 4)

Inasmuch as she had to switch from Nellie Heathcote's Catholicism to the Anglicanism of St. Monica overnight, she maintained a "remnant of affection for the faith of her earliest years." She told her son, "When I die, contact the Roman Catholic priest" (Eilerson Thunder 25). This he did.

While a young adult, she made many friends at the Post and Drum publications but especially with those who later contributed to The New African. In the repressive interval of the few years

after Sharpesville, her friends, one after another, were forced to seek exile:

Todd Matshikiza died in exile after being banned under the Suppression of Communism Act; Ezekiel Mphahlele went into exile for twenty years; Arthur Maimane is still in exile in London; Dennis Brutus is still in exile in America after being jailed on Robben Island; Bloke Modisane died recently in exile after being banned under the Communism Act. Can Themba, Jonty Driver, Lewis Nkosi, Breyten Breytenbach--the list is endless. Of course it was not solely due to the fact that they wrote for *The New African* that these writers were persecuted in this way, but their common fate does say something about the political orientation of the magazine and its reception by the authorities. (MacKenzie xvi)

Bessie herself wrote of the effect that the loss of friends of Africa had on her in 1963, the year before she herself joined the African hegira. She wrote of friend Dennis Brutus, the poet who incidentally brought her close to a discovery of her real family. As president of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, Brutus had negotiated with the head of the South African Olympic Committee: none other than Ira Emery, the ex-husband of Bessie Head's mother. Although Bessie and her husband Harold noted the similarity of last names, they made no investigation, the least of which says Eilerson, "would have revealed the name of his first

wife: Bessie Amelia Emery" (Thunder 58-59). While Brutus was probably evading detection as a prison escapee before he was caught and sent to Robben Island later that year, Bessie Head wrote:

One is constantly losing friends these days. Some of the refugees, like my friend, "D. B." did not want to leave. Wherever he is now, I know he is very unhappy. For those of us who are still here, life becomes lonelier and intensely isolated. South Africa is an intensely lonely, intensely sad country. It must have always been but you only begin to notice the loneliness and sadness when all your friends are gone. Friendship is like the part of you that is not very brave; and, if you have friends you find yourself rising to extraordinary heights of strength. You get up to crazy schemes; you talk crazy and it is as though with your friends you will fix up all the wrongs in the world. Suddenly that happy, warm laughing world is shattered and you are left alone to face a horror too terrible to contemplate. (Alone 13)

The loss of friends, inclusive of her husband, was a real item of suffering for her.

Without family, friends, country, religion, she found a sense of community partially in the ideal. The cosmopolitanism of the Stoics was a result of the collapsed Greek city state. The end of the polis as a political entity with which the thoughtful Greek could identify, produced an identification with the ultimate human

community: the world. The lines of causality are not absolute in this, of course, but it does create what sociologists call a structure of plausibility, which is the best we can hope for in matters of this sort. The anomie which Head experienced resulting in the beginning from the illegal liaison of her parents and continuing through the depletion of her friends is a postcolonial predicament. To say this is not to say that hers was the only response. Given her political status in South Africa and the imprisonment and exile of friends she might have, for instance, opted for protest of an overt nature.

Her first submission to the The New African showed a bit of the spleen of which she was capable:

I am Black.  
 Okay?  
 Hot sun and geographical set-up  
 Made me Black;  
 And through my skin  
 A lot of things happen to me  
 THAT I DON'T LIKE. (Alone xv)

This shrill attitude did not continue because, it seems, she was constitutionally incapable of sustaining it, as she seems to have learned after her brush with the authorities who greeted her involvement with the PAC in 1960. In the days of her celebrity,

when she was asked by a Nigerian politician to save South Africa, she said that this should best be left to others: "South Africa had had Steve Biko and they did not need me. There'd be another Steve Biko soon" (qtd. in Eilerson Thunder 251).

What has not been said heretofore is the extent to which Bessie Head placed the emphasis in her novel on the Botswanan experience as over against that of the Union of South Africa. She regarded it a prejudice that many critics thought such soul-powers as those of which she spoke in the novel could not result from the experience of Black Africans. She wrote of these reviewers:

In the mind of any white, whether racist or liberal, a black man is not a whole man, with whole, horrific, satanic passions. A black man is a wee, sleekit, timorous, cowering beastie they mowed down with maxim guns a hundred years ago. A black man could not possibly be the characters in my books, so hugely vile, so hugely demonish. (222)

Toward the end of her life, she relented from the vehemence with which she insisted upon her own interpretations of the novel and looked with equanimity on several views of the novel.

The quest in A Question of Power ends with "a gesture of belonging" to the continent. When she had made her polyphonic, multivocal affirmations of the divinity/brotherhood of man, and

prepared for the miracle of a good night's sleep, the novel reports, "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over the land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). The very moment that affirms her solidarity with all mankind: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet," is the same moment in which she establishes a deeper relationship with Africa. The universal is therefore established within the particular.

Eilerson has convincingly advanced the view that the *oeuvre* of Bessie Head is a tale of two trilogies--the first, noted initially by Arthur Ravenscroft (Eilerson "Social" 51), consisting of When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru, and culminating in A Question of Power; the latter consisting of Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind, A Collector of Treasures, and culminating in A Bewitched Crossroad. By Head's own admission, the first three works are personal and inward, ending in that most inward of novels upon which we have concentrated; the latter three, as she wrote, "became more social and outward looking" (qtd. in Eilerson "Social" 44). The first work of the second trilogy is a series of interviews of the citizens of Serowe, her adopted village. The collection of short stories entitled A Collector of Treasures was regarded by Bessie Head as a sort of overflow of the work done among her village neighbors. The last



book of the trilogy is the capstone of her attempt to knit herself into her local surroundings and Africa, intellectually.

The theme of the exile runs truly through the first trilogy. In When Rain Clouds Gather, the Zulu prince Makhaya crosses over the border from South Africa into Botswana, abandons his plans to be a terrorist, and finds a tenuous sense of belonging in his new land. In Maru, Margaret the Masarwa is passively brought into a socially redemptive relationship, as her oppressed people sense freedom from her marriage with black royalty. In A Question of Power, as we have seen, Elizabeth is regarded as the Cape Gooseberry plant that achieves successful transplantation into Botswana.

The role of history in Head's personal quest to find a place to belong is well documented. She agreed with Fanon that the colonial violence in South Africa not only disrupted the flow of primary history, that is, history as it was lived, but also the character of secondary history, that is, as it was remembered and conceived. She felt that a past with which she could identify was a casualty of the double colonial domination that characterized the South African political experience. In her introduction to Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa in 1982, she expressed her

view that “Most black South Africans suffer from a very broken sense of history” (Alone 82). In “Writing out of Southern Africa” in 1985, she applied the same words to herself, “Like most black people born in South Africa, I lived with a very broken sense of history” (97). It became a conscious interest of hers to re-establish this history.

In contrast with South Africa where, as she said “we, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth; we did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation” her experience of Botswana was wholly new:

In my eyes Botswana is the most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa. It has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa. It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained intact here. (qtd. in Eilerson “Social” 229)

In the introduction to Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind, Head intimates the work of historical remediation that village life wrought upon her:

It was by chance that I came to live in this village. I have lived most of my life in shattered little bits. Somehow, here, the shattered bits began to grow together. There is a sense of wovenness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of how strange and beautiful people can be--just living. (Serowe x)

Among the things that life in Botswana supplied to Bessie were personifications of the history she found so delightfully intact. She wrote,

I know of other British protectorates in Africa where the soul of the people was left intact and undisturbed, the British being mainly interested in resources, not the people, but what is unique about Botswana is that over the 80-year period of British occupation, the country produced two leader images--Khama the Great and his son Tshekedi Khama who asserted black pride and independence and claims to the land. They were men admired in Britain and their personalities lay like a protective mantle over the land. (Alone 94)

To the Khamas, especially Khama the Great, was credited the ability of Botswana to escape the more vigorous hand of imperialism of Cecil Rhodes. Whereas Britain was pleased to merely keep Botswana out of the hands of other European imperialists, Rhodes wanted to possess it just as he possessed the land to the north that he called Rhodesia. He was the first to use the American-invented machine gun known as the Maxim gun. He trained it on Lobengula's Matabele warriors, killing 3000 of them with a loss of only one of his own troops.<sup>1</sup>

To Eilerson, it was Khama the Great who served the double purpose of leading Bessie Head to a closer relation with black

Africans, although she had already identified with them, and also bridging the gap between ordinary people and the people of power. These identifications, in turn, enabled her to find her real voice of political protest:

It is my contention that Head's lack of historical reference is one of the major causes of her earlier avoidance of political involvement. The double process of establishing an intellectual historical basis in her life and a group identity provided her with the mature confidence to examine and express the indignation she had always felt as a victim of a racist regime. A *Bewitched Crossroad* gives voice to this indignation. The tribal migrations and local disruptions of which Sebina and Khama III are part are set against a much more ambitious backdrop--the complicated intrigues taking place in Southern Africa in the nineteenth century. ("Social" 48-49)

Imaginatively, then, for the first time in an extensive work, Head is able to take a precolonial and relatively acolonial standpoint, where the would-be victims of colonialism stand, as it were, at the calm center of a storm of dispossession and violence that swirls around them. The colonial wolf at the door in the person of Cecil Rhodes and his British South Africa Company is kept away, and kept away in large part through the efforts and personality of King Khama the Great. Says Eilerson,

A *Bewitched Crossroad* should never have been her last work. Because her life ended so early, the book stands

as a worthy document of the odyssey . . . that she embarked on after she (Elizabeth) had placed a soft hand on her land in a gesture of belonging. (51)

This precolonial, non-metropolitan standpoint is an Archimedean standpoint which reorders her conception of the world. It allows her for the first time to see her history whole and conceive herself outside the bowels of the colonial tide. She is able to conceive a pre-colonial history the temporal extensions of which afforded her a concrete refuge. The historical transcendence with which she affiliates herself affords a space within which to reclaim an identity, if not entirely uncontaminated by colonialism, then not debilitatingly so.

The precise mechanism by which King Khama and his Bamangwato people “eluded the colonial era” and provided a space for the historical transcendence Bessie Head was eventually able to achieve, is within itself a mode of transcendence, all the more worth looking at as it is ostensibly what provided Bessie Head with her ideal of equalitarianism. Although Bessie Head herself does not explicitly make much of the fact of the mechanism other than that it worked for King Khama, it might recommend itself as a principle of universality that she had ready-to-hand.

Khama, eldest of the five sons of King Sekgoma, became a

Christian in his youth. Despite the disapproval of his father, he refused to participate in the *hogwera* or circumcision rite, since this rite like all the major rites involved the sacrifice of a human life (51). To the Christian wife he had taken, he refused to add the one for which his father had paid the bride price some years before. The parental disapproval grew into a desire for Khama's destruction. Khama's strength grew until the portion of the tribe that had followed him became powerful enough to oust his father. Nevertheless, Khama respected his father enough to return him to the throne after a defeat. The father pursued his plans to destroy the Christian King, but did not succeed. In 1876, Khama assumed total control and gradually Christianized the practices of the tribe. By the publications of missionary John MacKenzie, the image of Khama permanently froze into one of a perfectionist, a remarkable

African, an enlightened leader of his people, a man of integrity, and a Great Christian. This image was to be deferred to by every European missionary, trader, traveler, adventurer, and imperialist. This image of the perfect black man found at last, was to create a pause in the activities Europeans. (Crossroads 56)

Although this has the note of hagiography, the achievements of Khama, nevertheless have a heroic cast.

In the moment of crisis with Rhodes, it was as a Christian that

Khama was able to motivate the British public. It was as a Christian that he enlisted membership of the London Missionary Society to prosecute his campaign for independence in a matter where the minister of colonial affairs was so much in the pocket of Cecil Rhodes that he would not talk with Khama. Here one might see clearly a principle of transcendence, though Bessie Head herself does not directly embrace it.

In investigating the ontology of universality, we inquire into what ultimate bases there are, insofar as one can know them, for claiming what Bessie Head advocates: the essential equality of man. It is perhaps to the great credit of history that Bessie Head feels no need to provide a reason for her belief. She asserts it repeatedly and attempts to overthrow obstacles to its realization, namely the will to be "somebody" rather than "just anyone" and, *mirabile dictu*, the belief that God is a transcendent being. She feels no need to argue for the point. It is "self-evident" to her as it was to Jefferson, the American founding fathers, and the larger world of the eighteenth-century philosophes, "that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life liberty and the pursuit of happiness." What attracts her attention is the tendency of men of power to act

in a manner contrary to these ideals. Nor is it likely that anyone would attempt to prove human equality. It remains a matter of faith.

It would perhaps have strengthened her position had she, nevertheless, brought to bear a body of faith to support her belief. Since she admits that her belief in the equality of men derived primarily from the teachings of Jesus, the “great short story teller,” it is conceivable that it would have been to her advantage to have brought world-wide Christianity to bear upon her project. Here would have been at her hand the “one blood theory” of mankind, observable in the creation story and proclaimed by Paul of Tarsus to the Greeks on the Areopagus in Athens:

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and he made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the surface of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, “For we also are His offspring.” (NASB Acts 17:24-28)

Here a common creation by a common Divinity establishes the



oneness of mankind, or, to put it differently, provides the ontological basis for the universality of humanity. In the Enlightenment, the exercise of reason established equality. Head appeals to neither, or else to a world which has accepted what the former and the latter, especially the first, have, over the years, established.

This passage not only asserts the solidarity and brotherhood of all mankind but expresses as well a theory of history, the extension of being through time. Whereas for Paul the passage of time did not affect the essential reality of salvation, other takes based as well on the on the Greek tradition, do have implications for a construction of ontology. J. Sibree in the “Translator’s Preface” of Hegel’s Philosophy of History construes Hegel’s efforts as a philosopher of history as an attempt to take seriously these very words of Paul, to wit, that God who “made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth, hath determined *the times before appointed*, and the bounds of their habitation, if haply they might feel after and find him” (vi). It is, he continues, “these καιροὶ προτεταγμένοι, these determined and organic epochs in the history of the world that Hegel proposes to distinguish and develop in the following treatise” (vi). Paul’s words

suggest an order to history and a purpose for it, to wit, that the boundaries and appointed times are established that men might come to a salvific knowledge.

Postcoloniality, though exceedingly comprehensive, is not ultimate. In fact, Head's discovery of a pre-Riebeeckian Southern African history includes the history of the metropolis within itself. It is a view that concentrates its analysis upon the last half millennium of world history, although there is no reason why the insights pertinent to it could not be applied in any age. In fact, the dissolution of the Roman empire and the eventual rise of the colonized people of antiquity have been referred to as a precursive model of modern postcoloniality. The primary difference is ideological and geographical scale. The present world is oceanic and global in contradistinction to the thalassic and regional empire of Rome or the potamic civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China that preceded it. The conceptual paradigm by which Head begins her novel dates to the acknowledged beginning of the Western tradition, and by appealing to the three Greek superphilosophers--Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle--adds authority to longevity. The ontology of these three provide the central means of the philosophy Hegel elaborated, ostensibly as an attempt

to take the words of Paul of Tarsus seriously. Uniquely then, in Hegel, we may see both the universal-particular paradigm with which Bessie Head begins and the oneness of man that she takes from Christianity. We may see therefore, the ontological combination of the Greeks and the Hebrews.

Against the philosophy of change which was dramatically and effectively posited by Heraclitus in the emblematic utterance, "You can't step into the same river twice," which was later extended by his disciple Cratylus as, "You can't step in the same river once," Socrates/Plato postulated outside time the ontically ultimate realm of the "Idea" which did not change and in which the changing things of the world could somehow participate. Aristotle describes this movement:

The supporters of the ideal theory were led to it because on the question about the truth of things they accepted the Heraclitean sayings which describe all sensible things as ever passing away, so that if knowledge or thought is to have an object, there must be some other and permanent entities, apart from those those which are sensible; for there could be no knowledge of things which were in a state of flux. (894)

The realm of the Idea was the realm both of the universal and ultimate reality. The things of the world were what they were and were real to the extent that they participated in or approximated

their Idea.

Aristotle brought a portion of Platonism down to earth by internalizing the blueprint aspect of the Idea in the things themselves, conceiving, therefore, growing things as moving toward their final causes or goals. The whole changing world of living individuals were attracted toward perfection, however, by the power of the perfection of the Deity, in the same way that all eyes turn toward a beautiful human beings without their intention. What was Aristotle's God intent upon? Only that which befit him: thought of perfection. What was perfect? Only thought, or Idea in motion. He spent his time then in *noesis noeseos*, the thought of thinking (Aristotle 885).

Hegel, a thorough classicist in his thinking, and a historian of philosophy as well as a philosopher of history, maintained the name of the Platonic Idea but altered the content, however, such that "it was progress in freedom conceived as the Platonic idea of the beautiful" (Manuel 121). Although, as Bessie Head would respect, Hegel dropped the notion of transcendence, he maintained the immanence of Aristotle and, having said that there was nothing in Heraclitus which he could not accept, enclosed his whole formulation in the Heraclitean concept of motion now conceived as

“progress.” For Hegel, all of history, therefore, was involved in the realization of the Idea.

The content of the Hegelian idea was freedom and morality under the law. Hegel referred to the advance of history as the march of God in the world. That divine ideation maintained its Aristotelian stamp. It existed in self-consciousness. How could a nation be self-conscious? When it obeyed its law which made freedom possible and secure. Inasmuch as law was a sort of crystallized consciousness or thought, obedience to the law under the condition of freedom was the thought of thinking and therefore divine. Therefore the final aim of history would be reached and indeed had been reached when free people obeyed the laws that secured their freedom.

Although many smiled at Hegel's conclusion of The Philosophy of History, to wit, that the Germany of his day was the end of the history, despite the fact that, objectively speaking it is noted that “it is hard to detect a triumphant temper in this work” (Manuel 119); the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent sole super-power status of the United States, accompanied by the general proliferation of democracies in the world has given the notion a serious audience in the twentieth century. The power

contest between these two nations which Hegel presciently called “the lands of the future,” and which others have regarded as the Hegelian left and the Hegelian right, Francis Fukuyama, has regarded as outgrowths, respectively, of the thought of Hegel and Marx: “Both thinkers posited an end of history: for Hegel this was the liberal state, while for Marx it was a communist society” (xii). The outcome of the contest has eventuated in Fukuyama’s thesis that the end of the cold war and the collapse of communism has indeed led to the end of history. The ontic *ens realissimum* of history then has been achieved in the proliferation of America-like democracies. Present history has arrived at the *ne plus ultra* of attainment, the self-realization of God in the world.

Bessie Head’s philosophy of history also involved the notion of deity, or at least the use of the word for deity, as does Hegel, for some supreme reality, however far short it falls of the deities of the great world religions. In a piece entitled “Writing Out of South Africa” written in 1985, Head says clearly,

I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books. I cannot find a substitute word for all that is most holy but I have tried to deflect people’s attention into offering to each other what they offer to an Unseen Being in the sky. When people are holy to each other, war will end, human suffering will end. (Alone 99)

That this is her considered and practical view of history is clear from a concrete conclusion. She shows what she means by her use of the word "God" by the statement: "I would propose that mankind will one day be ruled by men who are God and not greedy, power-hungry politicians" (99). This world government would be gradually achieved through the lives of men of integrity. The *ne plus ultra* of attainment for her world view? She concludes:

Hand in hand with world government I clearly foresee a new race of people--not nations or national identity as such but rather people who are a blending of all the nations of the earth. Its beginnings are already there so I do not see any of this as being forced on people, but that it is the natural outcome of mankind's slow spiritual unfoldment over the centuries. These are the themes that have preoccupied me as a writer. (100)

Though several theological definitions of the divinity within man would seem ready-to-hand for Head, especially the atman-Brahman concept of Hinduism, given her love of Indian philosophies, she manifestly shuns that direct route in her works. It is as if she distrusts divinity in any ontological sense even as she feels the need draw upon the rhetorical power connected with it.

In 1986, the very last year of her life, Head continued to use the word "God" in a way that is ontically negative except when attributed to man. Envisioning herself as a sort of Prometheus

after, not some glittering possession of God, but his very name, she wrote:

I foresee a day when I will steal the title of God, the unseen Being in the sky, and offer it to mankind. From then onwards, people, as they pass each other in the street each day, will turn to each other and say: "Good morning, God." War will end. Human suffering will end. I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of mankind up there with me. That is why I write. (Beard "Syncretic Fictions" 580).

Head therefore tries to avoid the expressly ontological, always veering from the metaphysical to the ethical goal of brotherhood. Brotherhood is dialectically isolated, owing nothing even to divinity. It is a *ding an sich*, a thing-in-itself, something *sui generis*, so much the object of veneration that it brooks no causal antecedence. Although she does not hesitate to explain that with which it is incompatible--colonialism, egoism, transcendent deity--she is careful not to make it derivative of or dependent upon any positive entity. History, psychology, philosophy, mythology, and theology--the entire ensemble of *universalia*--although they unerringly point to it, are not allowed to touch the unvarying ideal of brotherhood, which is for her like the idea of being in Heidegger, the one star in the world's sky:

We are too late for the gods and too



early for Being. Being's poem,  
just begun, is man.

To head toward a star--this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a  
single thought that one day stands  
still like a star in the world's sky. (Poetry 4)

As Heidegger says of his ontological goal, Head says, as it were, of  
her ethical goal: "To head toward a star--this only."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Russell Baker, host of the PBS Masterpiece Theater broadcast of Rhodes on January 6, 1998, after noting that if Rhodes had his bloody attack with the American invented Maxim gun on the hapless warriors of Lobengula and later the infamy of the Jameson Raid, then the Americans had Wounded Knee. He suggested that the Western powers could not resist using the powerful new weapons upon themselves, as witness World War I. Aimée Cesaire in his "Discourse on Colonialism" follows a similar line of thought, suggesting that such a movement from inhuman practices in the colonial scene to the metropolitan eventuated in the holocaust.

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