

# The Sea Close By: The Coastal Diaries of Albert Camus, Athol Fugard and Stephen Watson

Hedley Twidle

## Abstract

In reading passages about the southern African coastline from Athol Fugard's *Notebooks 1960-1977* (1983) and Stephen Watson's *A Writer's Diary* (1997), I hope to explore how and why these writers are drawn to the figure of Albert Camus. Much of this Nobel laureate's *oeuvre* – his *Carnets* and in particular his lyrical essays like 'Nuptials at Tipasa' and 'The Wind at Djemila' – returns to an Algerian coastline of similar latitude, light and climate to that of the Cape Peninsula; so too he writes out of a vexed political context which speaks to the situation of the liberal-humanist literary imagination in southern Africa. The 'invincible summer' instilled by his Algerian upbringing was something which Camus imagined as the core of his creative being; yet how does a similar celebration of physicality, the body and 'the sensual intelligence' play out when relocated from a northern to a southern African coastline? In answering this, I hope to suggest how the diary form – a neglected and supposedly minor mode on the margins of 'literature' – is able to show with a particular power the ways in which natural, social and personal histories come to be braided together in a postcolony like South Africa.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus, Athol Fugard, Stephen Watson, diary as literary form.

On 12 July 1996, midway through his *A Writer's Diary*, the Cape Town poet, critic and essayist Stephen Watson pauses to consider 'those who, without

being attached to anything like a weather bureau, keep a daily record of the weather, its changes, variations, apparent duplications’:

I imagine there must be moments when they ask themselves what all their annotations amount to .... Today there is one feature which may be noteworthy; tomorrow another. Years pass. But still it doesn’t quite add up. It simply is what it is...

Writers, too, are little different from these amateur diarists of the climate, notating a world of insatiable flux. They too are forced to annotate the world over and over, hoping against hope that somehow, somewhere, one day, it will all add up; that instead of just the weather – all that is variable, never constant, never quite the same – there will be, on the page they’ve just written and abandoned, the world (Watson 1997: 126).

It is a passage which speaks wryly, and self-consciously, about the practice of diary-keeping: a long-term discipline of dispassionately logging the world set against the ingenuous, laughably partial nature of the individual entry; the combinations of settledness and flux that come, in Watson’s year long writing up of the Cape, to form the ‘inner weather’ of a text which knowingly blurs interior and external worlds, encoding each in terms of the other.

In southern Africa the diary as meteorological record carries with it, as we shall see, a long colonial history as a navigational and conceptual aid – first on sea, then on land – for apprehending the trackless, the unfamiliar, the other. Yet equally, despite being private, closeted and comparatively ‘unofficial’ archives, several historical diaries have proved compelling for a contemporary literary imagination<sup>1</sup> intent on re-presenting once obscure(d)

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples would include: Sol Plaatje’s lost and then rediscovered Boer War journal (speculatively ‘finished’ by Andries Oliphant in ‘The Interpreter’, 1999); Olive Schreiner’s proto-feminist life-writing, which surely feeds into the ‘locked diary’ of J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); the journals of Lady Anne Barnard and Susanna Smit that compel and frustrate the poetic imagination of Antjie Krog in equal measure; the *Dagregister* of Adam Tas, drawn on by several writers as a formative moment in Afrikaans culture.

lives, rediscovering the ordinary and, perhaps more elusively, evoking a different kind of temporality: an altered sense of how time passes, shapes and is shaped by writing. In the more recent diaries that I hope to explore here, intensely personal meditations on creative process co-exist with an attempt to log the everyday during times of major socio-political flux. And all of the above find figurative counterparts and shapes for understanding in the interplay of wind, tide, water and light along the southern African coastline.

Like Watson's record from one December to another across 1995 to 1996, the *Notebooks 1960/1977* of Athol Fugard are drawn repeatedly to the South African coastline. If *A Writer's Diary* is suffused with evocations of the Cape Peninsula, Fugard's journals read in one sense like a long meditation on the beaches, estuaries, tidal spars and mudflats near Port Elizabeth: almost every page carries depiction of a space that, given that there are some 3000 kilometres of it in total, remains a rather overlooked site in South African literary culture more generally.

Introducing *The Penguin Book of the Beach*, a 1996 anthology of short stories, Robert Drewe explores a similar situation in Australia, remarking that even though it is the world's largest island, with more than ninety per cent of its population living near the coast, 'the mythical qualities of its ocean shore have, until recently, been neglected in Australian literature':

The sensual intelligence tended to be distrusted or denied, viewed as mere hedonism or pantheism. Literature academics, though they rarely ventured there, favoured the dry, asexual, pragmatic myth of the bush and inland desert... At the same time, for at least the past three generations, the average Australian has been conducting a lifelong love affair with the beach (Drewe 2006: 6).

One might want to question this idea of 'the average Australian', and suggest that such a label is even less viable in southern Africa. But it certainly seems that from accounts of the colonial romance through to J.M. Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk's fractured meditations on the African farm, 'the heart of the country' has compelled far more critical attention than the long inverted arc which forms the land/sea borderline of Africa South.

Even the growing interest in ‘black’ Atlantics or ‘blue’ cultural studies – those complex historical trajectories across oceans which form such a powerful means of thinking our way into transnational or world history – tends to pay attention to transport networks and nodes, shipping routes and (post)colonial ports, but is less concerned with the sea margin itself, and in particular those parts of it where the built environment thins out or is left behind. What would it mean to think about all those figures in the South African past and present gazing not towards arid hinterlands but turned instead to face the sea? *Strandlopers* and *seewagters*, castaways and prophetesses, prisoners, beachcombers, fishermen, swimmers, scientists, pilgrims, New Year’s Day revellers, holidaymakers, surfers and sunbathers  
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In exploring the ‘the sensual intelligence’ – its possibilities for literary fiction, but also the difficulties that it poses for a politically aware cultural criticism – Drewe is drawn, as are Fugard and Watson, to the work of Albert Camus. He quotes the 1958 Preface to the collection of early ‘lyrical essays’, *L’envers et l’endroit* (*Betwixt and Between* 1937; also translated as *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*):

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with sunlight. Even my revolts were lit up by the sun .... To correct my natural indifference, I was placed half-way between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything (Camus 1970: 18).

From *L’étranger* (1942) through the *Carnets* (1962, 1965) to the unfinished, posthumously published manuscript of *Le premier homme* (1995), the work of this *piéd noir* become Nobel laureate provides a range of ‘intimate recognitions’ and encouragements for both the South African playwright and the poet (Watson 2010: 148). And their respective diaries leave one in no doubt as to the strength, and relief, of this identification: ‘Resumed reading Camus’s *Carnets*. I would be happy to spend the next ten years deepening my understanding and appreciation of this man’, Fugard writes in August 1963; and later in the year: ‘Impossible to describe the excitement, the total sympathy that exists for me with Camus’s thinking. In the harsh but lucid

world of his writing I seem to have found, for the first time, my true climate' (1983: 94, 105)<sup>2</sup>.

Watson's engagement with Camus is most explicit in the long essay, six years in the writing, which forms the centrepiece of *The Music in the Ice* (2010), the collection of critical and personal pieces published shortly before his death. But it stretches back through his diaries and criticism to his first collection of poetry, *In this City* (1986), which takes a line from Camus's essay 'Return to Tipasa' (1954) as its epigraph:

Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first<sup>3</sup>.

It is, like the piece quoted by Drewe, one of many aphoristic, even gnomic formulations by the French writer in which the claims of a world that is both intensely physical and intensely unjust are placed in a taut and difficult dialogue. It suggests too how the range of analogues between north and south Africa offered by his writing are at once both political *and* geographical.

The Mediterranean coastline that Camus returns to throughout his life is, in terms of its latitude and climate, is a kind of topographic double or mirror image of the littoral zone that Fugard and particularly Watson are drawn to: the shifting combinations of light, wind, swimmers, saltwater and cold ocean currents, the 'life that tastes of warm stone' in which his prose luxuriates (Camus 1970: 72). Yet at the same time, the acrimonious debates

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<sup>2</sup> Given the almost talismanic significance which certain of Camus's formulations seem to have held for Fugard in the mid-1960s, it is unsurprising that Russell Vandenbroucke's 1986 monograph on the playwright takes its title from the essay 'Summer in Algiers': 'Between this sky and the faces looking up to it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic or a religion; only stones, flesh, stars and those *truths the hand can touch*' (1970: 89, e.a.).

<sup>3</sup> The lines appear translated slightly differently in *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, trans. Philip Thody: 'Whatever difficulties the enterprise may present ...' (1970: 153). All quotations from Camus taken from this edition unless otherwise stated.

about ‘formalist’ versus ‘committed’ writing, or ‘revolutionary’ versus ‘aesthetic’ poetics which dominated South African literary culture in the 1970s and 80s find an echo in Camus’s increasingly embattled liberalism as decolonisation unfolded in Francophone Africa. As the historian Tony Judt writes, although with hindsight Camus seems to have negotiated a uniquely honourable path through the ideological pressures of twentieth-century life as a public intellectual, his rejection of violence and terror in all its forms ‘reduced him to impotent silence at the height of the Algerian civil war and rendered him inaccessible to the generation that followed’ (2009: 98)<sup>4</sup>.

The result is a distinctive, unsettling poetics, both seductive and possibly suspect: sunlit wellbeing co-exists with relentless poverty; richly embodied sensuality risks tipping into mere cultural vacancy; stylistic lucidity is married to Sisyphean absurdity. I will hold such ebbs and flows in mind while considering the varied literary trajectories of Watson and Fugard as they explore their respective regions as ‘extremes of social nightmare and geographical dream’ (Anderson 2011: 18). And I hope to suggest that it is the diary, a neglected and supposedly ‘minor form on the periphery of literature’ (Watson 1997: vii) that is able to show with a particular power the ways in which natural, social and personal histories come to be braided together in the tragically delayed postcolony that is South Africa. More generally then, I approach such ‘littoral zones’ as a means of thinking through the possibility, but also the difficulty, of bringing into dialogue those modes of reading and writing that might broadly be termed ‘postcolonial’ and ‘ecocritical’.

## **Writing Up, Writing Off: Diaries, Dead Reckoning and Day-registers**

Both Fugard’s and Watson’s are quite explicitly *writer’s* diaries, in the narrow sense: the workbook of a writer who imagines his or her main practice to be going on elsewhere, and in other forms. Yet for a certain kind of reader, such supposedly peripheral or supplementary texts may come to

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of Camus’s vexed career as political commentator and public intellectual, as well as his bruising clash with Sartre, see Judt’s long essay on ‘The Reluctant Moralist: Albert Camus and the Discomforts of Ambivalence’ (1998: 87 - 135).

hold just as much interest as the main body of the *oeuvre*. And not, I would suggest, simply because of voyeurism or a small-minded fascination with the prosaic.

Introducing a selection from Coleridge's *Notebooks*, Seamus Perry remarks that journalism and notebook entries, in being occasional and impermanent forms, 'enablingly slackened his self-imposed expectations' (2002: viii). As a reader who has always found such notebooks a more engaging, accessible and ultimately more acute form of knowledge than the self-consciously 'literary' prose of the *Biographia Literaria*, I am receptive to the idea that it was this descendant of the 'commonplace book' – with its abrupt shifts from high to low registers, its aleatoric or serendipitous logic, and its 'unplanned, unfolding, various existence' – which 'allowed his multiform genius its natural outlet' (2002: viii).

It is this sense of marginal and liminal written modes – genres, styles and registers positioned slightly aslant to publicly imposed or privately internalised expectations – that I hope to retain in a postcolony where, as I have argued elsewhere, the literary text is subject to an unusually intense and premature pressure to be *written up*. 'South Africa' – often imagined in grandiose and incorrigibly allegorical terms as a 'concentration of world history' or a 'hemispheric seam' – has produced countless texts which tend to resolve (or be resolved) into a fixed, transportable set of meanings intended for global consumption<sup>5</sup>. In this context I am interested in whether the ongoing and localised practice of diary-keeping might offer more unusual and unexpected shapes for thought.

In the most compelling examples of this kind of life-writing – from Coleridge through to Virginia Woolf or, say, the *Journals* of John Cheever –

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<sup>5</sup> The quoted phrases are from Derrida (1986: 337) and Mostert (1992: xv) respectively. In a more general discussion of non-fictional modes and their genealogies in South African literary history, I use the phrase *writing up* in two senses: 'firstly to evoke figure of the foreign correspondent (or any writing outsider) filing a report for a distant audience, a report often registering the pressure of the exotic or ethnographic; and secondly to suggest how texts from South Africa often register a (premature) pressure to resolve into a fixed, transportable set of meanings: to be (too quickly) *finished up*, that is, or *sewn up*' (Twidle 2012: 18 - 19).

one is able to experience the daily *bricolage* produced as a wide-ranging intellectual life interacts with materials immediately to hand. In 1830, Emerson, dissatisfied with the didactic, monotone address of the sermon ('no arrows, no axes, no nectar, no growling') found a metaphor for the kind of cultural criticism he wished to practice after seeing the 'panharmonicon' being toured by the German con artist, Johann Maelzel. As David Shields describes in *Reality Hunger* (2010), when demonstrating this 'organ without keys', Maelzel 'would crank its heavy silver lever three times and step off to the side, and the machine would spit out an entire orchestra's worth of sound: flutes, drums, trumpets, cymbals, trombones, a triangle, clarinets, violins':

After seeing Maelzel's machine perform, Emerson called the new literature he'd been looking for 'a panharmonicon. Here everything is admissible – philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humour, fun, mimicry, anecdote, jokes, ventriloquism – all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest and lowest personal topics: all are permitted, and all may be combined into one speech' (2010: 16).

If much academic literary criticism in the last half century has operated in the shadow of Michel Foucault's panopticon – with its metaphors of power, disciplining and subjection – then perhaps the panharmonicon registers (as the reception of Shields's book testifies) an appetite for broader, more public and perhaps less predictable sense of what cultural criticism might be: criticism as autobiography, discursive essay, travelogue, or a creative response which blurs all the above. All are modes which may well have been *written off* as mere belle-lettrism in the ideologically charged debates of the 1970s and 80s. But when approached today, they may well serve as descriptions of the kind of deeply empathetic (and unashamedly humanist) response to literary precursors that characterises the approach of Camus, Fugard and Watson.

But if the diary form is in one sense uniquely open to the world, it is also often closed, locked, secret, or at least uncertain of its status with regard to a wider social body: whether it should be public, publicised, published (the kind of internal debate that generates the split personae, and pages, of



Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*). It can offer a space for thinking that is more obscure and lonely, but also safer and more experimental. If the mode signifies in one sense the comic ordinariness that Watson remarks on in discussing those 'amateur diarists of flux', in literary history (or at least, literary mythology) the writer's diary often exists under the sign of the aberrant and unusual: a series of (posthumously discovered) writerly experiments with alternate selves (Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*); the unbearable, unreadable or destroyed (Gide on Wilde, Sylvia Plath's last journal); the unconscious (Kafka, Graham Greene's 'dream diaries'); the radically displaced (Gombrowicz in Argentina); the ungenerous or unsayable within one's own lifetime (Malinowski; Cheever).

Finally, as a sustained record and personal archive, it can be a space where thoughts and ideas might mature for much longer before being released into the world. And in an increasingly hyperlinked world, with the kind of instantaneous self-broadcasting now enabled by the internet, one might even ask whether it is a form that has come very quickly to seem impossibly outmoded and old-fashioned, almost a kind of literary relic. Set back from a digital world of blogging, live feeds and comment forums, the handwritten diary stands as a long and private record of built-in obsolescence<sup>6</sup>.

Yet of course, in a place like South Africa (as in so many parts of the world), the diary is also an explicitly colonial form. Any genealogy of the mode must eventually lead one back (via countless texts by missionaries, administrators, ethnographers, travellers and natural historians) to the foundational text of settler-colonialism in South Africa: what is normally called the *Daghregister* or Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, even though not a single word of it was written by the first (reluctant) Commander of the Dutch garrison at the Cape. Instead we have a document sometimes dictated by him, sometimes chronicling his actions in the third person, and sometimes composed in his absence: kind of collective, political unconscious of the early station that has been repeatedly, almost obsessively, drawn on by social

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<sup>6</sup> I have in mind here the remarks of Philip French who, in his work on V.S. Naipaul, suggested that it might be 'the last literary biography to be written from a complete paper archive' (2008: xiii).

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historians, poets, historical novelists seeking to re-imagine the past<sup>7</sup>. Yet this master document of settlement – at first remarkably precarious, then aggressively expansionist – can be pushed back even further, dislodged from its claims to the land and run backward into the impermanence and tracklessness of the open ocean.

In an outline of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) writing system, Adrien Delmas shows how the *daghregister* was first and fundamentally a nautical form. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, as Portuguese and then Dutch ships began to explore the *volta da mar largo* (the ‘diversion to the deep sea’ which enabled the passing of the doldrums and the rounding of the Cape) coastal landmarks could no longer be relied upon. New techniques of open-sea navigation had to be developed on voyages where latitude could be measured with astrolabe or sextant but longitude, which required accurate chronometers, could not be calculated. As such, all navigators on board ship were compelled to adopt the practice of *gegist bestek*, or ‘dead reckoning’, in which the pilot would write down the observed course and estimated distance of the ship on a daily basis (if not more frequently) so as to make an educated guess about the position of the vessel. In Pedro de Medina’s, *Arte de Navegar*, published at Valladolid in 1545, he described how the navigator

... must be well prepared for long journeys and have a register of his journey, where he records the wind that he uses every day and in which way: and also how fast his ship can sail, checking with the clock how many leagues per hour it covers (Cited in Delmas 2011: 97).

As recorded in a VOC charter of 1602, this requirement to maintain a daily log or written ‘memory’ of the voyage (a text that inevitably collected other, incidental details) was one of the most important instructions issued to navigators: pre-printed, lined notebooks were provided for the task, documents that would have a second life once lodged in the VOC

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<sup>7</sup> For some accounts of how post-apartheid South African literature engages the VOC archive, see Easton (2002); Samuelson (2007); and Carli Coetzee (2012).

headquarters as part of a vast Company archive devoted to the secrets of *Konst der Zeevaart* (Knowledge of Seafaring).

As Delmas writes, at the southern tip of Africa the 17<sup>th</sup>-century *daghregister*, ‘begun with the casting-off from Texel, would not...be stopped, and would continue its narrative for the next one hundred and fifty years of the VOC’s presence at the Cape of Good Hope’ (2011: 106). Once on land, the Company directives about logging daily events were equally insistent: ‘Of all that occurs in your neighbourhood, you will keep accurate notes and a diary,’ instructed Amsterdam on the eve of Van Riebeeck’s departure, ‘and shall not fail in this point’ (Moodie 1959: 8). In its very form, then, the document prefigures the shift from sea-going navigation to land-based natural history narrative that will transpire over the coming centuries at the Cape: the first entry of *The Journal of Jan van Riebeeck* as it now appears in published form is of course penned on board the *Drommedaris*, a vessel named, rather suggestively in this context, after north Africa’s ‘ship of the desert’, the camel<sup>8</sup>. ‘The wind still east, sometimes half a point to the south and now and then as much to the north, blowing freshly’, reads the entry for Christmas Day 1651, soon after setting sail, where the obsessive attention to climatic conditions is so clearly *underwriting* the massive ambition and but also uncertainty of 17<sup>th</sup>-century navigation:

Estimate to have sailed 26 miles from Texel on a south-westerly course and to be between the *Polder* and the *Gom*, where towards evening the whole fleet had to lie to the wind. All night we kept

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<sup>8</sup> In her account of colonial travel writing and transculturation, *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt describes the Cape as a particularly charged site for charting discursive and generic shifts in the writing up of colonial journeys. In discussing the work of Peter Kolb (1719), which comes after three centuries during which ‘European knowledge making apparatuses had been construing the planet above all in navigational terms’, she claims that it differs in a number of respects from later post-Linnaean natural histories: ‘Kolb was writing before narrative paradigms for interior travel and exploration emerged in the last decades of the century. In 1719 navigational paradigms still prevailed: the only part of his experience Kolb does present as narrative is his six-month sea voyage to arrive at the Cape’ (1992: 43).

between 20 and 23 fathoms in order to avoid the perils of the Flemish shoals (Van Riebeeck 1952: Vol. 1, 4).

### **‘A little postage stamp of native soil’: Marine Biography and the Bioregional**

It is a sense of an ocean-based form spilling over onto land that I want to carry forward in considering the much more recent writers’ diaries at the Cape. Encoded within this long history of the diary as colonial form, it seems, is a fundamental tension between movement and emplacement, settlement and flux. If the kind of weather bulletins which one finds, almost as a reflex action, at the beginning of every entry in the day-registers of Van Riebeeck, Adam Tas and so many to follow want to claim a land-based settledness – the logging of a world from a still point at its centre – then they can just as easily be read as a legacy of positional uncertainty and guesswork on the open ocean.

Within the twentieth century, the diary form is again implicated within many of the nautical trajectories, displacements and passages into exile which are so constitutive of literary modernism. Sea journeys, and the possibility of embarkation and flight from the grey, overwritten European metropolis, play a major role in the imaginary of Camus’s self-writing, and it is a departure from Southampton to the Cape in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre that serves as a kind of overture to Fugard’s *Notebooks*:

The ship’s brass-band playing patriotic British music. Nostalgia and a flood of sentiment. Sheila in tears – myself too, but suppressed. Indulged this mood, savoured the bittersweet of our leaving. The last tug that had followed us to the harbour was turning away, our ship was slipping alone, into the ocean ....

The evening on deck. Biting cold. Wind and spray...Gone were the cobwebs of Europe and the past twelve months. I felt awakened – renewed – in life I again see the dimension, the big dimension. The ‘big conception’ of my youth. The spars were singing. God! How could I forget so much. Life is big, its possibilities infinite (1983: 11).

It is a passage in which the slow choreography of the once imperial port is displaced and quickened by the elemental. The writing registers the mixed anxiety and freedom that results in distancing itself from a European inheritance of play-making, of exchanging the London avant-garde for explicitly South African materials. The next entry made on the voyage is concerned with a very different kind of journey: 'Joburg to Orlando train. Tsotsis. Bicycle spoke – death' (1983: 11). Anyone who has watched the brutal opening scene of the 2005 film *Tsotsi* with Presley Chweneyagae playing the lead role will recognise that this is the germinal idea of Fugard's early novel of the same name. His *Notebooks* are a rich source for tracking these dense 'knots' of meaning and memory which provide a first intimation of the plays which we know will result; or to use a high modernist term that Fugard is drawn to, these 'images':

Ezra Pound: 'An image is the presentation of a psychological and emotional complex in an instant of time.' To which he adds a remark about the 'sense of liberation, of freedom' that follows. I use the word 'Image' a great deal. Pound's definition explains my meaning completely. I cannot add a word to it (1983: 77).

It is a reminder, as J. M. Coetzee wrote in a 1984 review of the *Notebooks*, of how intently Fugard strives to deploy a poetics of modernism across an oeuvre which might more often be classed as social realism, an impulse that gives his work much of its distinctiveness (1992: 372). It also helps to explain, I would suggest, how it is that the diaries record such a knotting together of private and public, of solitary reverie and social engagement, littoral and literal – and in ways where such terms need not be seen as mutually exclusive.

As the entries move back to Port Elizabeth and its environs, such 'images' become more explicitly personal and autobiographical, even as many of the passages are also in one sense a remarkable document of collaborative creativity: with the Serpent Players in New Brighton, and actors like Zakes Mokae, Norman Ntshinga, Winston Ntshona, John Kani and Yvonne Bryceland. Brief extracts from the journals were used in the introductions to his published plays, but in 1983 Fugard reflected that he never quite understood 'the chemistry of my relation with them' or of their

relation to the finished works:

They became a habit, serving many purposes – at one level a constant literary exercise which I hoped would lead to greater accuracy in expression. Without them my thinking would have been confused, blurred... Sometimes it was compulsive, at others I wrote nothing. They reflect a certain reality in terms of the South African experience but although I have lived through very major political crises, these are not reflected. And though I never consciously used the notebooks as a playwright, everything is reflected there – my plays come from life and from encounters with actual people. But I found that as soon as I got deeply involved with writing a play, I either forgot the notebooks completely or had no need of them (1983: 8).

What one reads then is a record of those periods between the major phases of playmaking and composition, when opaque but compelling images and as yet undisciplined creative urges are beginning to act, unconsciously or semi-consciously, on the writerly imagination, and in ways which meld the intensely private registers and mythic impulses of modernism with a textured, highly localised realism.

Reading back, Fugard remarks that the notebooks strongly confirm his sense of being a regional writer, one attuned to ‘the humble specifics of an Eastern Province world’ (cited in Gray 1986: 10). From a green perspective, perhaps one could even make the case for him as a *bioregional* writer, given the way that the *Notebooks* disclose a terrain shaped as much by river mouths, watersheds, and escarpments as by apartheid’s roads, factories and locations. He quotes with approval William Faulkner’s obsessive attention to a ‘little postage stamp of native soil’ in the American South (Gray 1986: 10)<sup>9</sup>. And as Rita Barnard remarks, the metaphor returns us to the dialogue of fixedness and flux, of local specificity and the international circuitry of literary modernism: it ‘not only suggests the small scope and value of the territory represented but also evokes the possibility of travel – the potentially global reach of the regional text’ (2006: 118).

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<sup>9</sup> Faulkner’s phrase comes from a 1956 *Paris Review* interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel, collected in Meriwether and Millgate (1968: 255).

The compulsion to limn a literary space more regional than national is also central to the work of Stephen Watson, although his relation to the city of Cape Town that he did much to make ‘a place in the mind’ was if anything an even more vexed and ambivalent one. While an early poetry collection invokes Simone Weil’s dictum that ‘To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul’, in his 2005 ‘Afterword to a City,’ Watson turns to Philip Roth at his most savage in suggesting why a discouraged observer might remain ‘rooted to the spot’: ‘How could he leave? Everything he hated was here’ (2005: 211).

In one of the entries from *A Writer’s Diary*, he turns over in his mind the opening line of an early poem ‘Definitions of a City’, musing about there being a single sentence which might embody the interplay of nature and culture (words which he is prepared to use without quotation marks) in Cape Town and its environs, the peculiarly intense dialectic of given topography and human inroads in a place which he has explored throughout his career: ‘On the slopes above the city there are footpaths / cut through sandstone, following the contours...’ The poem’s epigraph is taken from Fernando Pessoa – ‘...because the town is Nature’ – while its long, over-spilling lines register the textures of the mountain-side and the ocean vistas it affords being meticulously distilled into words by a solitary walker.

‘The nature of any walk is perpetual revision,’ writes Iain Sinclair of his tramps around greater London, ‘Voice over voice’ (2002: 159). In each of Watson’s many poems which are, one senses, the writing-up of a walk across some portion of the Cape Peninsula, there is just this kind of line-by-line re-envisioning: a controlled, self-possessed poetic intelligence refines and reframes its verbal formulations, testing them against the effects of wind and light playing over ‘a city held there, almost en-islanded / by one rough mountain, by two cool porcelain seas’ (2000: 15). Again and again, within the scope of each poem, one can witness a careful, almost ritualistic procedure which works by slowly logging its environment from different angles, correcting and rewriting itself in thick stanzas as it seeks to bring the sandstone and the stone-pines into ever finer focus, to place the cold oceans and the particular light which hangs over them in their proper relation.

Yet at the same time, this is not a naïve form of writing nature. As a critic, Watson is acutely aware of how often this portion of the earth has been written (and overwritten) by navigators, natural historians and poetic

predecessors. In an essay on Sydney Clouts, he places this ‘Pen-insular’ poet of the 1950s and 60s (judged an interesting failure) in a trajectory which leads from Thomas Pringle via Roy Campbell to Guy Butler, quoting purple passages from each to show how ‘literary Romanticism in a 19th century British colony like South Africa was far more damagingly romantic than almost anything in the mother country herself’ (1990: 60). Numerous diary entries trace in a local context the vexed intersection of ‘landscape poetry’, literary theory and that strand of environmentalism which proclaimed, in the title of Bill McKibben’s landmark 1989 work, *The End of Nature*. Seeking to avoid the effusions of sub-Romantic poets, but also to evade the academic jargons of the 1980s, Watson gives at one point his personal, working definition of postmodernism:

[T]he moment in history when the word is no longer connected to the earth, when the word has left the world behind, when the immemorial marriage (and the myth of that marriage) between language and the organic is severed for good. (And now that severance celebrated as a higher form of wisdom, a liberation.) (1990: 33).

Setting itself against this, the early poetry searches for a language of descriptive exactness, of heightened precision and increased purchase on the natural world. Footpaths are a recurring motif, perhaps as a way of grounding a poetics which might otherwise tend towards ‘mysticism of a most misty sort’ which Watson himself discerns in the more unguarded moments of Clouts’ work (1990: 67). Often they appear in opening lines, points of access which concede from the outset that the landscape is an altered, created one, yet by the same token enable poems which are not so much descriptions of inanimate surroundings as self-aware meditations on the whole linguistic process of apprehending and then remaking one’s environment in words.

Yet for all his investment in poetry, perhaps what makes Watson singular in a South African context is his commitment to a certain kind of prose. His last published work, *The Music in the Ice*, reveals a long engagement with (and attempt to rehabilitate) the essay, in the older sense, as derived from Michel de Montaigne: an exploratory, personal, discursive



work (shorn of academic footnotes) which is linked to the French *essayer*, and to *assay*. The etymology carries with it the sense of *testing* or *trying out* an idea, in the manner of Samuel Johnson's 'loose sally of the mind', or Francis Bacon's 'dispersed meditations'. The result is an experiment in prose that is at once itinerant, often linked to the practice of walking, artfully disordered; but also highly controlled, stylised and distinguished by the rhetorical performance of a strong authorial voice.

Much of Watson's poetry, in fact, might be considered prose-like in this sense: long, carefully modulated sentences which rarely move beyond grammatical reach of the speaker, seldom relying on the compression of the modernist image.

Appearing as a kind of refrain in *A Writer's Diary*, the poem 'Definitions of a City' opens out into a generous vision of continuity between the topography of the city and the tidemarks of its history, a literary ecology that is surely in large part generated by the porousness of the categories 'prose' and 'poetry' within his *oeuvre*:

And should you follow these footpaths really not that much further,  
they soon become streets granite kerbs, electric lights. These streets  
soon grow to highways, to dockyards, shipping-lanes. You'll see  
how it is – how these paths were only an older version of streets; that  
the latter, in turn, continue the highways, and the quays of the  
harbour, and even eventually, the whale-roads of the sea.

You'll see how it is – it is still that kind of city – here where  
one thing leads, shades into another ... (2000: 20).

Both Fugard's and Watson's diaries are of course carefully shaped literary texts; it would be naïve to consider a printed diary (particularly one published, in Fugard's case, by Faber and Faber) as more 'raw' or immediate than other literary modes. But nonetheless there are significant formal and tonal differences between them. Selected from over seventeen years of life-writing, the playwright's notebooks carry more a sense of being workmanlike jottings intended (as he tells us) to exclude 'self' as far as possible, and committed to incident, ideas, sentences overheard. By contrast, Watson's book records a year of daily entries, comprising a kind of self-conscious writerly experiment that reads more like a selection of short essays or *pensées*.

In the Preface, he makes a case for this minor literary mode which ‘can ingest almost anything; such is the privilege of the form’, ‘everything from the conditions of one’s stomach to that of the soul, from a flea to God’ (1997: n.p.). And if a certain strain of literary criticism contents itself with locating paradoxes and contradictions within a writer’s work (hunting for these ‘with the same zeal that old-time prospectors once went scratching for pay dirt’), for Watson this kind of contradiction is built into the genre itself. The diary gives its author ‘the freedom to be as contradictory as he or she might wish to be’, and reading back over his entries, he sees them as carrying the evidence of ‘an often day-to-day alternation between disquiet and composure, rebellion and acceptance, uncertainty and conviction, a hope dismayed and hope regained’:

Corrosive, even exhausting, such alternations might be, but they also form a part, if I’m not mistaken, of the deep systolic and diastolic movement which governs almost any life that cares to record its dialogue with itself (Watson 1997: n.p.).

This corrosive systole and diastole, moving constantly between dwelling and provisionality, or (to use terms that recur in his work) ‘rootedness’ and ‘thinness’, is at many points mediated through Camus’s writing. Like the ‘pine, dark mountain, star...’ which the speaker of one poem recites like a mantra in an attempt to recover the sense of growing up amid the forests and the numinous bulk of the mountain chain (2000: 3), the Cape Peninsula’s coves and beaches, as well as the mountain streams of the Cederberg – ‘tasting of rinsed stone, not water’ – join a cluster of ‘elements, archetypes’ which are compulsively revisited and recombined throughout his writing. It is a poetics which takes strength from Camus’s 1958 dictum that ‘a man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened’ (1970: 26).

Yet equally, what Watson is grateful to recognise in Camus is ‘a superbly conscious historian of one of the cultural consequences, or inner dimensions, of living in an effective colony’, a place ‘where beaches effortlessly outdid books, nature culture, and the local citizenry, happy in its philistinism, lived out lives devoid of culture and most other gods besides’:

Repeatedly, the Algerian colony is described in the terms Camus once used for the country's second major city, Oran: 'a town where there is nothing to attract the mind, where ugliness has played an overwhelming role, and where the past is reduced to nothing'... This was the unbearable lightness of being, colonial-style, of all 'lands without a past' and Camus was to give it one of its more far reaching articulations (2010: 148 - 149).

What one sees throughout Watson's criticism then is a recursive loop, or double-bind: in an attempt to staunch such absences and bring a more lasting literary identity to their immediate surroundings, his essays look elsewhere, reaching again and again for those authors regarded as having given imaginative substance to their native cities. Considering his various attempts to reveal Cape Town 'for what it is / a city of the southern hemisphere, more full of sky than streets' (2000: 17), it is striking how often Watson's poetics is buttressed by the cadences and images of writers from north of the equator, opening up a fraught dialogue between the rooted chronicler of place and the urbane, cosmopolitan critic intent on transcending the provincialism of South African literary liberalism in the 1980s.

At several moments, the essayist looks longingly at Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, writing in the very different political context of an Eastern Europe where poets were the ironic scourge of the 'comrades', rather than sidelined onlookers. The Algiers of Camus is joined by the Lisbon of Pessoa and C. P. Cavafy's Alexandria: all port cities, and all writers drawn to the imaginative and mythic possibilities of 'the sea close by'<sup>10</sup>. Yet even as he enlists them one becomes aware how differently positioned are these writers on the Mediterranean rim, able to draw on a lattice of classical mythology which allowed their different modernist projects to fashion 'a myth greater than the solitary and artificial flower of one poetic mind' (2000: 138).

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<sup>10</sup> This title of this unusual and self-mythologising 1953 exercise in autobiography by Camus, (framed as the 'Logbook' of an imagined voyage), lends the title to one of Watson's poems. The original ends with the famous lines: 'I have always felt that I was living on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness' (1970: 163).

The final part of this account seeks to trace how a postcolonial approach to such ‘day-registers’ – one which shows up the vexed relation between writing and belonging – might be crossed with a more broadly ecocritical inflection. Reading from the postcolony, how can one win the space to account for those passages which are haunted by ‘the teeming strangeness and menace of organic presences’, in the words of George Steiner: the ‘irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world’ (1989: 139-40)?<sup>11</sup> For having set out his injunction never to be unfaithful neither to beauty nor the humiliated, Camus does after all push his thinking a step further: this imperative ‘still resembles a moral code and we live for something that goes farther than morality. *Si nous pouvions le nommer, quel silence...*’ (If we could only name it, what silence ...) (2000: 182; 1954: 160).

As Fugard and Watson are drawn to this Mediterranean littoral (a mirror image in some ways, a mirage in others) the local matter of ‘white writing’ – the psychological suppressions and socio-political silences of texts by those who feel themselves to be ‘no longer European, not yet African’ (Coetzee 1988: 11) – becomes implicated in the wider challenge of what might be called ‘writing white’: of rendering the non-human and the numinous in words, even while sensing that such raids on the inarticulate (or inanimate) might properly tend towards the simple litany, the mnemonic, the non-verbal, the blank page.

Relocated and reimagined by Coetzee at the height of apartheid, the phrase *l’écriture blanche* was originally one which Roland Barthes evolved via the prose of Camus’s early, coolly managed depictions of the north African coastline – ‘that style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style’ (1984: 64)<sup>12</sup>. It is dual genealogy which suggests again how ineluctably the (postcolonial) problematic of place becomes entangled in the broader (ecocritical) difficulties of apprehending the pleasures, pressures and aporias of the physical world.

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<sup>11</sup> Watson draws on this passage in his essay, ‘Bitter Pastoral: The Meaning of the Cederberg’ (2005: 146 - 159).

<sup>12</sup> I also have in mind here the aphorism that ‘Happiness (or desire) writes white’.

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## **Like Every Promise ...**

... the beautiful in nature is feeble in that it is just a promise and strong in that it cannot be blotted out once it has been received. Words tend to bounce off nature as they try to deliver nature's language into the hands of another language foreign to it. But this is not to say that there cannot be sunny days in southern countries which seem to be waiting to be taken notice of ... (Adorno 1970:108).

When one reads in Watson's essay on Camus of a city 'where beaches effortlessly outdid books, nature culture' (2010: 148), the grammar produces an unusual yoking together of two of the most complex words in the English language. For a cultural materialist criticism, though, the idea that 'nature (effortlessly) *outdoes* culture' might be demystified and translated to mean that 'nature (tacitly) *encodes* culture' or 'nature *does the work of* culture'. And here 'culture' signifies not a touring opera company, a book launch or symphony orchestra programme, but (following Raymond Williams) something at once more ordinary and more powerful, more diffuse and more determined: something concerned with the relation between every human individual and the forms of expression available to them.

For much twentieth-century critical theory, the contradictions, elisions and overdeterminations of one's historical position cannot but play themselves out in whatever material substrate is to hand – fluctuating weather, littoral zones, tidal flows, the nearest available landscape – as the problems of social *locatedness* are dispersed and dispelled into physical *location*. To put this another way: in Fugard and Watson's accounts of outdoor dwelling, walking and thinking – all those passages which might go by the inadequate name of 'nature writing' – one undeniably senses something compensatory: how the very act of verbally reconstituting the textures of coastline or contour path on the page betrays an ineluctable apartness from the non-human world which the playwright and poet long to write themselves into: an apartness that might be serving as a proxy for other, more humanly engineered forms of social separation.

The copiousness and 'thickness' of Watson's writing about the Cape Peninsula is evident in a long entry of 2 March 1996:

Yesterday, for instance, I drove over the chain of Peninsula mountains to Scarborough, way down the Atlantic seaboard towards the southernmost tip of the Cape. On the pass over the Kalk Bay mountains I saw the coastal southeaster cloud pouring down the western slopes, the colour of those clouds close to the grey of mist. But there was also the astonishing salt-like whiteness of the sandstone scree on the slopes set against the grey of the fraying cloud, further highlighted by the clumps of pine, their trunks blackened by the pitch of noonday light.

I found myself more or less instinctively seeking out the textures, the tonalities in that landscape, devouring it so that I could remake it. I had the happiness of knowing once again that this peninsula, these landscapes, were a kind of infinity which would never be exhausted and which would continue to elicit from me this passion. As I drove, I was already experimenting with the words that might reproduce the combination of southeaster cloud, white mountain stone, gale force wind, and light blackened pines. I knew myself to be saturated by this world; it was akin to the experience of physical love, that sense of being drenched by the reality of another's being.

Later, there was the view of the sea at Scarborough, the Sicilian blue of the icy water; the coastal milkwoods glittering green and black under the volleys of wind and light (1997: 40 - 41).

Here then is an example of the 'littoral euphoric' that Watson discerns in Camus: a relocation of the pleasures of the ancient pastoral to the twentieth-century coastline (2010: 69). Yet at the same time the intoxication of representing the non-human and elemental on the page is combined with an awareness of the artifice and verbal experimentation that this involves.

And beyond this, there is surely something compensatory or compulsive about this kind of description; the exhaustive intimacy is in one sense an index of unfamiliarity, of being estranged from the majority of the city's inhabitants. The local familiarity it asserts is counterpointed by the international pull of his nomenclature (Scarborough, and why *Sicilian* blue?), just as the generous literary ecology of the poem 'Definitions of a City'

depends on the strangely out-of-place Anglo-Saxon compound: 'whale-roads'. Despite inviting a sense of continuity between built environment and the non-human world, both texts depend on a transport infrastructure from the 'old' South Africa, on sealed roads and driving. And if the Atlantic coastal route provides access, the raised freeways of the Foreshore, with unfinished outer viaducts suspended in the air, must surely be read as memorials to apartheid modernism: an ideology of division so ambitious it achieved an almost total segregation between city centre and ocean.

To stop here, though, is to remain within what is by now a predictable, even complacent, move of critical scepticism; it is also to assume that the texts in question are automatically more naïve than the critical approach used to brush them against the grain (something that Williams, with his own imaginative investment in a socially textured history of the English countryside, can hardly be accused of). But as Watson reminds us in his Preface, what distinguishes the writer's diary as a form (and these two examples are no exception), is their ability to stage such contradictory dynamics, and to reveal how they play out in time. To state the most obvious fact about the diary: it is a cumulative text, an incremental endeavour which does not proceed by propositions made and positions taken, but rather through a series of discrete entries which are correcting, rewriting and modifying all the others as they proceed.

It is a kind of writing that throws into relief the question of where the most intense and lasting meanings of a text are produced during the reading process: within the compass of a single sentence, or a single entry? Or in much larger, more diffuse agglomeration of textual parts where the writing / written self of the first page is so clearly not the same as that of the last paragraph? To this one could add that, for the casual reader, a diary is not a form that tempts a linear or chronological approach; rather, it is likely to be dipped into at random, so offering itself still further as a text which is reconfigured with each (re)reading. Finally, it is also a document of space between entries, a kind of (temporal) punctuation which might not be verbal but, like a musical rest, is nonetheless meaningful. The conclusions and connections that it tempts one to draw across these orchestrated silences remain implicit, suggestive and provisional.

This way of apprehending and living with a text over a long period of time is difficult to convey in an academic essay. But one can give some

sense of it in concentrating on the period of 1962-3 in Fugard's *Notebooks*, precisely the time in which he is engaged in an intensive reading of Camus's work. For Fugard the French-Algerian writer (in a recurrence of the metaphors of navigation and dead reckoning) 'sounds out and charts the very oceans of experience and thought, on which I find myself sailing at this moment' (1983: 94). In the first of many paradoxes to follow, we see Fugard posit Camus's world as a flight from the writing desk to the sensual degree zero of the coastline:

Camus's 'no life lived in the sun can be a failure' – I understand this now, having discovered the sun and the sea, and the long hot hours on the beach. Simply to go there involves me turning my back, literally and figuratively, on this room and table, this world where the words 'success' and 'failure' have meaning. Down there on the white sands, with the long wind blowing and the taste of the sea in my mouth, they are empty sounds.

A fine contempt is forged in the sun, tempered in the sea (1983: 104).

The move from the textual to the physical (as the critic zealously hunting for contradictions might point out) is one that is itself mediated through an intimate negotiation with a foreign text. And Camus's aphoristic turn of phrase might seem contentious and inappropriate when relocated to the racially segregated surrounds of Port Elizabeth in 1980s: New Brighton, Swartkops, the Korsten 'location'. Elsewhere in the same decade we see Fugard working up the ideas for *Boesman and Lena*, a play which takes as its 'image' not the solitary beach walker but an anonymous woman by the roadside wearing (in the memorable stage directions) 'one of those sad dresses that reduce the body to an angular gaunt cipher of poverty' (Fugard 1973: 1). What is Lena's litany of places if not the record of failed life in the sun? Or what does it mean for the white male playwright to suggest otherwise?

Yet it is precisely this mixture of confident arrogance and stringent self-abnegation required by the playwriting self that seems to find an analogue in the fluctuations of the littoral zone. After a passage meditating on the different 'character' of the beaches along the coast, an entry of early



1962 strikes that note of humility and insignificance in the presence of the non-human which is so common a trope in wilderness writing. At the same time though, one becomes aware (almost by the text's own admission) of how this supposed dissolution of the self could just as easily be described as its indefinite expansion: the 'limitless narcissism' that Freud evoked in his account of the 'oceanic' feeling, that quasi-mystical intimation of boundlessness and connectedness to the physical world (Fugard 1930: 72):

Now, thirty years old, feeling at times mortally sick from the corruption and duplicity of my country, I think that given time I could prepare, and find peace, by remembering, re-seeing, the little that I already have seen of life; and relive my dawning astonishment and wonder at the great beauty, complexity and honesty of that vast area of 'living experiences' that have nothing to do with man.

Has any previous age been so self-centred, so conscious of the human shape to the exclusion of all else?

The humility I felt this afternoon, crouched over a rock-pool, watching (1983: 48).

Such pious humility, after all, is not incompatible with the deep pleasure that Fugard records in spear fishing – 'that electric, orgiastic moment' of the kill – a bodily rush that he finds difficult to account for: 'All attempts to think and write about it, here at this desk, are uncertain, as if the essential experience, that part of me which hunts in the water, eludes memory' (1983: 108). The entries for these years, as Fugard swims, writes, reads and lives 'lightly' along the Eastern Cape seaboard, become a kind of 'nature writing' unusual for the degree to which these various kinds of uncertainty and elusion are bodied forth. A trust in the sensual intelligence and respect for the opaque psycho-sexual drives underwriting his play-making make the *Notebooks* remarkable for the range of relations to the non-human that they express, and the way that these are immediately, and creatively, folded back into the social activity of rehearsals with the Serpent Players in New Brighton (a company that stages, under exceptionally difficult conditions, warmly received productions of *Waiting for Godot*, *Mandragola* and *Woyzeck* during these years).

In the attempts to map the contours of an unknown and largely unknowable selfhood, the entries remain open to the land / sea borderline as it suffuses both the individual unconscious and the *longue durée* of human history along this coastline. On many pages we see cryptic images recorded from a 'rich and affirmative dream life' (1983: 222) populated by sea creatures. A trip to Klaasies River on the Tsitsikamma Coast entails a visit to *strandloper* caves, archaeological sites which, instead of calling forth untrammelled imagination (as is often the case in literary engagements with such nodes of 'deep time' in the southern African imaginary) actually *resist* being absorbed into a glib meaning or personal mythology: 'The caves provoked depression. I couldn't romanticise them – they stank of darkness and fear. They were too perilous – the human hold on those damp walls too frightened and insecure' (1983: 107).

Unlike many classic wilderness diaries from Thoreau to Edward Abbey, with their drive toward the hermetic and the pristine, Fugard's *Notebooks* rarely shirk the contact with manifold forms of otherness, cognitive dissonance and disturbance in their immediate context. It is, perhaps, precisely the fact that they are not operating under the self-imposed burden of being a form of 'nature writing' that makes them unusually open and unpredictable in their notations of the non-human: that their imaginative investment in it does not result in the kind of anti-social reflexes and ideological blindspots to which constructions of 'wilderness' inevitably fall prey. Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968) is notorious for the way it effaces nuclear weapons testing and debates about fallout from the Utah landscape which it venerates; but at many points in Fugard's text, the menace of apartheid's security apparatus impinges on the Eastern Cape coastline all too directly:

Shell collecting at Cape Recife the other day. I knew what to expect because on the drive there I followed on the tail of a convoy of army lorries carrying Active Citizens' Force trainees and their guns to a nearby rifle range. The silence of the beach was persistently broken by the innocuous sound – and therefore so much more terrible – of rifles and automatic guns being fired on the range. Everything conspired to make the afternoon ominous. The sun went behind

cloud, a cold wind came off the sea, the tide rushed in with savage fury (1983: 81).

If some entries register a flight from the world of current affairs to a private space of rejuvenation, others record near daily contacts with destitute fishermen, beggars and the homeless. Encountering a small shark left to suffocate to death by an angler, ‘a heavy rock on its body just below the jaws’, the shockingly alien nature of this life-form calls forth a meditation on human atrocity:

When the angler packed up and left that particular rock, I took it over and found the shark. Far from being one of the harmless variety it had a mouthful of the most terrible-looking teeth – possibly ragged-tooth. Setting sun; rough white sea; strong South-Easter. The appalling intolerance and savagery of man when he encounters anything that does not fit into ‘his’ scheme of things... Out of the shark’s terrible jaws the voices of ...the condemned in death cells, the thin spiral of ‘time’ on Robben Island (1983: 209).

While revealing the naïvete that is central to Fugard’s poetics, it is also a passage which shows itself acutely aware of how the human will to power conflates various modes of otherness – social, racial, non-human. The prose here is able to register the psychic jolt of encountering the ‘teeming strangeness’ of another life-form without (as does so much nature writing in the colony) collapsing natural and cultural foreignness into each other; rather it tries to understand precisely this kind of de-humanization, in its widest sense.

Elsewhere in these years of the early 1960s, the crassness and violence of South Africa impinges still more directly: we are given Fugard’s shocked reaction to the shooting of Dennis Brutus, his attempts to deal with the racism ingrained in some of his extended family. But we also see charted his experience, by turns joyous and unsettling, of fatherhood. The idea of no life lived in the sun being wasted recurs as he watches his two-year-old daughter Lisa master her first ‘time concepts’: ‘Never such a radiance, such a passionate orgy of freedom as Lisa when she finds herself on the beach. Space and sea: the one inviting, the other provoking’ (1983: 97).

At the end of 1963 – following such complex rhythms of invitation and provocation which shape the larger project of self-writing – we see the reading, thinking and probing of the previous year knot itself into an ‘image’. A passage from Camus’s *Carnets* serves as the germinal idea for one of Fugard’s most inward and challenging works.

The story of Dimetos in Camus’s *Carnets*: falling in love with a beautiful but dead woman washed up by the sea, and having to watch the decay and corruption of what he loves. Camus: ‘This is the symbol of a condition we must try to define’ (1983: 107).

*Dimetos* would first be presented over 10 years later, opening at the Edinburgh Festival in 1975. Coming directly after the success and topicality of *The Island*, Fugard’s collaboration with Kani and Ntshona, this abstract and placeless work (Act One set ‘In a remote Province’, Act Two ‘Beside the Ocean’) found few sympathetic reviewers<sup>13</sup>. A revised version (with the locations specified as Nieu Bethesda and Gaukamma [sic] Beach in the Eastern Cape), found slightly more success; but nonetheless, the opening of the second act is one of many passages in which the heavily symbolic evocations of the sea margent read as flat and portentous when compared to the textured, daily world of the *Notebooks*:

DIMETOS: Sea. Sand. Sun. Sky. Elemental. There could be a beginning here, as easily as an end. The footprints leading across the wet sand to this moment, suggest a purpose.

The tide has pulled out so far I despair of its return...There are no landmarks. You walk until you’ve had enough (2000: 148).

What is intriguing, though, is that Fugard’s obsessive return to Camus and the Eastern Cape coastline yields both his most collaborative, workshopped and ‘political’ play, as well as his most solitary and cryptic. If

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Even from a (white) South African one cannot if you please, constantly expect apartheid plays’, one commentator wrote of the German-language premiere, ‘But does it *have* to be such a mytho-mishmash?’ (cited in Wertheim 2000: 101).

the austere classicism of *Dimetos* owes much to Camus, so too does *The Island*, with its stripped-bare, absurdist locale. The famous opening scene is based on Norman Ntshinga's descriptions of the Robben Island quarry, but is also so clearly underwritten by *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 'Each in turn fills a wheelbarrow and then with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging, and empties it', read the initial stage directions, which in performance became a long, excruciating mime where the bodies of Kani and Ntshona limp and crumple under invisible blows: 'As a result, the piles of sand never diminish. Their labour is interminable' (47).

Like the many prison memoirs and 'jail diaries' that record the experience of being *Esiqithini* ('at the Island'), the play serves as a reminder that this 'low-lying lozenge of sand and rock' (Penn 1992: 5) is itself another important space for probing what the coastline might mean in the South African imaginary. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela records being put to work dragging kelp from the ocean, looking back towards the city that seemed so deceptively close, 'winking in the sunshine, the glass towers of Cape Town' (2002: 201). The episode, in turn, lends its name to an anthology of prison writing from throughout the continent, *Gathering Seaweed*, edited by the Malawian poet Jack Mapanje.

Yet in an essay entitled 'The Meaning of an Island', amid the earnest 'nation-building' of the early 1990s, Watson strikes a characteristically discordant note. Writing of the Esiqithini-Robben Island Exhibition at the South African Museum in 1993, he remarks that 'it was the very gaps in this exhibition's documentation which suggested that Robben Island harbours a deeper, more difficult, and indeed haunting significance, than the political one so often claimed for it' (2010: 461). Turning to the colonial archive of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, he rejects the tendency to confer liberatory potential on the obscure fates of those sentenced by the VOC Council of Justice, or to label its victims as early 'freedom fighters'.

By the same token, only an illegitimate act of the imagination could attribute a triumphalist political meaning to the words of Katyi, the sick wife of the Xhosa chief Maqoma, both confined to the Island in the late 1850s, and who is reported to have refused medicine with the words: 'No, my heart is sore, I want to die' (2010: 463).

Contra to the ANC *mythos* that was in the process of being constructed around Robben Island, the essayist describes it instead as ‘a natural memorial to the nameless; and, not least, to a suffering no less extreme for having been overwhelmingly anonymous and now largely unremembered’ (2010: 464).

If this kind of ‘nature writing’ is apolitical, then this is only in the sense of being suspicious of any prevailing political consensus, in being wary of the replacement of one nationalist historiography with another. Similar misgivings – which could have been read as ungenerous, even reactionary at the time, but which now seem prescient – can be found throughout *A Writer’s Diary*. Various entries question the autocratic nature of the African National Congress, and the glibness of many applications for political amnesty. At one point the diarist despairs of the flattened language used by a perpetrator – ‘Unfortunately we kept hitting him until he died’ (1997: 155) – at another point, he states flatly of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: ‘You can’t apologise for the unforgiveable’.

At the same time, we see how the shift from Cape Town as a seat of political struggle to a city now marketed as a world-class tourist destination (with abundant ‘natural capital’, as the tourist board refers to Table Mountain National Park) has only compounded the challenges which his work sets itself. Reflecting in 1996 on how his surroundings seem to have taken on ‘the patina, the glaze of a giant Club Med’, he remarks that ‘not far into the next century I suspect that Cape Town, a city remarkable for having a mountain in the middle of it, will have managed to relegate even its natural environment to a kind of sideshow’ (1997: 150). The ‘cultural degree zero’ of Camus’s colonial formation persists in the globalised, 21<sup>st</sup>-century metropolis; but now this sun-struck sensuality and ‘solar mysticism’ can hardly be separated from the more ordinary pagan rituals of mass tourism on Camps Bay and Clifton beaches. In Watson’s essay on Camus, he comes back to the simultaneous strength and fragility of a poetics that is *materialist* in all its complex senses: ‘What is, from one point of view, a quiet yet triumphant assertion of the body, its liberation, is also shot through with a kind of melancholy. For if the body is now king, it is because all other thrones or sites of worship have been vacated’ (2010: 69-70).

In the totality of the diary, though, such disaffected responses to the public world are not absolute, or unchanging. Based on daily rhythms and shifting internal weathers (rather than the single, abstracted moment of the

lyric, or the position-taking of the polemic) the diary form prevents that note of misanthropy and disgust which mars some of his writing from contaminating the whole. Rather, there is the sense of other voices entering the text, each demanding their own forms of dialogue: the nightly radio bulletins of the TRC, which continue to intrude; the drunk man looking for work who turns away saying ‘You people all just want to live alone’; and – in the record of a lone vigil in the Cederberg – the cadences of |Xam orature as recorded in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, voices which come to underwrite, in the deepest sense, his evocations of the Cape fold mountains:

Besides, it is these evening skylines that provide me, repeatedly, with a visual, spatial representation of what I would like a line of poetry to be.

Yes, to write one verse which has both the clarity of line, the poise, as well as the weightiness, that density-in-clarity, of the western slope of the Sugarloaf when the sun has gone down behind it and the sky lifts as it begins to drain ... (1997: 85).

To give one final example of the kind of suggestiveness enabled by the diary: on 13 March 1996, Watson writes of the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal in The Hague, and quotes an article in *The New Yorker* where the writer ‘makes an ingenious connection between the horrors unearthed by this tribunal and the presence of the Vermeers in the Mauritshuis in the same city’, an artist who ‘must also have painted in an historical period of almost constant chaos and ferocity – certainly of social upheaval to equal anything in Bosnia’:

And he remarks that often in Vermeer’s work ‘the themes... are saturatingly present but only as felt absence .... It’s almost as if Vermeer can be seen, amid the horrors of his age, to have been asserting or inventing the very idea of peace ... he had been finding – and, yes, inventing – a zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision... and then breathing it out’ (1997: 47).

In its play of presence and absence, its international reach, and its combination of deep historical perspective with the sanctity of private space, this offers itself almost as an organising ‘image’ of the diary as a whole. But

its larger resonance only accrues with the next entry, which now becomes more than a description of the weather:

Another cooler morning: after sunrise a sea-fog moves off the bay and drifts into the suburbs. All the doors and windows of my Woodstock house are open to release the heat still trapped inside from yesterday's high temperatures. The fog flows through the rooms, its pale whiteness like a principle of coldness in the air, as if it were the colour of the cold itself made visible in the air (1997: 47).

Here the writing itself seems unconsciously to be 'breathing out' and releasing its own idea of peace into the city, and the wider social body.

This still point is soon dissipated by the wind. But nonetheless we are left with a text which emerges as a compelling document of the South African transition, precisely because of its candour in logging cognitive dissonance and difficulty. It shows a rare ability to stage the fundamental writerly paradox that – to adapt a line from Watson's one-time colleague J. M. Coetzee – whatever can be articulated is falsely put, and whatever cannot be articulated must be lived through (2000: 70).

In the afterword to *A Littoral Zone*, Douglas Livingstone wrote of how this 'mysterious border that shifts restlessly between land and sea' had to him 'always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements' (1991: 62). Through the examples of Fugard and Watson, we might begin to see how the changeability and marginality of the diary form itself interacts with (and enables a space to reflect *on*) other kinds of liminality: spatial and environmental, but also generic, socio-political and imaginative.

This is not, however, to imply that all writer's diaries are similarly valuable. Indeed, the particular qualities of Fugard's *Notebooks* from the 1960s and 70s are perhaps most clearly shown up by comparing them with some more recent entries from the early 1990s, a selection published in the special issue of the journal *Twentieth Century Literature* in 1993. By his own admission, they have become little more than 'a catalogue of daily trivia. I doubt whether an original thought or image has found its way onto their pages for years':



Paging through the published Notebooks yesterday, I realised with a shock how the quality of my intellectual life has deteriorated over the past ten years – unquestionably the result of the measure of success I now enjoy as a playwright and my inability to protect myself from the damaging consequences of the American Success Syndrome. The decline has been insidious (1993: 528).

Removed from the Eastern Cape locale which generated so many of his most important works, the entries apprehend ‘South Africa’ as mediated through newspaper stories and BBC documentaries, and record place as mere scenery, a template on which to impose already formed thoughts: ‘A perfect match: bright sunlight and flamboyant fall colours outside the train window, and Janet Baker’s passionate rendering of a Handel aria on my Walkman’ (1993: 529).

The flatness and all-too-easy consonance of this American diary can be compared to the friction, flux and resistance encoded in the earlier day-registers, where the capacity of a mind at full creative stretch to ingest eclectic sources is figured in the far more unexpected and provocative juxtapositions of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ that fill the pages. To select almost at random from one of many specimen days: in an account of a typical evening at ‘S’kop’ (his rustic cottage at Schoenmakerskop, used for writing retreats), we read of a mingling of the visual, ecological and musical:

Last night’s fare: a chapter on Ukioy-e prints; a few chapters on marine biology and, to end with, Mahler’s Fourth Symphony while I sipped lemon tea.

Little candles held up in enormous and dark rooms – madmen muttering and singing in the corners. I was deeply moved by the richness, the beauty, the pathos of the human adventure. Those solitary courtesans in kimonos, the primeval mystery of the single-celled protozoa, Mahler singing! (1983: 96).

It is one of many moments in which a fascination with the ‘carnal reality’ of play-making – the fact that it draws on the body in space, under duress, and in real time – translates into a very physical response to the different kinds of stimuli which the diarist exposes himself to. So too, the passage is surely

underscored by Camus's credo of full lucidity in the face of absurdity, suffering, and unmeaning: the great humanist motto of *The Plague* that 'there are more things to admire in men than to despise' (1991: 308). Inevitably though, the stillness and sense of achievement inscribed in this moment is soon dispelled in the ongoing flux of the diary form. The next entry records a joyless, blustery walk in the veld: 'The bluegums outside Pieter's house: whipped savagely by the wind and roaring back...Why does the wind desolate more than anything else in nature?' (1983: 95-6).

As in those passages where the rainless south-easter strafes Watson's Cape Town, worrying at the built environment and human structures of meaning more generally, the weather is hardly the signifier of daily ordinariness with which we began (an idea which, in any case, seems impossibly dated in a twenty-first century context of climate change and unreadable flux within the biosphere). Rather, both these projects of life-writing ask for a more creative account of the relation between natural, personal and social histories within southern African letters. Set back from those pressured public spaces which demand a loudly advertised 'self-consciousness' with regard to one's 'politics' and 'subject position', the diary form offers a space to think through each of these in ways that are creative rather than reductive, implicit rather than overt: to trace them, in other words, as *lived* rather than merely proclaimed.

Beyond this, they may gesture towards what is entailed in bringing littoral (and literary) spaces tainted by discourses of leisure, conservatism and privilege into a more communal post-apartheid imaginary. Without wanting to lean too heavily on a simplistic equivalence between word and world, one might even suggest that in each the result is a prose which has the sense of having been tempered and impinged on by outdoor conditions: a critical language shaped and thickened by the littoral to which it constantly returns, complicated by its tides and textures, made more subtle by its gradations.

The coastal wind carries on blowing throughout Fugard's *Notebooks*, right until in the last entry for 1974. Typically, it registers in these closing moments that co-existence of the numinous and the workaday inherent within the creative process, receptive toward whatever form of otherness may present itself during the physical act of writing:

The wind has turned. A moderate easterly all day, calm sunset and twilight and then, about half-an-hour ago, the westerly moved in. For me it remains a spine-tingling mystery how that wind brings with it a world so uniquely its own ....

In among all the wind rattlings and buffetings at the door, just occasionally a very clear and simple double knock. I answer: Come in. So far nothing (1983: 225).

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Hedley Twidle  
Department of English  
University of Cape Town  
hedley.twidle@uct.ac.za