

The Postcolonial Border

• Bessie Head's "The Wind and a Boy"

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WHAT HAPPENS when national borders meet textual borders – in a postcolonial context, in Southern Africa, in the writings of Bessie Head, in a story called "The Wind and a Boy"?¹ What happens when the borders of a short story are juxtaposed with global borders, with the borders of a post- or neocolonial system, borders which figure what Gayatri Spivak describes as an "international division of labour"?² In order to provide provisional answers to these questions, I shall furnish here a brief presentation of an interpretative practice which focuses on the border, a 'border poetics'; and a reading of "The Wind and a Boy," using some of the tools of border poetics and some reflections on the question of the postcolonial border.

¹ Bessie Head, "The Wind and a Boy," in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1977): 69–75. The present essay is part of a larger project on literature and borders. For a related study of postcolonial borders in Southern Africa, focusing on the juxtaposition of the internal borders of the apartheid state and the borders between realistic prose and poetic metaphor, see Johan Schimanski, "Genre Borders in a Border Novel: Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*," in *Genrer och genreproblem: Teoretiska och historiska perspektiv / Genres and Their Problems: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Beata Agrell & Ingela Nilsson (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2003): 505–13.

² See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988): 271–313.

Border Theory and Border Poetics

One of the first problems a theory of the border must deal with is the very applicability of the term 'border'. Borders may be found within a very wide range of contexts. Even limiting oneself to literary studies, they are often invoked, especially in discussions of transgression and identity. What quickly becomes apparent, at least within the context of a border theory proper, is that the word 'border' is frequently applied where alternatives could have been just as useful: words like 'difference' and 'opposition', for example, depending on what is intended. The problem with using the term 'border' instead of these other terms is that it tends to territorialize difference, even if only within an imaginary mental landscape. One runs the risk of homogenizing bordered-off areas in this landscape, and repressing in the process more network- or rhizome-like models of the world. However, this reductive use of the term 'border' – common and unavoidable as it is – is the bread and butter of border theory. Border theory regularly returns to such questions as how difference is made into borders, how networks are refigured as territories, and what kind of borders are the end-products of these territorializing processes. Are they divides or joins? Places of communication or of non-communication? Of insight or of blindness? Are they precise lines? Zones? Overlaps? Double invaginations?³ Seams? Floodgates? Are they stable or shifting? Is there something on the other side?

Border theory as such is hampered also by not being a homogeneous academic field (or territory). It is at the present time a fragmentary affair, almost dysfunctionally so, and certainly has little to be mustered in the way of agency. Border theory is a network of approaches crossed by internal divides, laid out by people working in many different disciplines and in different geographical contexts. It focuses on different themes: nations, transgression, border-crossers, scaling, figurality, ethics, subject-formation, rites of passage, identity/hybridity, etc. Many of these themes are

³ A term used by Jacques Derrida in one of his discussions of the border: "La loi du genre" (1980), in Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986): 249–87; tr. Avital Ronell as "The Law of Genre" in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992): 211–52.

directly relevant to the study of literary borders, and what one may call border poetics; especially so the study of border-crossing narratives, but also of the way in which borders are figured metaphorically or through other rhetorical devices.

Border poetics can be defined as any approach to literary texts which connects borders on the levels of *histoire*, the represented or presented world, and of *discours*, the text itself, a weave of rhetoric and narrative. Border poetics is sensitive to borders on many levels of the text, the five most important being, I propose: *textual borders*, the edges and divides of the text as discourse; *topographical borders*, borders in the represented space of the setting; *symbolic borders* or, properly, differences which have allowed themselves to be territorialized in a symbolic landscape; *temporal borders*, the passages from one period to another – territorialized time; and *epistemological borders*, borders which positivism imagines as always expanding – knowledge territorialized. But while all border-crossing narratives may be examined for their textual, topographical, symbolic, temporal and epistemological dimensions, I must underscore the fact that this five-level model is mainly heuristic, and needs more theorization in order to attain stringency. All borders have a spatial element (at the very least), and it is possible to talk about the topography of a text, a symbolic mental landscape, a temporal progression, or a field of knowledge. This means that the borders above tend to be re-complicated at the very point at which they have taken their proper places as elemental denominators in an analysis. A person crossing from one territory into another crosses a topographical but also temporal border; and this temporal border, in being designated a border, figures time as an imaginary topography. Yet the topographies of space and time (and text, and symbolic structure, and knowledge), while overlaid, are not wholly commensurable, causing a sense of slippage when their borders are juxtaposed. This sense of slippage, of the diffusion of the border across larger areas of the text, will form part of the particularity of any individual border reading.

A Border Reading

Crossing the border into – or opening the border to – a short story by Bessie Head, I am awkwardly aware of the richness of Head's writings in general as a field for border studies. Practically all her texts have to do with the formation of community and, as a specific problem within the formation of community, with the way in which communities adapt to strangers.⁴ This is perhaps something only to be expected, written as they are by a naturalized Botswanan of South African birth, and indeed, the biographical background for Head's border themes has been thoroughly discussed by Rob Nixon.⁵ One obvious place to start would be *A Question of Power* (1974), a novel of borderline states (in the psychological sense). Nancy Topping Bazin writes that the dystopian fantasies and hallucinations in this novel are the product of the barriers between people in Southern Africa.⁶ Another potential opening would be those novels of Head's that allow the reader to cross the border of the text in parallel with the main character crossing the border into Botswana. I am here referring to *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), a novel of border zones, and addressed as such by Edward O. Ako.⁷ This novel is in itself a border zone, with

⁴ Besides being a theme in many other studies, this is the focus of Maria Olausson's major monograph on Head's novels, *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain: Place and Identity in Three Novels by Bessie Head* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

⁵ Rob Nixon, "Border Country: Bessie Head's Frontline States," *Social Text* 36 (1993): 106–37.

⁶ Nancy Topping Bazin, "Madness, Mysticism, and Fantasy: Shifting Perspectives in the Novels of Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer," *Extrapolation* 33.1 (1992): 73–87.

⁷ Edward O. Ako, "Crossing Borders: A Study of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 22.2 (2000): 5–11. James M. Garrett's exemplary Jamesonian reading of *When Rain Clouds Gather* also focuses on textual borders or "ruptures" – "Writing Community: Bessie Head and the Politics of Nature," *Research in African Literatures* 30.2 (1999): 124. Bessie Head herself identified the main theme of this novel as "refugeeism" in her essay "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in Southern Africa," in *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*, ed. Cecil Abrahams (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990): 13–14.

the main character not really crossing the border into the local community before the end of the novel, the reader's point of exit. To quote Kenneth Harrow, "In fact, with Bessie Head boundaries, the forces that maintain and perpetuate them, and those that dissolve them, could be said to be the focus and key to her work."⁸

Here I will be examining a lesser-known text which has received comparatively little critical attention, one of the stories in her collection *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1977): "The Wind and a Boy."⁹ This is a text which intimates a great many symbolic, temporal and epistemological borders, but which contains very few and almost imperceptible concrete topographical borders. At the same time, it quite clearly both performs and plays with the textual borders of the short-story genre.

"The Wind and a Boy" is set in a village in post-independence Botswana. It tells the story of a small boy, Friedman, and his grandmother, Sejosenye – two characters who "captivate the imagination and hearts of all the people of their surroundings."¹⁰ But precisely because of this air of enchantment, they may be said to be set apart from the people around them, similar to other strangers and "detribalized" characters in Head's novels.¹¹ Friedman's mother, who works as a typist in a town a hundred

⁸ Kenneth W. Harrow, "Bessie Head and Death: Change on the Margins," in *Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. C.C. Barfoot & Theo D'haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993): 165.

⁹ For readings, see Coreen Brown, *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head* (Madison WI: Fairleigh Dickinson UP & London: Associated UP, 2003): 124; Sara Chetin, "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 24.1 (1989): 132; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "Windows of Womanhood," in *The Tragic Life*, ed. Abrahams, 127; and Olausson, *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain*, 107–108.

¹⁰ Head, "The Wind and a Boy," in Head, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1977): 69. Further page references are in the main text.

¹¹ For discussion of the function of detribalized characters in Head's novels, see Sophia Obiajulu Ogwude, "Protest and Commitment in Bessie Head's Utopia," *Research in African Literatures* 29.3 (1998): 73; and Ako, "Crossing Borders," 6.

miles away, has entrusted him to his grandmother to be brought up in the village. The narrative covers the story of Friedman's life from his birth in a hospital and his naming after a "friendly foreign doctor" (70), to when it is cut short at the age of fourteen by a speeding car, which hits him and his bicycle. His death is rapidly followed by the death of his grandmother, who has gone mad with grief. The story ends with reflections on the driver of the car and what he represents to the community, ending: "And thus progress, development, and a pre-occupation with status and living-standards first announced themselves to the village. It looked like being an ugly story with many decapitated bodies on the main road" (75).

Friedman, however, is a complex, dynamic and tragic character, and the story also suggests other reasons for his death.¹² The car-driver represents neocolonialism, but so does Friedman's absent mother, and the bicycle on which he rides up the embankment: "His mother, who worked in a town far away, sent him the money to purchase the bicycle. The gift brought the story of his life abruptly to a close" (73–74). Maria Olaussen even suggests¹³ that Sejonsenye is complicitous in this, for she sends Friedman to the village to buy typical 'neocolonial' foodstuffs: "sugar, tea, and [powdered] milk" (74). But this journey, ending in his death, is also a product of his sense of duty, in bicycling from his grandmother's land some twenty miles away in order to buy food for her. Another reason for his death is his – contradictory – boyish irresponsibility at the moment of his death: "In the devil-may-care fashion of all the small boys, he cycled right into its path, turned his head and smiled appealingly at the driver" (74).

The narrator explicitly divides the story of Friedman and his grandmother into several phases. The two of them make the villagers "smile, laugh, then cry" (70). "They smiled at his first two phases," as an over-coddled baby and then as "a small dark shadow" toddling silently beside his grandmother (70). "They began to laugh at his third phase" (70), when he becomes the mischievous but attractive leader of the small boys of the

¹² In addition to the reasons mentioned here, Chetin points to Friedman's sense of uniqueness, constructed by both the villagers and his grandmother; "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition," 132.

¹³ Olaussen, *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain*, 108.

village in their tricks. And the deaths of Friedman and his grandmother make them cry, thus ending their story in a fourth phase. But Friedman's third phase, as an object of amused and admiring laughter, may be further divided by his passage from irresponsible child to responsible adult. The mischievous leader of the village boys realizes he must be of help to other people – especially his grandmother. He has an "awakened compassion," and, on entering the last phase of the text, the narrator observes that "Life and its responsibilities began to weigh down heavily on Friedman as he approached his fourteenth year" (73). Memorably, the change has come about after his grandmother has told him the story of one Robinson Crusoe, loner and great hunter, who has killed an elephant all by himself. In giving the elephant to his people, this Robinson Crusoe becomes accepted by his people.

This story contains many borders of the types I have already outlined. It contains *temporal borders*: a birth, two deaths, and a passage from irresponsibility to responsibility: i.e. from childhood to adulthood. It also refers to the recent passage from a protectorate to an independent Botswana, also allegorically, through the name of Friedman (when read as "freed man").¹⁴ It contains *symbolic borders* or differences: between life and death, irresponsibility and responsibility, tradition and modernity, individuals and community, male and female. The last, gender difference manifests itself both in the love between Friedman and his grandmother Sejonsenye, and in the division between the irresponsible boys playing in the bush and the girls, who are "useful attachments" to the household (69). There is also, then, a symbolic border between the wild and the domestic, or the bush and the household, and I thus arrive at a major *topographical border* in the story: that lying between the inside of the village and its outside.

¹⁴ Cf. Chetin, "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition," 132. Compare also with the name of the protagonist in the story "Snapshots of a Wedding," Neo, which Femi Ojo-Ade reads as standing for "neocolonialism" – "Of Human Trials and Triumphs," in *The Tragic Life*, ed. Abrahams, 84. Harrow also focuses on the connection between temporal and topographical borders, and micro- and macro-spatial borders, in other stories by Head (esp. 167).

Inside the village we find households, the homes of the people, and an archaic, pastoral life. Outside the village we find the boys and their games, the hunting of small animals – also an archaic activity (and I here use the word ‘archaic’ in the sense in which it is used by Homi K. Bhabha – calling attention to its complicity in colonialist or developmentalist discourse.¹⁵) But also outside the village we find the main road and, further away, the town – that is to say, modernity.

However, the opposition between inside and outside is explicitly articulated as a border only twice in the story. The first time this articulation takes place, the border is a window. The boys steal something from a house: “Friedman showed us how to open the window with a knife and string” (71). While this incident belongs to the mischievous and irresponsible phase of his life – he is the “worst thief,” a “real nuisance” (71) – it also shows something of his compassionate responsiveness – if not responsibility – in teaching the other boys to open the window. It again marks him out as someone special: “‘Friedman isn’t as bad as you,’ the parents would reply, irrationally. They were hypnotized by a beautiful creature” (71). In the entering of the domestic sphere, the incident prefigures his later, responsible closeness to his grandmother at the same time as it symbolizes an aggressive, irresponsible encroachment on women’s territory.

The second time the topographical border is explicitly articulated, it is as an embankment by the main road:

He pushed the bicycle through the winding, sandy pathway of the village ward, reached the high embankment of the main road, peddled vigorously up it and out of the corner of his eye, saw a small green truck speeding towards him. (74).

This embankment territorializes temporal borders by dividing the “timeless, sleepy village” from the “progress” and “development” of the main road (75). Its upward slope can be read as the upward curve of development. It also territorializes symbolic borders by dividing a realm of responsibility (the village) from one of irresponsibility (the main road), the

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 130.

latter present both in the irresponsibility of the driver and the irresponsibility of the small boy. But in Friedman’s smile to the driver, his responsibility and desire for human contact and compassion are revealed at the heart of this realm of irresponsibility. This sense of bringing the responsibility of the village with him into a territory of irresponsibility, and thus experiencing a state of inner contradiction and splitting, mirrors the doubleness of the earlier window episode. Through this mirroring of episodes, the irresponsible modernity of the road is aligned with the irresponsible archaicness of the bush in a chiasmatic (=ABBA) structure. The splitting of the self is intimately connected with the territorial and symbolic divide created by the embankment, a phenomenon often associated with border-crossing.¹⁶

The chiasmus is also present in the ironic echoing in the meeting between a car and a boy of the meeting between Robinson Crusoe and an elephant. In the Robinson Crusoe story, the smaller hero meets the larger elephant – “Ah, people, I saw a terrible sight! I was standing at the feet of the elephant. I was just a small ant” (72). He then kills the elephant. The smaller Friedman meets the larger car (a small truck). The car then kills Friedman. Again, in both cases, the antagonist comes from the world outside the village, and thus the archaic and the modern are aligned.

Most strikingly, then, the embankment divides between life and death, and between the story of the boy and what happens afterwards. Its upward slope thus also follows the curve of tension in the story, leading up to its moment of crisis. It announces the beginning of the border zone the reader must negotiate to get out of the text. In this final zone, central events – the death of Friedman, the death of his grandmother Sejosenye – are not directly described, but figured in metonymic absences: the remains of the boy, horrifically described, stand for Friedman’s death, as the ellipsis

¹⁶ For a provisional guide to the ‘logic’ of border-crossing, see Johan Schimanski, “Den litterære grensen: Knut Hamsuns ‘Dronningen af Saba’,” in *Att forska om gränser*, ed. José L. Ramírez (Stockholm: Nordregio, 2001): 67–68. <<http://www.nordregio.se/Files/ro103p141.pdf>>. For an English version, see Johan Schimanski, “A Poetics of the Border: Nation and Genre in *Wythnos yng Nghymru Fydd* and Other Texts by Islwyn Ffowc Elis” (doctoral dissertation, Oslo University, 1996): 320–21.

delineated by the sentence "Two weeks later, they buried her" (75) stands for Sejonsenye's. In this zone, the narrative focus is shifted to the people and their view of events, to the crossing of the divide between the absence and the presence of knowledge, and the zone ends in a final, framing interpretation. We have thus arrived at the *textual borders* of the story, and here I will be focusing on these as contingent on genre: i.e. as textual territorializations of genre differences. For this final border zone, like the introductory exposition of the story, is *part* and *parcel* of the compression necessary for the text to function generically as a short story, with its accompanying production of a sense of an ending.

The ending of "The Wind and a Boy," with its fable-like moral, has, however, been read as a signal of an element of oral tradition in the story¹⁷ – and indeed, as a re-affirmation that the oral tradition is present in all of the stories in *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* – with an emphasis on "Village Tales." But I would like to add two qualifications to this sense of orality in the story. The first concerns the ending of "The Wind and a Boy." It is only comparatively recently in the short-story tradition – in the twentieth century – that it has become less common to include a framing interpretation at the end of the story. The second qualification concerns the story and the book as a whole. In using the phrase "and other Botswanan Village Tales" in her title, Bessie Head is most certainly playing on the reader's expectations, in a piece of what Bhabha would call "sly civility."¹⁸ Put on sale in a local Southern African bookshop, it seems designed to land beside similar titles, but different contents. An illustration would be books in a series published by Howard Timmins in Cape Town, one of which, *The Song of the Golden Birds* (1970), I was given as small boy myself, living for shorter periods of my childhood in Botswana and Zambia. This book, written by Phyllis Savory, contains mostly tales of meetings between humans and magical speaking animals from the oral traditions of the Bemba and Tonga peoples of Zambia. But the title, if we are to trust the list of other titles in the series

¹⁷ H. Nigel Thomas, "Narrative Strategies in Bessie Head's Stories," in *The Tragic Life*, ed. Abrahams, 97.

¹⁸ See the chapter of that name in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 93–101.

on the back cover, is an anomaly. Most of the other books in the series contain the words "fireside tales" in their titles, *Zulu Fireside Tales*, *Matabele Fireside Tales*, etc. – and also, not so far off "Botswana Village Tales," *Bechuana Fireside Tales* ("Bechuana" being the earlier English spelling of "Botswana"). But there is a great contrast in the contents of Head's tales and these books: Head's tales mostly address everyday life in contemporary village communities, and thus do not live up to expectations of safely archaic and magical folk-tales from a 'pure' oral tradition.¹⁹

This subversion of genre expectations is also played out in "The Wind and a Boy," as the text crosses the border into another story, into Sejonsenye's story of the hunter Robinson Crusoe. Genre borders are crossed here within the text, switching as it does to what is quite clearly a folk-tale in the oral tradition, and at the same time into an archaic time. However, in the use of the name Robinson Crusoe there is also a sly civility, an uncanny mimicry, and a play with the expectations of those readers familiar with Daniel Defoe's novel about British protocolonialism, moral progress and economic development.

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¹⁹ Here I agree with Brown when she states that "Even when Head does seem to be drawing directly upon the legacy of oral literature, [...] she does so with the understanding that the reader holds a very different relationship with the dramatized storyteller than the one experienced by the storyteller's immediate audience"; *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head*, 115. However, as my reading here shows, I am not so convinced by her claim that this story or Head's other work must be read in isolation from the postcolonial context (cf. her reading of "The Wind and a Boy," 124). H. Nigel Thomas also points to the way in which the play between oral and short-story tradition undermines the expectations of the reader ("Narrative Strategies in Bessie Head's Stories": 96, 103). For a very clear statement of the narrative structure of the play between different types of audience, see Chetin, "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition," 114–15. On narrative distance, see also Françoise Lionnet, "Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in the Fictions of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones, and Bessie Head," *Callaloo* 16.1 (1993): 147. Rob Nixon aligns Head's stories (specifically "The Wind and a Boy") with journalism rather than with the short story; "Border Country," 124.

These plays with a difference between the short story and oral tradition are also clear in those aspects of the story involving questions of knowledge, representation and narrative focus: i.e. questions of the *epistemological border*. Oral tradition is also represented in "The Wind and a Boy" by the figure of the people (or just "people"), who surface all through the exposition as intrusive fragments of pseudo-iterative narrative – for example, "She is like that," people remarked, "because he may be the last child she will ever nurse..." (70). The people also surface in the mixing of focal agents at the end of the narrative and in the conflict of interpretations of whose fault this tragedy is:

As was village habit, the incident was discussed thoroughly from all sides till it was understood. In this timeless, sleepy village, the goats stood and suckled their young ones on the main road or lay down and took their afternoon naps there. The motorists either stopped for them or gave way. But it appeared that the driver of the truck had neither brakes on his car nor a driving licence. He belonged to the new, rich civil-servant class whose salaries had become fantastically high since independence. They had to have cars in keeping with their new status; they had to have any car, as long as it was a car; they were in such a hurry about everything that they couldn't be bothered to take driving lessons. And thus progress, development, and a pre-occupation with status and living-standards first announced themselves to the village. It looked like being an ugly story with many decapitated bodies on the main road. (75)

Reading through the story, it is possible to trace the project-values of the people as being to maintain the social order, to be entertained or charmed, to understand and to remember. They thus become a figure of storytelling in general and – in their need to understand – of representational discourse. But in this last passage, their focus is intertwined with that of the narrator-figure of the short story and of the "sly civility" of these village tales. Through framing comments, the narrator interprets their interpretation and adds to it. The narrator's initial marker that we are to hear what the villagers made of the tragedy becomes part of the explanation, reaffirming the status of "this timeless, sleepy village" (an outside perspec-

tive) as place where by "habit" an incident could be "discussed thoroughly from all sides till it was understood." After giving the reader access to what has become evident to the villagers – the nature of the car-driver – the narrator's perspective returns in the last two sentences, making it ambivalent to what degree the people (be it in contrast to or in agreement with the narrator) see this specific road death as symbolic of national progress, etc.

Some commentators on Head's work set out to analyse her use of the tragic form, reaching the conclusion that this use is subversive, either in its 'African' attitude to community and to conflict within the family, or in its focus on the suffering of people living on the margins – rather than at the centre of the state.²⁰ I have already invoked the tragic here several times; like many short stories, "The Wind and a Boy" bears more structural similarities to the dramatic form of tragedy than to longer prose works. It utilizes compression, unity of action, and a climactic turning-point, and raises questions of fault and of audience affect. The pseudo-iteratives of the people function in a way similar to that of the chorus in classical tragedy. As in classical tragedies, the turning-point in "The Wind and a Boy" comes near to the ending, and lends the latter a certain finality – in this case, the finality of death. This ending, however, is at the same time a beginning, here clearly announced as the beginning of "an ugly story with many decapitated bodies on the main road."²¹ Here, Head's use of the tragic form is subversive in the sense that it makes one aware that this may also be the case in classical tragedy – the prime example being the ending of *King Oedipus*, which marks the end of Oedipus' reign over Thebes, but also the start of a new era for the plague-threatened Thebes, now cleansed of Oedipus.

If the death of Friedman is the main temporal border in the text – the main motif which Sejosenye, the people, the narrator and the reader must

²⁰ Carole Anne Taylor, "Tragedy Reborn(e): A Question of Power and the Soul-Journeys of Bessie Head," *Genre* 26.2–3 (1993): 331–51; Earl G. Ingersoll, "The Universality of Tragedy? The Case of Bessie Head," *International Fiction Review* 26.1 (1999): 36–45.

²¹ Head, "The Wind and a Boy," 75. This final phrase takes the name symbolism of the story to a new, autobiographical level by evoking Bessie Head's own name – a curiously erased signature at the very edge of the text.

interpret – it is, of course, intimately connected to the birth of a new era of “progress” and “development” (75). Its associated topographical border, the embankment which divides the village from the main road, thus attains the status of being the primary such border in the text. The window violated in the break-in carried out by the boys of the village is a secondary version of this topographical border, and is associated with another temporal border in Friedman’s life, that of coming into subjecthood, of ceasing to be an extension of Sejosenye. As this border zone is disseminated back through the text in its various re-complications, it reaches right back to Friedman’s birth and naming at the hospital. But already this temporal border is associated with the division between the village and its outside, or home and the foreign: for Friedman is named after “a friendly foreign doctor named Friedman” (70) who took a liking to Sejosenye. Using phonemic and orthographic repetition (*f-r* repeated three times in association with *ie* or *ei*), the phrase sets up a striking symbolism to the name *Friedman*, bringing it together with both *friendly* (not unconnected to the German *Friedmann*, Peace-man) and *foreign* (uncanny when juxtaposed with the aforementioned word-play on national independence, the *Freed man*).

The implication of this dissemination of the border back through the text is that Friedman is always already a split character – from the moment of his naming, even from the moment of his birth and conception by his town-dwelling mother. He has always carried the border between the village and its outside within him – as has his grandmother, from the moment she learns about Robinson Crusoe at the missionary school she attended as a girl (70). He is akin to the bridge figures Edward O. Ako finds elsewhere in Head’s work, and is one of Head’s “good” men. But, as Sara Chetin implies, he is an unsuccessful “Friday” (again, a word-play on “Friedman”) in comparison to Robinson Crusoe, both in Sejosenye’s elephant-killing and in Defoe’s colonial version.²² As I have shown in connection with the two explicit topographical borders of the novel, this

²² Ako, “Crossing Borders”; Chetin, “Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition,” 132. For another failed border figure in Head’s fictions, see Harrow’s reading of Galethebege in the story “Heaven Is Not Closed”; “Bessie Head and Death,” 170–71.

splitting is not only based on a political or social neocolonial border, but also on a tragic fault in Friedman’s character, his internal split between irresponsibility and responsibility. The question is whether in Friedman’s case responsibility and irresponsibility – and the whole problem of his character ‘development’, his individual ‘progress’ towards subjective ‘independence’ – can avoid an interpretative return to the neocolonial border on a more allegorical level.

The Postcolonial Border

Whether the theme of the story has to do with the specificities of neocolonialism or with the concept of responsibility in general, it does provide an apposite and realist description of a postcolonial situation. While, as Rob Nixon points out, Botswana was only very lightly colonized and precolonial culture there was certainly allowed to survive in different forms, its whole socio-economic structure – especially where gender and work are concerned – is predicated on the heavily colonized South Africa.²³ Parental absence in the story is a social fact as much as it is a matter of morality.

The ending also makes clear that the story must also be read against a neocolonial horizon. Here the placing of the border between the local and the global – an embankment separating the village and its outside – is crucial. Spivak’s international division of labour does not, in Head generally and in “The Wind and a Boy” specifically, coincide with national borders, but appears, rather, as an internal border within the nation (and even, of course, within individual subjects). It is the village, and not the ex-colony, that is threatened by modernity. As Nixon notes, “for Head the nation was less an organic community than a set of administered categories that militated against her efforts to cultivate community and ancestry.”²⁴ This is an example of the national uncanny as described by Bhabha, and encapsulated in the association of ‘foreign’ and ‘independ-

²³ Nixon, “Border Country,” 124.

²⁴ “Border Country,” 111.

dent' in the name "Friedman" as presented above.²⁵ The way in which Nixon describes Head's wish to create transnational and local identities suggests that her exilic consciousness rejects organic and pseudo-organic conceptions of identity, giving preference to incomplete and performative affiliations.

The temporal specificity of the postcolonial situation is, however, threatened by the dissemination of the border within the time of the story. The dead boy and the dead grandmother are not victims of a postcolonial situation alone, but victims of a paradoxically postcolonial *and* neocolonial situation. The fact that Friedman and Sejosenye are revealed as always already split implies that we have to do not only with split subjects here, but with split societies as well, and societies that are split *along* the well-ordered historicist precolonial-colonial-postcolonial continuum. As Nixon writes,

The sense of Head's passage through versions of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras – though not in that order and decidedly not in any sequence that could be read as synonymous with "progress" – ensures that her later writing offers a rare commentary on the porous, ambiguous frontlines among these historical divides.²⁶

The tragic situation in "The Wind and a Boy" makes it impossible to locate or date the exact turning-point: Did Friedman die because he was hit by a car, or because he was sent to buy food, or because his mother gave him money for a bicycle, or because he was told the story of Robinson Crusoe, or because he broke into a house, or because his grandmother named him after a friendly foreign doctor, or because his grandmother was an independent woman, or because she was taught in a missionary school, or because she had had the gift of storytelling passed on to her?

²⁵ See the chapter "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 139–70, 266–69.

²⁶ Nixon, "Border Country," 124–25. He also makes an important point about a certain shifting in Head's writing when he states that it addresses problems common to rural communities in South Africa and to those ostensibly described, in Botswana (123–24).

On the outside of the village, the modern is aligned with the archaic. As Bhabha writes in the introduction to *The Location of Culture*,

we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond": an exploratory, restless movement [...].²⁷

The allegory of development, progress, and responsibility in Head's story is an allegory ambivalent to the very concept of development, progress, and (paternal) responsibility.

However, Spivak's global border is not just a violent imposition of power resulting in deaths of the kind described in "The Wind and a Boy." It is also an epistemological border, a divide to be crossed not only by the political representations associated with physical power (*vertreten*), but also by the discursive representations associated with the aesthetic (*darstellen*).²⁸ In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak," she criticizes the notion that the (neo)colonial divide can be made transparent, for in allowing the appropriation of the Other, such transparency – such uncritical representation – only becomes part of the power-structure. However, in "The Wind and a Boy," as in "Can the Subaltern Speak" (with its analyses of colonial and nationalist appropriations of widow-burning in India), this problem of representation becomes emblematically the problem of representing women's suffering. "The Wind and a Boy" ends apparently in interpretative closure, with the agreement that the kind of death Friedman has succumbed to will happen again and again. But as shown above, his death may be explained in other ways as well, and besides, this is the perspective of the story which begins with the ending of the tragedy. The other perspective, that of the story which ends together with the tragedy and which carries inside it the moment of tragic recognition (as set out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*), is Sejosenye's perspective. The grandmother provides an alternative interpretation,

²⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*: 1.

²⁸ For discussion of the two different terms used by Marx, both translatable by 'represent', see Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 275–79.

but one that cannot be represented except through the absence of representation.²⁹ It is an interpretation beyond language: “they [People of Ga-Sefete-Molemo ward] heard the matter-of-fact voice of the policeman announce the death, then they heard Sejosenye say piteously: “Can’t you return those words back?” (74) ... “The stories brought to them by way of the nurses were too terrible for words. They said the old woman sang and laughed and talked to herself all the time” (75). It is, like death itself, beyond the human: “Then her feet tripped her up and she fell to the ground like a stunned log” (75). And, as shown above, even Sejosenye’s death is covered in an ellipsis.³⁰ Indeed, the whole story is figured by absences of other kinds, especially those of Friedman’s mother and father, the latter replaced by Dr. Friedman, Robinson Crusoe, and the car-driver in ways that call attention to the original absence.³¹

Thus, as Sara Chetin writes, “The storyteller’s tales end as the old woman lies talking and laughing to herself, her audience [Friedman] having become a victim of its own susceptibility.”³² The story told, presumably like the songs Sejosenye sang “as they sat by the outdoor fire” (71), is replaced by the “ugly story” of car-crashes in the last sentence, and

²⁹ Cf. Lionnet (writing in extension of a reading of the story “The Collector of Treasures”): “This is the contradiction inherent in the relationship between textuality and reality: it emphasizes that the problematics of universalism in the context of women’s literatures remains a dead letter so long as women’s silences and body languages continue to be ignored or recuperated by the symbolic order, thus becoming ‘black holes’ (so to speak) within and against which all interpretive discourses can only come to a halting stop”; Lionnet, “Geographies of Pain,” 150.

³⁰ The figure of Sejosenye might be discussed further, including consideration of her connection with the land – she is a successful agriculturalist – and the fact that her lands are also outside the village. Cf. Lionnet’s discussion of female heterotopias (utopian female “other spaces”) in Head (“Geographies of Pain,” 133). Cf. also Nixon’s discussion of Head’s views on the relationship between women and territory (“Border Country,” 125–31).

³¹ For a discussion of absent mothers in Head’s writing and own life, see Liz Gunner, “Mothers, Daughters and Madness in Works by Four Women Writers: Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 14 (1994): 139–41.

³² Chetin, “Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition,” 132.

finds new audiences. For these, the expected representations of oral literature are replaced by something less reassuring. Here, the “sly civilities” of Bhabha’s native when interrogated by the colonist are brought together with the horror encountered at the very border of culture in Bhabha’s “colonial” literature, situated within “a fine tension between the melancholic homelessness of the modern novelist, and the wisdom of the sage-like storyteller whose craft takes him no further afield than his own people.”³³ Appropriately, the ugliness comes at the very end of the story, when the reader is on the verge of understanding what has happened, much like Marlow discovering the “horror” in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, at the point where he has finally made contact with that symbol of modernity, Kurtz, in the middle of the jungle – coincidentally, also the point of contact (or absence of contact, the border he does not cross) with the presumed archaic life of the people who live in this “jungle.”

The figure of the postcolonial border (and not purely in its symbolic form) thus informs very clearly the double lesson of the story: that development is not necessarily a good thing, but that it is not necessarily easy to represent its ambivalence. This is ultimately because representations are always part of the situation, and not just representations of it. Part and parcel.³⁴

³³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123. Bhabha, as his footnote makes clear, refers in this tension to Walter Benjamin’s essay on the storyteller.

³⁴ Many thanks to Ulrike Spring for her incisive comments and suggestions during the writing process, and to those students in Tromsø and conference delegates in Bergen who have also given me many helpful hints.

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