

*Paradise Lost in the Great Karoo:  
Athol Fugard's "Road to Mecca"*

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THE CENTRAL dramatic icon in Fugard's most recent play<sup>1</sup> is a lonely woman on a country road. There are three such women, and three such roads. Elsa Barlow makes her 800-mile journey from Cape Town through the God-deserted wilderness of the Karoo to New Bethesda, where the houses are without electricity or running water or the simplest amenities of the modern world — a trek from enlightened South African liberal attitudes into the stagnating world of reactionary nineteenth-century Afrikanerdom. She gives a ride to a destitute African woman forced to leave the white baas's farm after her husband's death, dropping her off where the road forks to walk the last eighty miles in the cold Karoo night, with a baby on her back, to Cradock — a journey from nowhere to nowhere. And, in the middle of nowhere, leading out of the darkness of New Bethesda, is the visionary road of the sculptress Helen Martins — the road to a fantastically reconstituted Paradise in the midst of wilderness, destitution, loneliness and spiritual distress.

The familiar Fugard territory of decrepit cityscapes and mud-flats, of South African prisons and Port Elizabeth tearooms seems curiously remote from the austere and distant region of the Karoo; the habitual, almost Beckettian couplings of paired opposites — Boesman and Lena, John and Winston — now give way to a triadic pattern of relationships where, for the first time in Fugard's drama, two women provide the focus of the whole event; and in place of his customary analysis of the soul of man under apartheid, and the appalling racial tensions generated by the political system, Fugard shapes this material into an artist-parable and explores the abstract theme of creativity under totalitarianism.

His development, even to his most sympathetic critics, would seem to be a mirror of the White Liberal's failure to effect significant political change in South Africa — “a retreat,” as Dennis Walder puts it, “into self-scrutiny, fantasy, and an obsession with the psychopathology of the isolated consciousness” (100). Margarete Seidenspinner, more critical of this apparent withdrawal from the political fight, traces in Fugard's plays a pattern of disengagement from passionate involvement in the suffering of the Black and Coloured communities to a form of solipsism, from Liberal hope to a pessimistic dedication to lost causes, from a universal concern for social issues to a regionalism which, she claims, “facilitates his compromise with the current situation and enables him to redefine his function as a writer within the accessible demarcation lines of South African existence” (219). But *The Road to Mecca*, it seems to me, does not lead away from the vital political issues of the earlier plays nor does it imply a lonely withdrawal into the private consciousness of the disaffected artist. Art, in this play, is *revolution* — as it had been in *The Island*, where to stage the *Antigone* on Robben Island was to threaten subversion. But the rebellious artist in *The Road to Mecca* is not a dissident Black. Fugard, as Albert Wertheim points out, has returned to the artist-figure of *Dimetos*, whom he now conflates with the figure of the “persistent, indefatigable Afrikaner” last seen in *A Lesson From Aloes* (17); and if, as Fugard maintained in his interview at Yale, “Helen is me” (Honnegger 35), it becomes clear what particular group of South African artists she represents — the disaffected Afrikaner himself, the traitor to his own national ideology, the outcast from the tribe whose art has made him anathema to the community and isolated him in the terrible freedom of his craft. Although Fugard has never claimed to belong to the group of dissident Afrikaner writers known as *Die Sestigers* (“The Writers of the 'Sixties”), his focus in *The Road to Mecca* is brought to bear upon the dilemma of the Afrikaans artist who chooses to remain in the wilderness his country has become, who mourns the lost hope of Paradise and uses his art (as Miss Helen puts it at the end of the play) to “misdirect all the good Christian souls around here and put them on the road to Mecca” (79).

*The Road to Mecca* is a deeply personal if not an autobiographical play, set in a region of the country about fifteen miles from Fugard's birth-place, which cries for the beloved country with the voice of an entire generation of contemporary Afrikaner writers — André Brink, Etienne Leroux, J. M. Coetzee — who can neither relinquish their culture nor live with what it has become. Pity the Black man in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* who must survive within apartheid at terrible cost to his integrity. Pity the child in "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the Boys* who must grow up tainted by his racial heritage. But pity, also, the liberated Afrikaner who is oppressed by the failure of a national ideology even as he is bound by love for a land as bleak as the countryside around Middelburg and New Bethesda. The Karoo lies in the remote fastnesses of the Eastern Cape, a landscape of unremitting desolation flanked by mountain ranges which intensify its isolation and ensure its inaccessibility, its villages widely scattered and its population predominantly Afrikaner. These are the people of whom Pauline Smith wrote in her tales of *The Little Karoo* (1925) and whose way of life has remained largely impervious to the advent of electricity or, if Fugard is to be believed, the enlightened political values of the twentieth century. Arnold Bennett, in his preface to Pauline Smith's short stories, describes the Karoo dwellers as

simple, astute, stern, tenacious, obstinate, unsubduable, strongly prejudiced, with the most rigid standards of conduct — from which standards the human nature in them is continually falling away, with fantastic, terrific, tragic, or quaintly comic consequences. They are very religious and very dogmatically so. (9)

Their religion is an austere brand of Calvinism, and their Church is the Nederduitse Gereformeerde — the Dutch Reformed — which, until very recently,<sup>2</sup> enjoyed the uniquely paradoxical situation of embracing both Christianity and apartheid in the same general ecumenical gesture. The play does not protest openly against the laws that enforce segregation or perpetuate the injustices of the Nationalist regime; but the powerful presence of the Dutch Reformed Church, its authority, and its power are constant reminders of the close affinity between Government policy and the Church which has justified this policy.<sup>3</sup> In the

Reverend Marius Byleveld we see not only the “Nationalist Party at prayer” (which is how the Dutch Reformed Church has been defined), but one of the great forces in persuading the Afrikaner that segregation, conformity, and racial superiority are endorsed by the Bible and sanctified by the faith. “When one considers the facts of the Afrikaner’s history,” writes Brookes, “and realizes that his Church and his cultural leaders have encouraged his feelings and not challenged them, it is not difficult to understand why apartheid has taken such a hold on the South African white electorate” (xxx). The extraordinary difficulty of breaking that hold, of embracing a freedom even lonelier and more desolate than the Karoo, is the theme of Fugard’s play; and his heroine is a seventy-year-old woman whose human nature (in Bennett’s phrase) “falls away” from conformity and rigidity — and who dares to countermand her faith, her history, and her culture through the dissident and heretical vision of an “un-Christian” Mecca.

The Road to Mecca is the route to a difficult and fragile freedom — freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of creativity — inhibited by the manacles forged in peculiarly South African habits of mind. And the three women on their different roads are mirrors of the liberated/manacled self, each seeing herself reflected in the image of the other. Elsa Barlow, all but shattered by her inability to sustain a vision of freedom based on trust, travels deep into the heart of Afrikanerdom to reconfirm the possibility of liberation in the life of Helen Martins. “She challenges me,” Elsa explains to the Dominee:

She challenges me into an awareness of myself and my life, of my responsibilities to both that I never had until I met her. There’s a hell of a lot of talk about freedom, and all sorts of it, in the world where I come from. But it’s mostly talk, Dominee, easy talk and nothing else. Not with Helen. She’s lived it. One dusty afternoon five years ago [. . .] I met the first truly free spirit I have ever known. (66-67)

En route to New Bethesda she encounters its opposite: the black woman whose road is the rest of her life, for whom no “Mecca” waits. She is the paradigm of woman’s soul under the Afrikaner regime, incapable of resisting subjection, overwhelmed by the

spirit of the Karoo, whose response to her fate is to endure it with the stoicism that characterizes so many of Fugard's social victims. There, but for the grace of God. . . .

I asked her who she was. She said: "My English name is Patience." She hitched up the baby, tightened her *doek*, picked up her little plastic shopping bag and started walking. As I watched her walk away, measuring out the next eighty miles of her life in small steps, I wanted to scream. And about a mile further on, in the *kloof*, I did exactly that. . . . I screamed louder and longer than I have ever done in my life. I can't describe it, Helen. I hated her, I hated the baby, I hated you for dragging me all the way up here . . . and most of all I hated myself. That baby is mine, Helen. Patience is my sister, you are our mother. . . . (77)

This is the triadic pattern, the nexus of almost allegorical relationships in the play. Helen Martins, through her dissident art and her spiritual revolution, is the "mother" of the liberal conscience of white South Africa, the inspiration and the model for a form of emancipation that transcends sectarian politics and the polemical issues of Women's Liberation. But she is also the "mother" of Patience, which she believes to be a virtue and a grace (17) — that capacity for long-suffering which is the predominant characteristic of all Pauline Smith's pathetic heroines and which Arnold Bennett might have included in his list of deeply entrenched Afrikaner cultural values. Elsa calls her a "double agent," "history's first reactionary-revolutionary" (28) in her paradoxical conflation of liberal and stoical attitudes. By the time Elsa Barlow reaches New Bethesda, however, the revolutionary impulse — battered by the forces of Afrikaner conformity and weakened by the failure of artistic vision — is on the verge of annihilation. Helen Martins, in near-suicidal despair, is on the point of capitulating to the will of the Church and to the deep and abiding need of the Dominee to bring her back to the faith and the *volk*. At the heart of the ensuing drama is the struggle of Feminism against Afrikanerdom for Helen Martins's satisfaction of their most insistent needs, a conflict inextricable from the mixture of their motives and complicated — surprisingly — by the love and compassion of the Dominee, and by the harsh self-righteousness of the free-thinking liberal.

Fugard's plays may be a bitter disappointment to those expecting an outright condemnation of Afrikanerdom and the Nationalist regime in South Africa. But it is all too easy to see the Karoo through Elsa Barlow's eyes as the heart of darkness, its vast space and awesome silence as merciless as the religion preached in the country. "It's so obvious where you Afrikaners get your idea of God from," she says (21), looking at the landscape as an alien universe — too hot or too cold, either parched or flooded — as absurd as Camus's Algeria and as inhuman as Balzac's definition of the desert as "God without mankind" (50). But hers is an outsider's view of the Karoo, the inimical landscape of the stranger to the South African wilderness — like Kipling's in his Boer War poetry, where a "monstrous heaven" presides over the bridge-guard in the Karoo as night falls, "And the darkness covers our faces, / And the darkness re-enters our souls" (15). It is a vastly different view encountered in Guy Butler's "Karoo Town, 1939," where "climate integrates the landsman with his soil / And life moves on to the dictates of the season" (1). And for Fugard, the Karoo is clearly home-ground, the beloved country rooted in the soul: "I have the sense," he confides in the Yale interview, "that if anybody were to cut me open, if you could do a sort of X-ray job on my psyche, you'd find something that looks like the Karoo" (Honnegger 38). It is this passionate and deeply personal identification with the land that Fugard embodies in the Dutch Reformed Dominee — that pillar, like Ibsen's Pastor Manders, of a repressive and authoritarian institution, but, like Manders, a pathetically vulnerable and sporadically sympathetic figure. To Marius Byleveld, entering Miss Helen's house with a basketful of fresh vegetables, the Karoo bears constant witness to the beneficence and bounty of God, the divine generosity beneath the apparent desolation, the "fullness and goodness" (53) of human life which merits man's eternal gratitude. It is an image resonating with that sense — peculiar to the Afrikaner — that among the white colonists in Africa, he alone has taken root and discovered an affinity with the land. It has become increasingly more difficult, over the past 40 years of South African history, to remember that the original Afrikaner Dream, like the American Dream, was based upon a set of self-evident values and inalien-

able rights; that the Boer War — the *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* — was fought for freedom and national autonomy; and that even the Great Karoo held out the promise of a Paradise regained in what André Brink has called “the hard process of learning not only to survive *in* this continent but to survive as *part* of it: part of its blood and flesh and bones and guts, part of its deep and awful rhythms” (19). The tragedy of the Afrikaner is that his dream, compromised and eroded in the historical emergence of the *volk*, is now no longer visible beneath the ash-heaps of South African policy, and that the ideology of apartheid should have displaced the Utopian vision so decisively as a national mythology. This is the sorrow at the heart of much South African literature, from Alan Paton’s novels of lamentation to the dissident voice of the Afrikaans writer, like André Brink, who sees apartheid *obscuring* what is finest in the Afrikaner temperament:

It reveals only that side of him which is characterized by fear, by suspicion, by uncertainty, hence by arrogance, meanness, narrowmindedness, pigheadedness. What it denies is the Afrikaner’s reverence for life, his romanticism, his sense of the mystical, his deep attachment to the earth, his generosity, his compassion. (19)

This is a list of mingled attributes more accurate, more up-to-date than Arnold Bennett’s. It helps to define Fugard’s own “bastardized Afrikaner”<sup>4</sup> perspective and his ability to “internalize and transform” (Honnegger 37) *both* sides of the Afrikaner temperament — the Dominee’s simple gratitude to the munificent God of the Karoo who feeds his people in the wilderness, a gratitude compromised by his bigoted insistence that the Coloureds display the same gratitude towards the Whites who, in charity, feed them in turn. For Marius Byleveld, the Coloured remains the white man’s burden, the responsibility that goes with the good fortune of being born on the right side of the colourbar, and he uses his pulpit to regulate their lives and make decisions on their behalf. For all his personal attributes of love and concern, the dispensation he represents is as cold and hard as the stones flung by the community at Helen Martins’s house —

the emblem, for her, of the "terrible lie" into which the faith of the Dutch Reformed Church has petrified:

Do you know what the word "God" looks like when you've lost your faith? It looks like a little stone, a cold, round, little stone. "Heaven" is another one, but it's got an awkward, useless shape, while "Hell" is flat and smooth. All of them — damnation, grace, salvation — a handful of stones. (70)

If the Dominee embodies the Afrikaner's generosity and attachment to the earth yoked to the narrowmindedness and the repressive authority of his Church, then Helen Martins offers that romantic and mystical alternative to Afrikanerdom's inability to sustain its ancient myths. If the *Vryheidsoorlog* — "The War for Freedom" — failed to build the New Jerusalem in Africa's wilderness, and if Paradise no longer inheres in political ideology or the teaching of the Church, then it must be recreated as a necessary spiritual value in the artistic imagination. This is the point at which the South African dream, rooted in the specific culture of the Afrikaner, touches upon the most universal concerns of the European and American traditions — the discovery, in Fitzgerald's phrase, of "something commensurate to [man's] capacity for wonder" (182). For Helen Martins, this alternative Eden is a wonderful amalgam of Eastern exoticism and the mysterious world of the Ekdals' loft in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. It is her "Life-lie," her fiction of necessary value in a world desperately in need of that which it can no longer accommodate. For she has converted her room into a mosque-like shrine of "light and extravagant fantasy" (15), the mirrored walls reflecting the multi-coloured geometric patterns on floor and ceiling, and the whole room magically illuminated by lamp- and candle-light. And beyond the room, surrounding the house, is the statuary — the "idolatry" (67) — that so outrages the Church and provokes the community to hurl stones at it. "This is the best of me," she tells Elsa. "This is what I really am" (35): the creator of light, a rebel against the shuttered gloom of Dutch Reformed Calvinism, whose new religion is all the more heretical for shaping its art in the imagery of a Cape Coloured Islam. Led by the candle that Marius Byleveld had once lit for her in com-

passion and love, she moves towards Mecca, "*radiantly alive with her vision*":

A city of light and colour more splendid than anything I had ever imagined. There were palaces and beautiful buildings everywhere, with dazzling white walls and glittering minarets.

In the centre of Mecca there is a temple [...] and that is where the Wise Men of the East study the celestial geometry of light and colour. I became an apprentice that night. (72)

And as she speaks, so the candles are lit to reveal the full magic and splendour of Helen Martins's achievement: "This is my world," she cries, "and I have banished darkness from it." (73)

To banish darkness is to banish despair — but it is also to banish reality, to move into the fantasies of the insane where illusion insulates the dreamer against the world. The community regards Helen Martins as a madwoman and casts stones. But hers is no ordinary madness:

They say mad people can't tell the difference between what is real and what is not. I can. I know my little Mecca out there, and this room, for what they really are. I had to learn how to bend rusty wire into the right shape [...], how to grind down beer bottles in a coffee mill to put glitter on my walls. My hands will never let me forget. They'll keep me sane. It's the best I could do, as near as I could get to the real Mecca. (73)

This is the "madness" of the artist who must *imagine* an alternative reality, who must change perception in a world no longer capable of alteration, and whose dissident vision incurs the charge not only of craziness but of heresy. It is the "stimulating principle" (Ibsen 226) that the artist discovers in the domain of the imagination, the consoling illusion that expands reality into the mythic constructs of the dreaming imagination — the very converse of madness which obliterates the real in regressive fantasies and mires the dreamer in his neuroses. Like Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*, Helen Martins is able to maintain that delicate balance between the vision and the reality from which it springs. She retains that child-like capacity, as Ibsen puts it, "to play with dolls" (430), to create Romantic kingdoms which temporarily reconcile one to the mundane. André Brink has written of the South African writer's need to envision maps for the

mythical African Kingdom of Monomotapo which exists as a necessary antidote to despair:

The writer, instead of hanging himself, turns to his own paper and draws, himself, the map of the Land of Truth he knows exists within himself. [...] What he does is to perceive, below the lines of the map he draws, the contours of another world, somehow a more "essential" world. And from the interaction between the land as he *perceives* it to be and the land as he knows it *can* be, someone from outside, the "reader" of the map, watches — and aids — the emergence of the *meaning* of the map. (*Mapmakers* 168-69)

Helen Martins is such a "mapmaker," and Elsa Barlow is her "reader." Each is an active collaborator in the ideals of the other, Helen affirming the vitality of Elsa's vision of the liberated woman and Elsa bearing witness to the meaning, to the very *raison d'être* of Helen's existence. Each holds the other in a relationship of mutual need and mutual trust; and an act of betrayal would destroy them both. It is in response to Helen Martins's letter of suicidal despair that Elsa travels into the heart of the Karoo, only to encounter those iconographic images of women overpowered by darkness on roads that lead to nowhere.

"Mecca" is clearly a tenuous defence against darkness, a fragile construct easily assailed by the pressures without and by the failure of creative powers within. What becomes of the artist when the redemptive function of art no longer prevails, when she can no longer "lie" value into existence, or shape liberating fictions of Paradise in the wilderness? Now the vision, the prerequisite for creativity, is fading, and the road peters out. "Everything is ending," she writes in her letter, "and I am alone in the dark. There is no light left. I would rather do away with myself than carry on like this" (39). This is the moment that Marius Byleveld has been waiting for, when in gentleness and compassion he will close the shutters once again on Helen's life and save her from idolatry and the blasphemy of Mecca. Like the good shepherd, he comes to rescue a stray and return it to the *volk*:

You turned your back on your Church, on your faith and then on us [...]. Do you realize that that is why you are now in trouble and so helplessly alone? Those statues out there can't give you love or take care of you the way we wanted to. And,

God knows, we were ready to do that. But you spurned us, Helen. You turned your back on our love and left us for the company of these cement monstrosities. (68-9)

He will save her from this heresy by arranging for her to leave the grotesque "nightmare" of the house, lodging her in a home for the aged next to the Church in Graaff-Reinet. And Elsa Barlow arrives to find her ready and willing to sign the forms that will plunge her back into the darkness of an Afrikanerdom she no longer trusts.

"If you sign this form, it must be of your own free will," the Dominee assures her (60). But his concession to free will masks a coerciveness that is at first subtly and then more blatantly apparent. At best, his motive is the pastor's concern for Helen's safety and the lover's fear for her life: there is at least the possibility that the fire in her house was an attempted suicide. In the ideological struggle that ensues, however, Elsa emphasizes the other side of his equivocal Afrikanerdom — the beleaguered tribalism appalled by Helen's defection and his horror at the model of artistic and existential rebellion her art offers to the faithful. One does not stone crazy old women, Elsa argues. One stones what one fears, what one jealously desires but cannot embrace — the free spirit that threatens the established order of the *volk*. "She did something," says Elsa, "which small minds and small souls can never forgive . . . she dared to be different"; and her "sin" is to exemplify what it means to be "a free woman! God forgive us!" (66) in a land that defines such freedom as "nightmare" and "idolatry" (67).

The other side of Elsa's liberal feminism, however, is the difficult idealistic demand it makes upon human fallibility and its unwillingness to compromise in the face of what it calls betrayal. The Dominee's offer of "free will" is a delusion, not to be trusted. But Elsa's conception of the "free woman" makes such extraordinary existential demands upon the woman chosen to embody this ideal that "freedom," as she envisions it, becomes a hardship scarcely to be endured. In the complex system of relationships that structures the play, Fugard makes it difficult to withhold sympathy from the dogmatic Afrikaner — and equally difficult to accord it fully to the liberal conscience. As Wertheim points

out, "Fugard carefully and skillfully erodes [the] initial impression of Elsa's power and purpose" (19), and what develops is the portrait of a woman incapable of sustaining her own drive towards freedom but who nevertheless imposes its stringent demands upon others. Her attitude, when she hears of Helen's suicide attempt is one of "*cruel detachment*" — a sense of having been betrayed by her paradigm of freedom, and a determination to force Helen to confront the "unfreedom" inherent in apathy and despair. To be kind, she must be cruel — even to the extent of "*hating herself, hurting herself every bit as much as she is hurting MISS HELEN*" (64). The confrontation she provokes in tones of an anguished and violated ideology is so unrelenting, so uncompromising that Helen is all but shattered by the apparent withdrawal of sympathy and support. "Who are you?" she asks (65). And Elsa is devastated by the imputations of cruelty and callousness in the rebuke. The dialectic admits of no easy resolution. Wertheim charges Elsa with "quick rejection and abandonment" (20) in the face of what she cannot change — but her ideal of self-sufficiency and freedom demands that each woman must choose for herself, confront her destiny, and abide the consequences of decisions taken. Her treatment of Helen is, in effect, no different from her treatment of the woman dropped off on the road to Cradock: each must grapple with darkness in the loneliness of an absolute freedom. "For all you know," suggests Miss Helen, "she might have got a lift" — to which Elsa responds with *an unexpected flash of cruelty*: "I hope not. [. . .] A lift to where, for God's sake? There's no Mecca waiting for her at the end of that road, Helen. Just the rest of her life, and there won't be any glitter on that. The sooner she knows what the score is, the better" (76). The existential idealist, to teach the painful lesson that life begins on the other side of despair, must sometimes wear the mask of cruel detachment — just as totalitarianism, to assuage this pain and win over mankind, must wear the mask of humane sympathy. But while the Creon figure in *The Island* is a merely cynical paradigm of the Nationalist Party's compassionate benevolence, the Dominee's concern and devotion are genuine — which is why his offer of loving support, however imprisoning, seems fatally attractive to the woman at the end of

her road. And if he is mistaken about much else, Marius is surely correct in seeing that Elsa has turned Miss Helen into a symbol for the sort of freedom she has herself been unable to sustain. His diatribe excoriates this view of "freedom" — a word so hated (69) as to be expunged from the Afrikaner vocabulary:

Don't you realize that you are being used, Helen — she as much as admitted to that — to prove some lunatic notion about freedom? [...] See yourself as I do and tell me if that is what you call being "free." A life I care about as deeply as any I have known, trapped now finally in the nightmare this house has become . . . with an illiterate little Coloured girl and a stranger from a different world as your only visitors and friends! (69-70)

Each regards the other as more-or-less "lunatic" — the dogmatic Afrikaner incapable of conceding to the existential freedom that his antagonist embraces, the equally dogmatic Liberal unwilling to acquiesce in the need for security in compassion and love. In the final analysis, neither "protector" fully grasps the freedom that Helen Martins embodies — the radiant vision that can banish fear, suspicion, arrogance, meanness, narrow-mindedness and pigheadedness in a reconstituted Paradise of artistic and racial harmony. And neither can grasp the nature of her anguish as the radiance begins to fade and darkness encroaches once again upon her freedom to transform the world. In the last ten minutes of the play she reveals herself fully. One by one, she lights the candles that change the room into a place of enchantment — an act of childlike joy to amuse and delight, of creative enlightenment to defeat the darkness. The first candle in her new life, she reminds them, was lit by Marius Byleveld; and however distant her Mecca from his Afrikanerdom, it was a journey inspired by a small symbolic gesture of sympathy and support. To reach her, he too must light a candle and follow it to Mecca. But he cannot take the leap, the act of cultural defection; and he commits himself to living out the rest of his life in "the shadow of something that is terribly wrong" (74). He leaves defeated, not by the anti-Afrikaner argument of Elsa Barlow but by a radiance he can neither share in nor deny: "I have never seen you as happy as this!" he tells Helen. "There is more light in you than in all your candles put together." (74)

It would seem, for a moment, in the dialectical struggle between Afrikanerdom and liberated feminism for Helen's allegiance, that Elsa has emerged triumphant. ("Rebellion starts, Miss Helen, with just one man or woman standing up and saying, 'No. Enough!' Albert Camus. French writer" [28].) Instead of resigning herself, like Patience on the road to Cradock, Helen Martins has asserted her autonomy in an act of defiance — she has finally refused to sign the form that will reduce her world to a few ornaments in an old-age home. ("You affirmed your right, as a woman . . ." [75]) But the rhetoric, unconvincing in itself, is further undercut by Elsa's desperate sense of loneliness and envy in her triumph. Surprisingly, she is jealous of the Dominee's great capacity for love, envious even of the child on Patience's back: the human connections, in the midst of desolation, so conspicuously lacking in her own existence. She is free, but abandoned — betrayed by life, by her lover, by her own right as a woman to terminate her pregnancy. She is free, but lost — and if she has spent much of the play casting stones, it is out of a sense of jealousy no less acute than the stone-throwing Afrikaners'. Her existential ideals are compromised by her failure to sustain their demands. Her attempt at radical political change has been too threatening for the Coloured community in Cape Town. And their concern for their own safety has left her frustrated, despairing, and helpless — an image of the South African liberal's hope eternally deferred.

At the heart of Fugard's dialectics is a carefully balanced opposition of strengths and deficiencies, of positive and negative impulses, of parallels within juxtapositions. And the complexity of his dramatic structure is a mirror for what his most stringent critics reject as an indeterminate political vision — that unwillingness to reduce the South African dilemma to a simple conflict of right and wrong, of free-thinking Truth battling against dogmatic Evil. If he were writing a form of political agitprop, a solution would be immediately apparent in the call for open rebellion. If his dialectics were Hegelian, it might be possible to see, as Wertheim does, a reconciliation of opposites in some political *Aufhebung*. "[It] is a play," he writes, "that strongly suggests

that the answers to South Africa's vexing social problems, which are so much a product of conservative Afrikaner stubborn determination, will nevertheless emerge through marrying that very same Afrikaner stubbornness and tenacity to an inspired vision of freedom" (Wertheim 18). But there are no apparent solutions in Fugard, and no marriage of opposites. The genuinely Ibsenian quality to the play lies in its open-endedness, its unresolved ambiguities, and its determination not to offer a facile remedy for an insuperable problem. At the end of *The Wild Duck*, Gregers Werle and Dr. Relling — the missionary of Truth and the advocate of the Lie — confront the appalling failure of two extreme but creditable methods of coping with reality. No resolution is possible. Any third term in the argument must lie beyond the boundaries of the drama. Another way of grasping the ideological *impasse* in *The Road to Mecca* is in Dostoievskian terms. In the famous Grand Inquisitor episode in Book Five of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Christ the Existentialist with his gift of a terrible and demanding freedom confronts, in silence, the voluble old Inquisitor whose compassion and pity for mankind would absolve them of the fear of freedom and offer, in its place, the security of the Totalitarian State. Even more extreme in their dialectical opposition than Elsa and the Dominee, they see with devastating clarity the undeniable value which each must acknowledge as a human necessity in the other but deny for himself: Christ kisses the Grand Inquisitor, and although the old man adheres to his idea, the kiss glows in the heart. Similarly, in *The Road to Mecca*, the difficult Existential demand for a lonely freedom of spirit must finally endorse the loving security even in the Dominee's horribly misdirected ideology, while the Totalitarian — incapable of embracing the freedom he vilifies yet desires — must finally concede to a radiance of spirit forever forfeited to the *volk*. For Marius Byleveld, like the Inquisitor, Miss Helen's vision glows in the heart. But the old man cannot abandon his idea. And Elsa's haunting visions of human connections on the Godforsaken road — the Dominee's love, the child on the woman's back — intensify the loneliness of the journey she cannot relinquish.

In the final analysis, both Marius and Elsa depend upon Helen Martins for the broader vision and the brightening glance. She is the missing third term in the dialectical structure — not a marriage of contraries, but an alternative to the extremes of reactionary accommodation and revolutionary freedom. Through the liberated imagination she creates dissenting visions, subverts the oppressive realities of her ethos, and banishes darkness in a redemptive domain of spiritual light. But if she points the Afrikaner along the road to Mecca and impresses him with her radiance, she must also help the liberal idealist along the road to Cradock and accommodate her to the darkness of mundane experience. She instructs the Dominee by lighting candles. She instructs Elsa by blowing them out:

My Mecca is finished and with it — I must try to say it, mustn't I? — the only real purpose my life has ever had. (*She blows out a candle.*)

I was wrong to think I could banish darkness, Elsa. Just as I taught myself to light candles, and what that means, I must teach myself now how to blow them out . . . and what that means. [. . .] The last phase of my apprenticeship . . . and if I can get through it, I'll be a master! (78)

Even art, in the final analysis, is an insufficient defence against the encroaching darkness. Poetry, in Auden's bleak phrase, makes nothing happen. It may protest, raise consciousness, or defy — like Sophocles' *Antigone* on Robben Island — but fictions of significance become increasingly more difficult to sustain against a system that cannot tolerate them. The black prisoner who speaks Antigone's message of love must do so in the full knowledge of its failure to change South Africa, and at the considerable risk of being detained in prison for subversion. At the end of her spiritual road, with her creative powers waning, Helen Martins must confront darkness once again, accommodate herself to an inescapable reality, and relinquish the consoling hope of Paradise. It will mean the cultivation of that stoical endurance which is Patience and which, even on the road to Cradock, one has to believe in as a virtue and a grace. The play ends in a mood of sombre joy and a note of tonal ambiguity. Love and trust are restored

between the women, Helen offering comfort and Elsa offering Valium. They laugh again at Helen's remedy for the spiritual ills of the Karoo — an heretical Angel pointing eastwards and misdirecting all the good Christian souls en route to their final destination.<sup>5</sup> But the irony behind the joke is that Valium is an "artificial sweetener" and Afrikanerdom not easily misled. It is impossible to expunge from one's sense of the play's ending the potential fate of the dissident poet no longer able to "lie" truth into existence or find the contours of Paradise beneath the road-maps of the Great Karoo. In his "Note on Miss Helen" that prefaces the play, Fugard discusses the life and career of the real woman, Helen Niemand, who inspired *The Road to Mecca* — a woman whose name translates as "No One," and whose death mirrors the fate of all those artist-protagonists in South African literature who must finally look on darkness. After eighteen months of depression, incapable of sustaining her visionary world, Miss Helen killed herself by drinking caustic soda and burning away her insides.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The play was first performed in May 1984 at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven. It opened in London at the National Theatre's Lyttelton in February 1985, with Yvonne Bryceland as Helen Martins.
- <sup>2</sup> At the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in October 1986, the meeting of clergymen repudiated the dogma, hitherto firmly endorsed, that enforced segregation is prescribed by the Bible. To date, the Dutch Reformed Church has not openly challenged the Nationalist Government's racial policies. See the report in *Time*, November 3, 1986.
- <sup>3</sup> The policy of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church is clearly laid out in the 1956 report of the Synod Committee, summarized in Brookes's section on "Official Church Statements" (76-79).
- <sup>4</sup> With an Afrikaans mother and a father born in Manchester, Fugard sees himself as a typically South African muddle — "a bastardized Afrikaner, a product of cultural miscegenation" (Vandenbroucke 3).
- <sup>5</sup> Another point of similarity between Fugard and Helen Martins is their "apostasy." Fugard has become a Buddhist, and there is the possibility that his political position has been shaped in recent years by his religious belief. When asked by an interviewer whether he feels he has contributed in any way to the lives of South African women like Patience, his reply was that to have met Patience is to experience *her* contribution to *your* life: "But that's a transformation we must take on, that's part of the Karmic circle that I believe in as a Buddhist. I couldn't give it to Patience. But I can give Patience to you. That's how I look after Patience" (Honnegger 39).

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