Writing a Life in Epistolic Form: Bessie Head's Letters

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Summary

In this article Bessie Head's letters – mainly those published in the two collections, Vigne's *A Gesture of Belonging* (1991) and Cullinan's *Imaginative Trespasser* (2005) along with extracts from her letters quoted in Eilersen's biography of Head, *Thunder Behind Her Ears* (1995) – are used to suggest that in these texts we have a broken or intermittent autobiography. As the quotations illustrate, Head's published letters (almost all dating from her Botswana years) demonstrate certain recurrent patterns: particularly her perceptions of social exclusion and the psychic strategy of *surmounting* these obstacles to make of them her vantage point from which to observe and evaluate the human limitations and possibilities of her time and place – but widely seen, hence the image of living "on an horizon" that she wished to invoke in the autobiography she had intended writing.

Because of Head's relative social isolation in Botswana, the letters afford her the opportunity of constituting a self in epistolic representations – a self that is framed by a collectivity with which she often feels herself to be at odds, but in relation to which she nevertheless needs to place herself and define her role. As the letters recall her experiences they become the opportunities to represent and re-imagine these events; to articulate, re-evaluate and shape her own arduously achieved ideas.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word Bessie Head se gepubliseerde briewe – meestal die wat in die twee versamelings, Vigne se *A Gesture of Belonging* (1991) en Cullinan se *Imaginative Trespasser* (2005), tesame met uittreksels uit haar briewe in Eilersen se biografie van Head, *Thunder behind Her Ears* (1995) – gebruik om te suggereer dat hierdie tekste van Head 'n onderbroke outobiografie is. Soos die aanhalings illustreer, word daar in Head se briewe (feitlik almal uit haar Botswana-jare) sekere herhalende patrone geïllustreer: veral haar waarnemings van sosiale uitsluiting en die psigiese strategie om bo hierdie struikelblokke uit te styg en van hulle haar uitkyktoring te maak vanwaar sy die menslike beperkings en moontlikhede van haar tyd en plek kan bespeur en evalueer – maar *wyd* gesien, daarom haar beeld van 'n lewe *op 'n horison* wat sy in haar beplande (maar ongeskrewe) outobiografie wou gebruik.

Weens Head se relatiewe sosiale isolasie in Botswana gee haar briewe haar die geleentheid om 'n self in epistoliese vorm te konstrueer – 'n self wat geraam word deur 'n kollektiwiteit waarmee sy haarself dikwels haaks bevind, maar in verhouding

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waartoe sy nogtans haar plek moet vind en haar rol moet definieer. Dermate hierdie briewe haar ondervindings in herinnering bring, skep hulle die geleentheid vir Head om hierdie gebeure weer daar te stel en te herverbeel; om haar eie moeisaam gekonstrueerde idees te her-evalueer en te vorm.

We know that from the age of thirteen Bessie Head was aware that she had not been born into the family in which she had been brought up, and that the family into which she had been born had regarded her birth as a source of shame – a fact to be suppressed. The pattern of place-seeking resulting from a perpetually precarious sense of whether and where she could "belong", manifested in her letters throughout her life, shows from early on. From the earliest available examples (written in young adulthood), her letters indicate that Head takes on the role of social commentator and philosophical truth-seeker who strives to transform familial and racial exclusion from a sidelined to a transcendent or superior observer's role – in this, daring to meet exclusion with the intellectual confidence of an artist "living on an horizon"[1] (quoted in Eilersen 1995: 277) and no mere pariah living on the lower edges of society.

Eilersen in her biography of Bessie Head cites from a late letter in which Head explained that she planned to use the expression "Living on an Horizon" (the intended title of the commissioned autobiography she did not live to write) as a tribute to Vivekananda, a Hindu holy man (1995: 279). As an image,[2] the phrase implies a location or perspective characterised by elevation, panoptic breadth of vision and freedom from national, local and probably familial containment of any kind. Yet it suggests an attained freedom rather than a withdrawal resulting from ejection. Perhaps it also implies the role of the lookout who is able to warn about the approach of invaders coming with armies or ideas that would enslave or entrap or put up exclusionary fences. Fascinatingly, in its allusion to a Hindu philosopher, it echoes back to Head's earliest encounters with Hinduism (in Durban, South Africa) as a mentally liberating alternative to the kind of missionary Christianity that she had been taught, which was insidiously contaminated

1. Desiree Lewis has titled her important study of Bessie Head (which has just appeared) *Living on a Horizon* (Lewis: 2007).

2. In a fascinating coincidence of terms, Trinh T. Minh-ha, writing about the "travelling tales" of exiled and diasporic writers, states that "exile and migration", despite their multiple "hazards", "have the potential to widen the horizon of one's imagination and to shift the frontiers of reality and fantasy" (Minh-ha 1994: 10-11). A confirmation of the breadth of Head's achievement occurs in Arun Mukherjee's testimony that Head's "identification with and portrayal of an India that has been marginalized by both the orientalists and the nationalists" is a "major achievement" of *A Question of Power* (Mukherjee 1998: 193).

by racism. (Compare her account of how the news of her biracial origins was conveyed to her (Head 1990: 4).

As a twenty-one-year-old, recently arrived in Cape Town, she writes in her early letters of recognising "a rigid caste system" among "the Coloured people here", where it is among the "carefree unsnobbish" even if "rough" (lowest) group that she feels "happy", while nevertheless craving the company of "intelligent people" where "such shameful matters as the colour of one's skin"[3] can be forgotten (Eilersen 1995: 40). The gestures of social immersion in seeking alignment with ordinary people (on the one hand) and of intellectual transcendence in seeking alignment with those considered mentally and spiritually superior (on the other), a pattern that would become characteristic in much of her later writing, are possibly already apparent here. The early maturity in political and social perception of this passionate, compassionate young woman, who speaks of her mind being "awakened to a world of helpless and enslaved people" (quoted in Eilersen 1995: 38), shows in her implicit self-positioning at this time – that of one able to see and speak clearly, and who is to that extent free of the entrapment which she observes.

In outlining late in her short life how she thought she would be writing her autobiography, Head told the intended publisher (in a letter) that, because of the South African government's racially disdainful attitude to people of mixed-race origin such as herself,[4] access to the records of her mother's life would be discouraged or denied. Moreover, she felt herself "as anxious to avoid any knowledge of my mother's white relatives as they were anxious to destroy my mother and disown me" (quoted in Eilersen 1995: 278). The raw bitterness, deep fury and wounded resentment in these words indicate a part of Head's personal history that she declared untraceable because it remained unendurably humiliating and contaminating, destabilising to the African identity she had forged for herself. Implicit in this statement is also the unknowability of her father, since the surviving white family's refusal to acknowledge her own existence and (what she saw as) its destruction of her

3. On an association between "shame" and "colouredness", see the essay "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" (Wicomb 1998). Zimitri Erasmus in her "Introduction" to a more recent collection makes the point that being "coloured" could also function in South Africa as a social space of "racial superiority" to black South Africans. She writes: "The safety of identifying only as 'black' denies the 'better than black' element of coloured identity formation. It denies complicity. It denies the privileges of being coloured" (Erasmus 2001: 25).

4. Head knew that in South Africa her very conception (because it occurred as a cross-race sexual act) was defined as both sinful and criminal (in terms of the piece of apartheid legislation revealingly called the Immorality Act).

mother for the transgression of racist protocol involved in her own conception, effectively erased him, too, from recordable history.[5]

Kristeva writes that "[w]riting is impossible without some kind of exile" and that exile "is already in itself a form of *dissidence* ... a way of surviving in the face of the *dead father*" (Kristeva 1986: 298; original emphasis). Although Head had no oppressive or protective father figure from whom to break free she was certainly aware of patriarchal forms impinging hurtfully upon her life. More noticeable, though, is her yearning for the benign philosophical and political paterfamilias figure who will unite and heal the oppressed and the shattered darker-skinned citizens of the world, the continent, or the southern African region. Mohandas Gandhi, George Padmore and Robert Sobukwe are revered figures referred to as spiritual guides in letters by Head describing her early adult years (see Eilersen 1995: 34; 45; 47). But these father figures, though inspiring, are unattainable, unavailable. Eilersen speculates that Head's admission of having turned state's evidence in a trial involving her fairly peripheral PAC involvement might have been a factor in the attempt she made to commit suicide while working as journalist in Johannessburg – a fact that she mentions in a letter (Eilersen 1995: 49) written years later to Sobukwe[6] himself concerning her life in Johannesburg around the Sharpeville period. The sense of failure and betrayal would have been intensified by idealisation of Sobukwe as not only a leader and saviour but also a father figure.

Head's idealised male leader figures have been much commented on by several sophisticated critics, often with some degree of condescension, as a romanticising tendency in her thought and writing.[7] I believe this trend needs some countering, in the balancing recognition that Head was wryly self-critical and humorously aware of her fondness for such "towering" figures (quoted in Lewis 2007: 289), whether on the actual political stage or as represented in her fiction (Vigne 1991: 177). Additionally and more importantly, Head never surrendered her own spritual-intellectual odyssey by becoming the disciple or disseminator of any single male leader's or

5. Kenneth Birch, a maternal uncle of Head's (whom she never knew) wrote an article explaining how the fact of Bessie Head's birth affected and was handled by her mother's family at the time (Birch 1995).

6. Years later (in 1978) Head wrote in a letter to Christopher Heywood: "I only loved one man in South Africa, Robert Sobukwe" (Eilersen 1995: 223).

7. The trivialising effect of such a reading of Head is especially evident in Rob Nixon's commentary – he refers to Head's "imaginary romance with Khama" as "the prototype and consummation of her partiality for 'great men'" and refers to "Head's fondness for generating men with whom to fall in love", claiming that "Khama ... becomes the great romantic interest of Head's life while deputizing for an idealized version of her spectral father" (Nixon 1994: 125-127).

thinker's ideas and she praises or depicts them admiringly as a demonstration of her own moral-political thinking. In Head's case, then, the missing rather than dominating and disciplining father figure led to her assumption of the responsibility of playing an intellectually and politically *parenting* role in communicating her thought on social and psychic predicaments. Unfathered, she finds herself thrust into a pathbreaking or explorer's role in the political jungles of her time. Her navigation instrument is her writing and it is from early on discernible that Head in her letters tries out ideas and meditates on experiences and adopts what could be termed a "life-mapping" mode of writing. An essay of Trinh Minh-ha's contains a most apposite description of the life-writing role of the exiled "writers of color": "[N]ot every detail of their individual lives bears recounting in such an 'autobiography', and what they chose to recount no longer belongs to them as individuals. Writing from a representative space that is always politically marked (as 'coloured' or as 'Third World'), they do not so much remember for themselves as they remember in order to tell" (Minh-ha 1994: 10).

Minh-ha's emphasis on "telling" (in the senses both of recounting and revealing) accords with the role that the autobiographical figure[8] of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* would (years later) identify as her own: that of being a "Blabbermouth" (Head 1974: 40-41)[9] who refuses to keep quiet about evils or be tractable towards power figures. The narrated self, while itself constructed in language, needs to be built up to the point where it can assume the role of the teller. Boyce Davies refers to "this process of ordering a life, giving meaning to it, and *rewriting the self"* (Boyce Davies 1991: 287-288; my italics). This comment seems applicable to letters of the kind Head wrote, especially those sent from Botswana.

The two published collections of Head's letters both begin with the articulation of the isolated letter-writer's extreme vulnerability and despair and by making an unashamed but unmistakable appeal for help. The early letter to Patrick Cullinan written from Atteridgeville (a "location" outside Pretoria) describes Head as living "at the edge of despair and terror" because her one hope of leaving the marital unhappiness, squalor and stress of her circumstances at this stage (crammed in, along with her small son, in the overcrowded and undernourished ghetto home of her mother-in-law), by taking up a teaching job in Uganda, has been quashed by the refusal of her passport application – probably (as she surmises) "because I was once a member of the banned PAC" (Cullinan 2005: 11). Here the double psychic onslaught of exclusion ("at the edge") and entrapment (the passport refusal) recurs in what would come to seem a psychic pattern in Head's response to her circumstances. Yet the despairing appeal which the letter makes

8. See "Elizabeth and I Are One" (Mackenzie & Clayton 1989: 25).

9. For "Blabbermouth", compare "blabber mouth" (in Vigne 1991: 116).

(comparable both to her first application for a journalist's job as evoked by Eilersen, and to her early "begging" letter from Cape Town to her former teacher (Eilersen 1995: 37-38), is innately dignified and proclaims conviction of the validity of her ambitions – "to be in a free Africa" – as "an impetus and inspiration to my writing" (Cullinan 2005: 14).

Head's main "stay against confusion" (Frost 1951: 18), her unwavering certainty that she had a writer's gift, was (as is evident in the above citation) from early on linked with her political awareness, which was both philosophically wide and practically astute (as comments in many of her letters show), although she disregarded the conventional practice of divorcing political comment from moral assessment. Lewis Nkosi notoriously complained of what he saw as Head's incapacity for writing about political matters ("[F]or most of the time Bessie Head seems politically ignorant. She has only this moral fluency" (Nkosi 1981: 99)). Yet Head's earliest published letter from Botswana shows her deftly delineating "the community life of Serowe" as she saw it at this time (1964): "On the one hand there is a terribly small educated and financially successful group of African white elite and it's a small tight world of cocktail parties. Then there is the broad mass of the people and a kind of suppressed cry from an equally tight prison – poverty" (Cullinan 2005: 19). In response to the perceptions cited, Head (a refugee and – as it turned out – precariously employed single mother), here in her late twenties, had already come to the conclusion that "all forms of communal living are eventually a kind of prison for the mind and personality" and that, for her part, "I don't have to belong to any prison. I am poor too but my mind is free" (Cullinan 2005: 19, 20). She experienced the ideological-political currents of the time as "overburden[ing]", declaring (to the Cullinans) that she was determined to "write very introspectively and deviously" in order to "fit in" her own "message" – but "between the lines" (Cullinan 2005: 28).

It is in reading Head's letters from Botswana that one becomes aware of the nearly constant pressure of poverty to which she was subjected – while she had to provide not only for herself but for her son (as Howard's father sent money only intermittently and never in large amounts). The only steady income Head received in Botswana was during the initial one and a half years of her life there, before she lost her teaching job. Even then, the R30 monthly salary did not allow her to save to repay the loan Patrick Cullinan had given her to allow her to travel to Botswana (in addition to helping her obtain an exit permit). The living space she shared with Howard was a twelve-feet square room. In addition to the near-constant anxieties about generating an income, Head was of course during her life in Botswana recurrently forced into the humiliating role of having to request loans or extensions of promised repayment dates. Despite the real generosity of so many friends (recorded in her letters), the dependence and the inevitably ignominous role of the beggar was a strain Head attempted to alleviate, in

part, by writing her wonderfully vital and thoughtful letters – and sometimes by including pieces of her creative writing as gifts to sponsors.

One of the early letters from Botswana to "Pat and Wendy" (Cullinan 2005: 23-24) is fascinating for the light Head throws here on the powerful impulses that led to her voluminous correspondence from "the BP" (the Botswana Protectorate, as the territory was then called). Her explanation is complex and nuanced, slipping from the jocular opening claim that she needs an "audience" to show off to, to the need for the sensitive companionship of kindred spirits unavailable in her immediate environment and then to her striving "to work out a system of making myself tolerable to myself" in the extreme loneliness of her life in Botswana: a clear allusion to the self-construction process. What is also striking is that even though a number of related terms and expressions indicating deprivation occur in the letter – such as "weeks and weeks without having a soul to speak to ... about things other than bread and butter matters"; "loneliness"; "I'm ... superfluous"; "isolation"; "solitude"; "silence"; "darkness"; "uncertainty" – and although she twice mentions the Cullinans' sympathetic interest in her as a needed "tonic" to heal and reinvigorate her suffering, stifling spirit, Head turns the enforced isolation into an opportunity for "contemplating" and "rethinking" her own larger purpose *as a writer*. That she sees herself as a person whose introspection must yield communicable ideas that others could benefit from is evident in that Head speaks of coming to terms with a self that she has to "present". Her intention of becoming a truly creative writer shows also in her rejection of writing that serves a political campaign (i.e. "protest" writing) as "the lowest form of writing" – a form which (in her "pain[ful]" but "craving, longing", however "uncertain", for achieving the difficult kind of writing that will plumb the deepest levels of "consciousness") she now has no further interest in producing. Yet, until she can *express* this yearning, she experiences her consciousness as a "heavy burden". It is clear from the preceding that while Head was beginning (in her letters) to fashion a self that would be distinct from that of one playing a required political role, she was also moving towards finding that self's "objective correlative[s]" (Eliot 1951: 144-145) in her fiction.[10] In her writing, she knew, she would be "assert[ing her own] kind of Africanness which is a wide, all-encompassing feeling of great intensity" in contrast with the quality of life and curtailed vision of the alternative she refers to as "a tribal man". No grandstanding is suggested, since the desire arises from "inner pain", "agony" and "uncertainty" that bring her close to "insanity, suicide" – hence her "survival" requires "some good purpose and meaning" to redeem it. But she is suggesting that the "deep self" she has discovered and is articulating in

10. Compare Boyce Davies's expression "*re*writing the self" (Boyce Davies 1991: 228; my italics).

these letters is also pushing her towards creating the best vehicles for writing up this kind of being *for others*.

In a follow-up letter to Wendy Cullinan (Cullinan 2005: 25-27) Head reiterates her sense of having a self-imposed task or sense of duty; one that is linked to her urgent need to escape ("to save myself") from "a burning hatred against injustice".[11] She writes: "[Y]ou have to use this force – push it out in all directions because it is a wealth that can build and build". Her metaphor shows that this lonely young woman's thinking is not only on a grand scale but (as expressed first in her letters) that its enormous, felt energy is intended to function beneficially and to be carefully structured in its articulation. Head from her early years on seeks to outmanoeuvre entrapment of the self by her deprived circumstances (and isolation) into the psychic or artistic role of benefactor – conceived on a grand scale as inclusive of all humanity, even when she is writing to a single correspondent. Nor is there anything merely quaint or touching in the contrast between her gigantic dreams and her meagre circumstances here, as it remained the basic pattern of her life as a writer who contributed so greatly to advances in understanding some of the most intricate puzzles of life in southern Africa and beyond. Her idea (referred to above) that hatred of the oppressor is the most insidious and self-undermining form of entrapment already points to her greatest and most difficult novel, *A Question of Power* (Head 1974).

Head's sense of isolation and exclusion at this time – from locally available friends with whom she might find intellectually and morally compatible companionship, from "Africa", from a passionately committed (male) life partner – finds telling expression in her wry references to her unpublished novelette *The Cardinals* as well as her other early pieces[12] as depicting "a mythical man" with whom she has imaginary, "intense" conversations (Cullinan 2005: 47). Her sexual loneliness and unmet emotional needs are (as she clearly, sanely and half-humorously realises) what lead to the invention of such tender, passionate and strongly moral male figures. During this initial period in Botswana Head was beginning to encounter or sense rejection and mistrust among the black (particularly refugee South African and other expatriate) community who resented her dissent from Marxist and other revolutionary rhetoric. To the Cullinans she explained her

11. Compare Head's 1963 "Letter from South Africa": "Every white face that you see passing by churns you up till you could just cry to be delivered from this unceasing torment of hate, hate, hate", where what follows the cited passage makes clear that it is hat*ing* at least as much as (or perhaps more than) *being* hated that Head evokes here as damaging to the psyche.

12. In the letter to Cullinan Head mentions "the 'Green Tree' ... 'Africa' and the 'Beautiful Birds Dancing in the Sun-Wind' and 'Earth and Everything'" – most of these posthumously published in *The Cardinals with Meditations and Short Stories* (Head 1993).

position as resulting from the realisation that "[w]e who seemed to be justified in carrying this burden of hate are going to be destroyed with those we hate"; adding: "The extreme height of extremism is suffocating and dazzles with power" (Cullinan 2005: 58). Cullinan mentions that in describing a "friendship" hampered by Head's being considered "[not] black enough for the cause of African nationalism" and by her failing to "hate my fellow men", Head is alluding to the African American "Jane Kerina, 'The Woman from America'" (Cullinan 2005: 58-59). I would add that from the description of her attitude to Head cited above, this woman might well have provided the seed from which Head constructed the figure of Medusa in *A Question of Power* (Head 1974).

After one and a half years in teaching, Head lost her first job in Botswana under circumstances involving conditions that would nowadays be termed both "constructive dismissal" and "sexual harassment" – although our contemporary labour law recourses were not available to her at this time. Her comment was: "[T]his man and all these other men they don't value women. They don't even see you as a real woman". Despite what she saw as deep disrespect towards herself and her beleaguered sense of "excruciating loneliness", Head's sense of the inner resources on which she would draw to write her fiction is expressed in almost the same breath (in this letter): "Here where so little or nothing was given me ... I have some priceless treasure now – a deep inner assurance and assertiveness; an insistent, very sure feeling that I'm alive ... in a thoroughly hostile environment" (Cullinan 2005: 87).

It is around this time that Head begins her correspondence with Randolph Vigne, whom she had known with affectionate respect in Cape Town as a member of the outspoken South African politically oppositional or "radical" circle (to which the Cullinans also belonged). Vigne now lived in Britain. In her very first letter to him, Head states, baldly and bleakly: "They don't want me here" (Vigne 1991: 9). Yet a resilience is also evident; two months later Head reports to Cullinan on her "God-awful position", only to follow up with "My God, if I survive this I'M GOING TO IMPRESS MYSELF ON THE UNIVERSE" (Cullinan 2005: 102-103; Head's capitals). Even when a publisher soon afterwards pronounces her "an undisciplined introvert who confuses a reader", she reports: "I said to myself, 'B. Head, recover thy equilibrium. The world is full of lots of things, besides publishers'"; for the sake of her writing (as she says in the next letter) she can face "battling this writing game out alone until [she] can win through" (Cullinan 2005: 106, 107).

As if in a relentless process of persecution, the next blow falls: Head loses the job at a development project on which she has since been keeping her small family (consisting of herself and her son Howard) afloat and she suddenly finds herself both jobless and homeless. Subsequent employment as typist for a road construction company brings her a small income, but

even at this time she writes to Vigne how "there is nothing more humiliating in the world" than having to borrow money. In the same letter she reiterates her sense of being a resented outsider among the "Botswana people" and tells him that she is "frightened" by the sense that she is despised for being "some kind of half-caste" (Vigne 1991: 37). In the very next letter she reports having been fired from the typing job, too, under what she refers to as "very sordid" circumstances: she refused the sexual advances of "unscrupulous men who think women are cheap" (Vigne 1991: 38). She goes to the refugee centre in Francistown, remaining "determined to survive. Because of Howard" (Vigne 1991: 45). From now on an officially stateless person, Head could for the next thirteen years get an income (above the tiny refugee dole) only from self-employment – part of the impetus that went into the writing of *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Head [1968]1987), her first published and financially most successful novel.

Although her short stories and novels are the vehicles for Head's creative writing and are carefully and beautifully structured wholes, her early letters in particular contain many resonant phrases and statements that throw light on her creative thinking process or are memorably expressed insights. Some of these are her recognition of a need for "listening with the inside of yourself" (Cullinan 2005: 52); that "our bodies are the earth and linked fast to it" (Cullinan 2005: 74); "I deeply accept everything about myself" (Cullinan 2005: 82) and again: "It's right to keep watch with the inner side of oneself" (Cullinan 2005: 88). One can see how such ideas, imaginative conceptions and feelings fed into her first long work of fiction and contain the seeds of later works. A darker note of perceived ethnic contempt from Botswana citizens as well as the refugee community begins to manifest itself, however, most frequently and openly expressed in letters to Vigne. What hurts Head most is when she sees such attitudes affecting her son: "[H]e is abhorred and detested for looking different", she confides in Vigne (1991: 54). In contrast with such exclusionary practices she declares that she wants to "assert black in the right way" (Vigne 1991: 59). This thought is linked in the same letter (to Vigne) with the idea that development at the level of "machinery, agriculture, progress [goes] hand in hand with spiritual knowledge".

Head acknowledges that "some of [her] writing has nasty things to say about Africa ... especially the [terrible] disregard and degradation of women" (Vigne 1991: 18) and the "tribal ... repressed" aspects of life in Botswana (Vigne 1991: 27). She describes herself in a 1966 letter as "such an isolated goddamn outsider trying to be an African of Africa ... grop[ing] ... at some goddam unfathomable life I'm not really a part of" and adds: "But one does not know where one belongs". At the same time she feels (writing in the same letter) that all around her there is "this awakening and movement towards a new destiny" and that she could "catch hold of the vitality, the newness ... so that I may grow too" (Vigne 1991: 24-25). Evidently, reconceiving Africanness and articulating and communicating

such newness in her writing is where Head feels she will (as she did) make a non-restrictive African space for herself and others. Yet during this period she also writes of feeling "harassed and worried"; "ill and frightened" (Vigne 1991: 29; 31). She thinks that the persecution she perceives springs from a "terrible ... insecurity" among "black people" and that this manifests in "shockingly destructive" ways; even though "perhaps not meaning to be", and that this complex is the source of "the pleasure" experienced in wielding "power over other people" (Vigne 1991: 30). She feels herself an easy target: "[M]any people told me I was not black enough" (Vigne 1991: 64). Someone (it seems, a PAC member in the refugee camp) "wanted to stuff some idiotic literature and attitudes down my throat", she writes, "apart from trying to force me by the hair to sleep with him", denouncing Head when she refuses these various "advances" (she writes) as "a PAC adventurer and useless person in the struggle" (Vigne 1991: 45). Head could never bear ideological confinement, declaring: "There are really wicked people on this earth. BUT THEY ARE NOT IN CAMPS" (Vigne 1991: 54; Head's capitals).

Head's complex racial positioning develops under the pressures to which she is subjected; she writes in a letter: "Some people can hog the black skin for themselves but I have to opt for mankind as a whole", even adding: "a combination such as I of two nations finally establishes the human race". But this jaunty claim shifts to Head's recalling what was evidently one of the most agonising experiences of ethnic exclusivity of her life, because it involved her little boy: he was, she wrote, "assaulted by children twice his age" for being "an usurper into the race of Motswana [he spoke the language fluently unlike Head], or some filthy specimen" (Vigne 1991: 64). This experience propelled Head's return to Serowe, as she withdrew Howard from the school in Francistown as a result of the incident. The same letter shows her considering going back to her own white mother to claim her as a figure, not of contamination and shame, but of profound heroism and advanced humanity, earned in suffering:

> There is something in me that is my own way and very precious. My mother made it that way for me. Because of the way she died ... locked ... up in a mental asylum for sleeping with a black man .... There is a terrible depth of loneliness in supposed or even evident insanity .... A birth such as I had links me to her in a very deep way and makes her *belong* to that unending wail of the human heart .... Why? Why? How do I know if she loved my father? She must have been as mad and impulsive as I .... I still say that she *belongs* to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she has done. She left me to figure it out. I feel more for her than for my father because she died a terrible death, in a loony bin while he is most probably still alive somewhere.
>
> (Vigne 1991: 65; my italics)

Especially significant (and poignant) in the above quoted passage is Head's use (twice, differently) of the key term "belong", while the roots of many trends in her thinking and writing are laid bare here.

Earlier Head (in her correspondence) articulates her commitment to the kind of social and cultural context in which she now finds herself, as follows: "I like the way I am just a nonentity ... the silence .... And I just like the Botswanas, not the big shots, but all the people who walk around with no shoes."[13] She says: "The best and most enduring love is that of rejection" (Vigne 1991: 58) – whether she means (by this) loving despite rejection, or by having overcome an attitude of rejection of others in herself. Yet the recurrent pain of exclusion resurfaces periodically – "I look like a Bushman, who is a despised tribe here", she writes, and even: "[M]y mind is distracted with intense dislike for the people of this country. I am beginning to really loathe them" (Vigne 1991: 71, 83). She quotes sarcastically the description of herself in a London magazine as "the ebullient *Botswanan*", adding: "If only they knew. Here I am Bessie Head, the Bushman dog" (Vigne 1991: 85-86; my italics) Sentiments of this raw, hurt kind in the letters complement Head's images of Botswana in her fiction. Rather than settling down, her awareness of the complexities of her racial "place" and "identity" intensifies in Botswana. Two dreams recounted in a letter to Randolph Vigne are obviously recognised by Head as very suggestive of this awareness of her "racial displacement". First she has a dream of some white people "sitting about" in a "bright and sunlit courtyard" (indicative of leisured ease and privilege?) while she the dreamer is "distressed" by the constant "crying, in a terrible voice" of some unknown other person; when she asks one of those sitting who the crying person is, she is rejected with a gesture of dislike, and wakes "in a sweat of terror". It is hard to escape the idea that Head is the person crying so terribly; she writes that this is the more "disturbing" of the two racially coded dreams evoked in the letter. Might it reflect her sense of her mother's and her own ostracism from her maternal family and (more generally) the psychic damage of apartheid racism?

Head's second dream (at this time) shows "a group of black people having a discussion" in which they refer to her as having "[blown] up for nothing [this time]" – a seeming allusion to Head's first public nervous collapse in Botswana, later to be described in the first part of *A Question of Power* – and implicitly acknowledging "that they have caused me trouble" previously, while the dream ends with the group's casual decision to "throw her out of the window", so that she again wakes from the dream "in a sweat of terror". Head explicates the second dream by telling Vigne of horrible

13. Although the final phrase obviously echoes in the final section of Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), I would suggest that it resonates particularly with her short stories in *The Collector of Treasures* (1977a), her collection appositely subtitled "And Other Botswana Village Tales".

rumours that are being (she writes) spread about her – of her supposedly having had a secret affair with a man who "protested" about being "forced into marriage" (evidently, with another, probably local, woman), containing the gruesome detail of a claim that she had supposedly had a baby which she had discarded "down a pit toilet" (Vigne 1991: 86-88). The beginnings of Elizabeth's trauma (in *A Question of Power*) are discernible in Head's conveying her fear here that "maybe God is just as evil and malicious as these people and long planned my destruction" (Vigne 1991: 86).

Head beautifully evokes the central importance in her life of her relationship with her son Howard, writing: "There are only the two of us. We are travelling companions" and depicts him as "some kind of fierce soul", heroically ready to fight "in the front line of the battlefield" (Eilersen 1995: 133; cf. Vigne 1991: 108). His presence as a kindred spirit and champion is all the more important since she continues to feel persecuted "for the crime of my complexion" by the dream figure of a black woman and by a dream refrain: "'If you are not of my complexion, you ought to die'". She reiterates: "Everything went wrong from the time Howard was assaulted", mentioning that her "recovery" seems unattainable in the face of the recurrent "nightmare" and that "nothing seems to wash away the horror of this racial bussiness" (Vigne 1991: 108, 109, 112). In a letter Eilersen cites, Head describes the "[assault]" on Howard, "on the grounds of his looking like a Masarwa or Bushman", as the incident consolidating for her what she has learnt about "the oppression of the Masarwa or Bushmen people" in Botswana from an "English Agricultural officer named George Macpherson" and two local Basarwa "named Leshelwa and Tshebe" – to all four of whom she was to dedicate *Maru,* which she was now writing (Eilersen 1995: 112-113).

Head's respect (one might say love) for what she sees as an inclusive yet distinctively African spirituality is illustrated in many of her letters, despite her horrified discovery in Botswana of what seems to her to be a specifically African type of *ex*clusivity (discussed above). Eilersen suggests the connections between three sources: a mid-1969 letter to Vigne in which Head articulates the thought of "want[ing] God in mankind instead of up in the sky" (Vigne 1991: 91); her appreciative review of John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969) – in which, Head writes, "creeds are seen as written in the heart of the individual" (Head 1990: 53) – and her own short story which she wrote at this time, called "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest" (Head 1977b: 19-36), which contrasts the two male African figures of the gentle Jacob and the ruthless Lebojang (as well as juxtaposing the much put upon but dignified Johannah with other, harsher women). In a later letter in which she writes how much more

vulnerable[14] she was to rejection by fellow Africans in Botswana than to white South African racism, Head modulates her meditation towards the idea that "one's greatest loves are [not] to be found firstly in a family circle and certainly not in colour compartments". Not only would Head continue to refuse to endorse racial compartments despite feeling compartmentalised by some of the people among whom she lived, but she was learning to "[balance]" such "things out in [her] mind" (Vigne 1991: 122). Even though she writes to Vigne in September 1970 that "[t]he ship's rocking badly again this side" when she is (as she puts it) "thrown off the garden project after working on it for 9 months", reduced to the state of "the trapped rat in a sinking ship ... so enraged [that] it just snaps at everything" (Vigne 1991: 128), she could in her next letter (written only three days later) produce her fascinatingly nuanced and compassionate interpretation of the deeper-lying sources and significance of the Xhosa cattle-killing of the nineteenth century. Head warns that those proclaiming visions must not be persons who stand to gain any power; she states that "a whole nation will fall for a vision, under stress" (Vigne 1991: 128-130). Even at the time when the more devastating collapse of her two public emotional breakdowns is pending, Head writes (in this letter) with the kind of sanity that would save Elizabeth at the end of *A Question of Power* that "[t]he mistake is to pray to the invisible", saying: "I never have. I have prayed to living things I can see". In her view, the notion of "divinity" as "an untouchable holiness" has no existence and is not to be trusted. The "long nightmare of darkness" in which her horror of evil overwhelms her is about to intensify, however.

Head makes important comments (in two letters[15] replying to Charles Sarvan) on her second and third novels as reflections of, as well as creative responses to, her harrowing suffering of what she perceives as racial and psychosexual persecution in Botswana. She does not make light of white (Afrikaner) racism to which she has been exposed in South Africa, but indicates that she is not as vulnerable to it as to perceived "racial" rejection by Africans in Botswana or to horrifically exaggerated dream figures persecuting her when she writes: "The Boers can say 'kaffir' and 'dog' to you, but only in an ordinary way. They haven't the power to jump into your dreams at night and shout". In the same letter, written retrospectively in 1980, she also indicates the interconnectedness of *Maru* (1972) and of *A Question of Power* (1974) by saying (of what led to the writing of the earlier text):

14. Poignantly expressed in the letter as "It is different if a racial feeling is created by people and I mean African, who are also human to you" (Vigne 1991: 121).

15. Published (a decade after they were sent) in *Wasafiri*, in a short article by Sarvan.

> I felt that what was getting at me was a world of power. It was getting at me in a hidden way, in a very violent way. I was being hit and hit in the way I describe in *A Question of Power*. In my own way I acknowledged that world of power. I made Maru a personality of power and then quietly stepped behind him and manipulated him. I was trying to reply to those obscene shouts with dignity .... The stylised beauty of *Maru* was one struggling to retain human dignity against those shouts. The passive, still girl [Margaret] was my own eyes watching the hideous nightmares which were afflicting me and all the girl's personality opposes the shouts of dog, filth, dog filth, you are a coloured dog. "No", she says. "I'm a Masarwa. I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa."
>
> (Head in Sarvan 1990: 14)

The (to Head, devastating) combined effects of entrapment and exclusion recur in her account of the circumstances surrounding and reflected in *A Question of Power* when she writes (in the same letter to Sarvan):

> Corresponding to [the] U.N. restricting me to continue living in Botswana, that background nightmare world I had lived with since my very arrival in the country began to upheave. From August 1968 until I broke down in 1970 a hideous background nightmare shout was directed at me from the hidden "presences" I tried to identify in *A Question of Power*. The shouts were of three kinds:
>
> * "We don't want you here. This is my land. These are my people. You keep no secrets."
>
> * "You are a dog. You are filth. You are a coloured dog."
>
> *The other shout became an obscene roar: "When I go I go for one hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina."
>
> ... I assumed the country had things like that in it, strange sorts of demons who howl abuse in the night. I couldn't get any help so I decided to do the best I could.
>
> (Head in Sarvan 1990: 14)

Comments by Minh-ha (from an article also cited earlier) on the general experience of exile throw light on Head's particular "process of [literal] rehabilitation" and (in Minh-ha's words) of "learn[ing] to adjust to [her] sudden state of isolation and uprootedness". Minh-ha states wryly that "refugees are unwanted persons whose story has been an embarrassment for everyone", since "[h]owever they are relocated, they are a burden on the community". In her marvellously astute way Minh-ha also writes as if she had Head's encounters, in the writer's fluctuating commitment to Botswana society alternating with horror and hatred of it, in mind when evoking "[g]reat generosity and extreme gratitude within sharp hostility; profound disturbance for both newcomers and old-timers: the experience of exile is never simply binary", for, Minh-ha writes: "If it's hard to be a stranger, it is even more so to stop being one" (Minh-ha 1994: 12-13).

A letter from Head to Vigne dated June 29, 1971 starts starkly: "I've just got home. I was locked up in a loony bin for nearly 3 months. Howard is alright". The expressions "I got locked up" and "Howard is alright" both recur (significantly) in this brief letter as the compass points of her life at this stage, and the letter ends on the poignant words "I am not sure what to do" (Vigne 1991: 142). Head seems to have suffered from extreme shame at having made unjust accusations against people during the period leading up to her breakdown. Eilersen cites a letter in which Head acknowledges painfully: "The most important thing is that society did not treat me badly, especially since I came back from hospital. The trouble was where my mind was travelling. It was horrible territory full of evil images" (Head in Eilersen 1995: 139).

Head's letters to Vigne during the slow process of her coming to terms with her breakdown and its causes fill one with deep respect for their painful candour and for Head's moral and intellectual courage, occasional humour, sense of her personal responsibility and sense of perspective. Brief excerpts from these letters may give some sense of this process of "spiritual accounting": "I threw myself on the ground and said: 'God, help me.' Then I made an error. In the same breath I said: 'Which God?'" In her own analysis, "[t]hat question ... unhinged my mind which was already over-burdened with suffering". Emerging from the asylum and the worst depths of horror, Head states hauntingly: "I am lost in a sorrow too deep for words", and she ends her letter by declaring: "There is only one nobility left in me. I am not afraid to die" (Vigne 1991: 143-144). Replying to Vigne's letters a month later, she begins by reassuring him: "I'm not as mad and depressed as the last letter I wrote to you". Yet she remains painfully troubled: "It is what I said that so sickens me". She explains what could be termed the surreal and shattering aspect of a breakdown by saying that a "deep horror" such as she experienced can "sever memories", emphasising that she's lost trust: "[N]ow I question love and am deeply afraid of it because its other face is evil" (Vigne 1991: 145) – an insight she would embody in the swaggering figure of Dan in *A Question of Power*.

Of the many "impossible situations" she has "survived", Head writes, "maybe this is the worst, but I should see my way out of it too". The two reasons for this not very certain-seeming hope of recovery are firstly her love for and responsibility towards her son ("because of Howard") and secondly her sense of achieved spiritual knowledge ("because I have learned so much") in what she again terms "the nightmare" that dominated her life "for more than three years" (Vigne 1991: 146). In a later letter Head tells Vigne of the cost of what she now conceives of as a humanising process: "In the end I really am a human being but the process of becoming so has worn me out and turned my hair stark grey" (Vigne 1991: 153). (She was only 34 at this time.) At this time Head begins to register the destabilising after-effects of her breakdown – the to her clearly excruciating and totally unexpected experience of people treating her with condescension because

they thought her mentally unstable or insane – "That's only I'm mad; etc. I was caught off balance. Everything I had thought and felt lost its validity" (Vigne 1991: 157). In asking Vigne whether she could (as she did) dedicate *A Question of Power* to him, Head insists on its qualities of "freedom of thought and mental stability" (qualities she feels Vigne inspired) as if to counter the denigratory interpretations of her third novel that she must have partly foreseen (in view of its subject matter). As the whole of that novel implicitly does, Head claims that despite its seeming to be primarily the account of mental and emotional breakdown, its greatest significance is the spiritual knowledge it builds up in facing (up to) the worst and most frightening aspects of life, *re*constructing the soul that is so dreadfully harrowed – hence her only initially surprising, confident reference to the novel as "very Wordsworthian – development of the Soul, sort of thing" (Vigne 1991: 158). If written by an "invalid", Head declares in her next letter, *A Question of Power* was "all the same" written by "a vividly alive invalid", one "trapped by arguments" of a metaphysical kind. A key remark is her comment that in this novel "I am anxious to re-capture a state so low and to pin point it basically as a great achievement" (Vigne 1991: 159, 160). In her fascinating comments (in the letters of this period) on both *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, Head emphasises her sense of these works as documentations of achieved spiritual insight functioning at the highest intellectual level as (what might be termed) maps of human dignity and danger (Vigne 1991: 147-165). Clearly, though, in writing *about* her texts to friends she believed would understand, Head writes in a way that is more explicit and explanatory than the mysterious suggestiveness of her fiction.[16] Trinh Minh-ha refers appositely to "this poetry of marginalized people ... remarkable in its strange beauty and fabulous irregularity" (Minh-ha 1994: 17).

By October 1972, when she has "started rewriting" *A Question of Power* "with Richard Lister ... to tidy it up", Head's writing activities, plans and prospects indicate a regained sense of balance and control in her life; an astonishing resilience. She informs Vigne in the same letter that she has "agreed with Giles [Gordon] to do a profile ... on village life in Serowe" (clearly the text that would become *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (Head 1981) and announces: "I wanted to try a biography on a certain chief named**,** Khama the Great". Interestingly, Head's comments in this letter show the

16. I would hence disagree with Eilersen (on this point) in her remark that "[t]he novel-writing process had given [Head] a certain breathing space but from now on the most effective way for her to order her thoughts was to lie in her letter-writing" (Eilersen 1995: 150). Eilersen elsewhere cites a letter in which Head actually announces: "I cannot afford to write any more of those tear-drenched letters until I see how I make out as a human being", and reports that at this time her correspondence with several of her most regular correspondents tapers (or actually breaks) off (Eilersen 1995: 154).

organic connectedness and what might be termed developmental nature of her thought, experience and writing, for what she says about the intended Khama book is that she sees the challenge of now depicting a personality "fluid, flexible" like her other "hero" figures, yet "unbending" in having to function "within a power structure, [and having] to use power for one's own ends and others'" (Vigne 1991: 170-171). Almost two years later (and still ten years before the publication of her Khama novel), Head was to make comments (in a letter to Pat Cullinan) explicitly connecting her understanding of Khama III with her own experiences:

> In Khama's case I saw only too clearly that period of learning when everything is against one – he learnt so that he could change the world, in his area. I was forced to interpret it in spiritual terms: "Yes, I have travelled that road too and I know it. The ruthless opposition helps one to define what right and goodness ought to be".
>
> (Cullinan 2005: 156)[17]

She adds, at this point: "I am far, far away from starting the Khama book. The more I look at it, the more it retreats in difficulty" (Cullinan 2005: 156). Head's scrupulousness in doing the oral history research for both the Serowe and Khama texts, and the many, many months of library research and correspondence with established researchers in which she engaged before she completed these texts testify to her respect for local, African realities and knowledge bases as much as to her own intellectual capacities and academic thoroughness, even though her formal education had ended at what would at present be termed Grade Ten (see e.g. Cullinan 2005: 200-201, 203-204, 214). Head never underestimated the difficulty of writing her great historical novel and indeed sometimes doubted her ability to compose this text (see Cullinan 2005: 213).

Towards the end of 1973 Head again strikes a somewhat despairing and bitter note in a letter to Vigne:

> As time goes on one begins to get a fatal sense that one does not understand African politics and that the whole process of liberation is very destructive, not to whites, they always have money and careers, but to blacks. They asked the young man Tom [Holzinger, a dear friend of Head's], of my *Power* book, to leave the country in 14 days' time. No one understands that sinister gesture. It is just something in the air and he wasn't so dramatic as a revolutionary. Most of those letters – leave the country in 14 days – have been sent to South African refugees and few had anywhere to go except back

17. After intimating (in a 1975 letter) that on moving to Botswana from apartheid's persecution of blacks she had been dismayed not to feel welcome, Head states: "You still have to make an Africa for everyone". She adds: "Khama is not so far from my preoccupations. Khama showed *how* it was done – how you plan for the unknown" (Cullinan 2005: 219; Head's italics).

> to South Africa. In that context, as a refugee I must identify with the people who have been deported and realise that there is no place for me.
>
> (Vigne 1991: 181)

Again one sees here Head's "twin" fears of entrapment (reconfinement to apartheid South Africa) and ejection (from Botswana) and one is reminded that her emotional vulnerability had everything to do with the actual insecurity of her position. No wonder, then, that earlier in the same letter Head specifically mentions Khama's "compassion towards refugees" and her evident sense of him as a kindred spirit: "Khama has the drama of a man who goes against the grain". What additionally fascinates her about him is "the question of natural genius or intelligence, *without book learning*" (Vigne 1991: 180; Head's italics).

On concluding *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* Head writes (more cheerfully) in 1974 of her "damn beautiful" book that "'[a]fter work like that, with so much humour, value and information, this is my home, and only death will take me out of it'" (Vigne 1991: 185). In the period that follows, the cause of her recurrent sense of insecurity and persecution is the meagreness and uncertainty of her (never very large) income, delays in publication and problems with agents and editors as well as the complexities of her taxation situation. Head writes of these woes (in her letters) as a type of psychodrama and tends over this last period of her life to villainise and ostracise several of her closest associates and dearest friends with little sense (it seems) of how unjust and profoundly hurtful they feel her rejection to be. Worn down by the unremitting vulnerability of her own position, which never seems to stabilise for long, she begins unjustly to misinterpret their goodwill and to forget *their* vulnerability. Some of Head's outbursts do of course seem justified *considering her circumstances*: that she should eventually (after initially welcoming all and sundry and giving copiously of her time and thought in interviews) turn against academic researchers on her work (especially those from South African universities, mostly white), whom she saw as profiting academically and even financially from her while she who was so poor was "rewarded" only with the odd meal, is hardly surprising. One cannot but term malicious Susan Gardner's ascription to Head (reported in the invaluable Eilersen biography)[18] of "a 'progressive' brain disease", though oddly Eilersen (almost immediately after defending Head from Gardner's slur) speaks of Head showing "[clear] traits of mental instability" (Eilersen 1995: 256).

Letters written to Vigne during 1974 and 1975 and in 1976 contain the following poignant expressions: "I'll never have the money"; "Everything is so uncertain"; "the terribly precarious income I have"; "I've had a bad financial time"; "business arrangements constantly fall through"; "Giles

18. A second edition of Eilersen's biography of Head (Eilersen 1995) has now been published.

Gordon wrote to Pat Cullinan implying that I'd suddenly gone insane"; "I have no resources at all to live on and I am at the end of my tether" (Vigne 1991: 186, 187, 188, 189, 189, 196, 202). Eilersen cites from a 1974 letter by Head: "I know how endless loneliness is difficult to cope with" (Eilersen 1995: 193). That such loneliness stemmed in part from Head's being (as she was to write of Khama in a later letter) "very tricky material indeed" (Eilersen 1995: 261) does not make it any less poignant to imagine nor less painful to endure. Especially isolating in effect must have been her anxiety that she now had a bad reputation for insanity – forms of this word occur four times in a single paragraph of a 1975 letter (Cullinan 2005: 175-176). The thought of such a reputation was moreover terrifying as it would deleteriously affect publishers' sense of the marketability of her writing (see Cullinan 2005: 193-194). From the letters (e.g. Cullinan 2005: 228, 237) it emerges that despite having the Serowe book as well as her short story collection *The Collector of Treasures* (Head: 1977) in press, Head received virtually no income from her writings during most of 1975 (Cullinan 2005: 241). That she perforce built up large debts with local shopkeepers would not have helped her reputation in Serowe. That Head's later violent distrust of and backbiting comments on people like Cullinan, who had done so much to help her, are ugly and profoundly unfair is as evident as are her own desperation and anxiety around this time. Nevertheless Head had not isolated herself from paying attention to broader political developments; with the coming of Namibian independence she refers to her "many friends in Swapo" as being as anxious as she declares herself to be that "statehood" for this territory should not be "dominated" by what she calls "three of my chief horrors: totalitarianism, tribalism and Marxism-Leninism" (Vigne 1991: 210).

The invitation (in 1977) to spend the last three months of the year as one of the guests of the famous Iowa University international Writing Programme brought Head immensely welcome and well-timed financial and emotional relief and a wonderful opportunity for doing research (in their superb library) for her Khama novel. It confirmed her status as an internationally recognised writer and was to be followed by many other invitations to literary conferences and colloquia. But a terrible blow to her self-esteem and sense of security came in the form of the refusal (from the Botswana government) of her application for citizenship of Botswana, which she had for years thought of as her own country by adoption. That this rejection came when she was representing Botswana at an international writers' gathering only added further gall to this bitter blow, as if it were a carefully calculated gesture of humiliation and mockery. She writes to Vigne about this setback (at the end of 1977), as follows:

> I'd tried to get some security for Howard. So, there's not much to go home to. I have been a tremendous asset to Botswana as a lot of people working on international aid programmes used my books for their work in the country.

> So I'd rather go straight through and see what I do next. So one is depressed, you see.
>
> (Vigne 1991: 216)

A few years later Head (in a 1979 letter) refers to this refusal in terms that reveal how it reawakened all her deepest anxieties and buried hurts: "That rejection of my application for citizenship was one of the gestures of evil that was done to me. Whereas I have only offered constructive work and help, to these people ... they still think they can treat me as the coloured dog. I am coloured indeed but the life of the soul is deeper than one's appearance" (Eilersen 2005: 226).

(Head was, of course, eventually offered – and accepted – Botswanan citizenship in 1979 (see Vigne 1991: 220).

Head writes of the "historical short stories" that she produced in the late seventies that they came out of the formidably wide sweep of research she had to do for her Khama novel in order to make herself "thoroughly familiar with the history of Southern Africa". This work was immensely valuable as a contribution to the countering of colonialist historians' erasure of much of African agency and corrected such writers' inability to recognise (as Head did) the profoundly civilised practices of particular (southern) African societies – which she contrasted with those of the trekking Boers, the Matabele and the Rhodes-led British colonial forces in their invasive and brutal activities.[19] Besides the value of the historical facts she recorded, Head's philosophical perspective noted a pattern of social conduct and non-aggressive political strategy that she (in a letter) termed "abandon[ing] evil" and "giv[ing] way [in order to] find a new world" – a discovery of a strategy that she terms (in a wonderful expression) the very point of her own entire "soul history" (Eilersen 1995: 202). Head's deep soul-searching combined with her position as a creative writer widely knowledgeable about but existing on the social edge of the society she lived in brought her the capacity for prophetic or visionary insight expressed in such comments as the following, testifying to her attained position on an intellectual and spiritual "horizon": "I think it is bound to be as bewildering, Southern Africa, as bewildering as its past .... I fear that the countries that have suffered after independence and are going to suffer, have been the ones where people lived in fear" (Vigne 1991: 218-219).

Returning from the Writers' School to her home in Serowe at the beginning of 1978, Head commits herself to her Khama book – "The only work these hands will do is ... pounding at the key-boards", she writes in a letter at this time (Eilersen 1995: 217).

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19. In one of my own articles I compared Head's representations of power abuse (and her depictions by contrast of worthy leadership) as depicted in *Maru* and in *A Bewitched Crossroad* (Gagiano 2000).

Even while Head was devoting all her intellectual and creative efforts to shaping a coherent and accurate representation of Botswana's past, she remained bitterly aware of her own and others' excluded position. In March 1978 she writes in a letter that "[t]he refugee situation is such a mess here because it is only black people who are refugees ... a white refugee stuck here [... is] an unheard of thing" (Eilersen 2005: 218). An ominous note is struck when Head, in the aftermath of the "upset[ting]" thought of the "sheer solitude" of the suicide of an expatriate woman doctor she has admired, writes to her friend Betty Fradkin that her weight gain is due to her "passion for beer" and that she is "liv[ing] on very little food" (Eilersen 2005: 220). While she "talked to various historians in Gaberone" (Lewis 2007: 296) during the research year she spent there, Head spent most of her time "re-reading research data and then *painfully* deciding how to arrange it in novel form" (Eilersen 2005: 236, emphasis added). The italicised word (above) indicates not only how painstakingly scrupulous Head was in preparing and composing *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984), but how much the effort and care taken strained her.

Eilersen cites appositely from letters Head wrote at the end of the seventies and during the early eighties to throw light on the vexed question of her resisting the label of feminism for her writing. Here Head comments brusquely on her approval of what was still (in 1979) known as "women's lib", while insisting (in a 1981 comment) that she should not be called a feminist as she does "not view women in isolation from men". Nevertheless in 1982 she acknowledges that her short stories in *The Collector of Treasures* illustrate a "sex war" in which "the women suffer" because of male conduct (Eilersen 2005: 237, 238, 239).

In a number of Head's late letters (not forgetting that she was only in her mid- to late-forties at this time) she returns in a way to South African figures, issues and relationships. She reads Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* and calls it "an astonishing book" while recording her "astonish-[ment]" at the fact "that a people so rich in spirit, and [that] Plaatje represents black people totally, could be so overwhelmingly overcome by evil" (Eilersen 2005: 241). Of a later black South African leader she writes "that South Africa had Steve Biko" to guide it towards liberation and she expresses the confident hope that "there'd be another Steve Biko soon" (Eilersen 2005: 251).[20] Nevertheless she continues to claim the "horizon" position for herself; she writes: "I was a story teller before I was an African"

20. Head expressed contempt for what she saw as the suspect and evidently (in her mind) unscrupulously exploitative motives of writing directly "anti-apartheid" works. As she saw and put it (in a 1983 letter): "The biggest thing you can sell and shit on is the suffering of black people in South Africa – that's why early on I would have NOTHING to do with it. I saw it and how cheap the people were and are and I would have NOTHING to do with it" (Eilersen 2005: 268; Head's capitals).

and that "even if I had been born midnight black, green or blue I'd still dominate and be above an environment" (Eilersen 2005: 252). She writes that in her Khama novel she was attempting "to pull together the whole southern African experience at that time ... mainly concentrating on the land question" (Eilersen 2005: 260).

In 1983 Head unexpectedly received a letter from her foster mother's granddaughter, Veronica Samuel; the younger woman with whom she had been brought up. Samuel wrote to Head about Pietermaritzburg where they had grown up and she replies by writing: "Your letters begin to make that [then] small town not so meaningless now" (Eilersen 2005: 258). Another "South African connection" came in the form of a visit from Ellen Kuzwayo, who asked to interview Head and requested her to write the Foreword to her own autobiography *Call Me Woman* (Kuzwayo 1985) – an honour for Head and a sign of the respect she had earned for her interpretations of southern African societies, despite her recusance from particular political ideologies.[21]

Intending to get started on writing her autobiography, Head brought herself in mid-1985 to write a letter to the welfare society in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, requesting not only information about her mother's background and her own birth, but asking specifically for the letter in which her mother had specified that money should be set aside for her daughter's education. She writes with poignant dignity that her mother's letter "would be of great sentimental value" to her: "I have done much with her stipulation". According to Eilersen, the welfare body never replied to Head's letter (Eilersen 2005: 285-286). Soon after, Head turned 48 and wrote that "there was no one in sight to tell that it was my birthday" and that "life gets lonelier as one gets older" (Eilersen 2005: 286). At the end of 1985 Head received a handsome sum as the advance for the intended autobiography; Eilersen mentions how meticulously she had arranged her enormous corpus of letters (presumably in preparation for the task). However, in April 1986 Head died in Serowe of alcohol-induced hepatitis.

In her first longer work of fiction, *The Cardinals* (Head 1993), the central female figure is taught to write and read by an old man who himself uses a manual called *The Art of Letter Writing*. Head herself had (only half-humorously) written to Randolph Vigne: "Forgive the vanity, but few people equal my letter-writing ability!!" (Vigne 1991: 118).

This article has concentrated on the self-representational aspects of Head's hitherto published letters, assuming that such self-construction

21. In an article published only in the late nineties, Patrick Cullinan quotes Head quoting (in her words) "one PAC fellow from South Africa" who had said of Head's work: " [S]he's just writing that way because I think she's a coloured and neither fish nor fowl" (Cullinan 1996: 4), while Lewis Nkosi had referred to Head's "vision of a 'power hungry' and 'exclusive' Africa" as being "rooted in her insecurity as a mulatto" (Nkosi 1981: 101).

functions in the mode of an intermittent autobiography. Moreover, the writing and publication of Head's letters (so many of which remain unpublished) should count along with her fiction as contributions to the "political" issue of African women's "access to positions of enunciation" (Innes & Rooney 1997: 207). The richness, complexity and future-directed import of the ideas Head expressed in her writing accord with the creative dimensions of the interplay between "autobiography" and "fiction" in "narrative" noted by Kristeva in the following extract[22] – as does the intensity yet sanity of Head's engagement with the crucial issues affecting so much of the African continent:

> [A] portion of autobiography in a narrative ensures its moorings in reality; but another portion, one of transformation or distortion, that is, the share of fiction, collects the intensity of the subjective bonds that fasten the narrator to others and to himself or herself. And that fictional portion, in contrast with the autobiographical one, acts as a filter that produces a certain discretion, a certain modesty, while changing real-life characters into prototypes.
>
> (Kristeva 1993: 78-79)

The "prototypes" or patterns that emerge from Head's letters, read as an autobiography in instalments, range from the "[u]nending wail of the human heart" (Vigne 1991: 65) to the future-directed certainty she felt that she was a "prophet" (Vigne 1991: 119): one "living on an horizon" (Eilersen 1995: 277). The overriding impression of the persona constructed in the letters is of a woman surmounting tragedy and denigration, who brought *thought* to suffering to become a witness to her time and place, and recorded her learning to our benefit.

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22. Desiree Lewis eloquently enunciates a similar perspective:

> Head's self-narration has often been anti-mimetic. It has formed a self-consciously textual strategy for questioning cultural assumptions about human and social experiences. Disavowing a tradition of documentary representation, she often questions consensual truths about her life experience, and transforms her self-narratives into dissenting knowledge or liberating artistic visions. Thus, considerations of how biography can assist criticism and autobiographical writing, and of the flexible possibilities of self-narration are all crucial to a study of Head's narrative strategy.
>
> (Lewis 2007: 5)

> Lewis also writes of Head's letters that "the way they register her distinctive fictional practices makes them integral to an understanding of her terminology and narrative practices" (Lewis 2007: 44).

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