

Exile: A Moving Wound¹

Damian Ruth

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

This paper is a collage, a succession of meditations, poems, excerpts of letters, conversations, seminar notes and responses to writing about exile, location, being homesick and nostalgia.

It attempts in substance and form to capture the fractured yet coherent, disconnected yet continuous experience of being in exile. Exile is a profoundly personal experience and yet it is a common one, and increasingly so. In other ways it is most public. It is a complex idea, and it can also be a visceral and emotional experience. The reader is offered *inter alia* a poem written for a father, a letter written to a daughter, excerpts from letters to the author, and notes and facts from seminars; you are invited to consider the difference between refugee, immigrant and relocated executive; above all, you are challenged to not be a tourist.

INTRODUCTION

You may wish to locate the writer in some kind of context. This is reasonable enough. It is for the writer more than a wish – it is a terrible, wretched yearning. You may wish to locate his (yes, it is a ‘he’) work in context. The writer chooses not to do so. This is not out of flippant disregard or arrogance. The writer is humbly aware of the value of academic courtesies and the intellectual rigour required to join conversations and make coherent contributions. He is also aware of the dangers of deceit and guile and the temptation to be superficial and glib. The writer eschews to situate this work in what could be called ‘exile studies’ based on a moral, aesthetic and intellectual choice to not seek effect or elicit a response beyond the obvious one already stated – to try and present in substance and form the displaced and dislocated sense of exile. It is a presentation. You may retort that this is disingenuous and there is no such thing as an innocent text; all utterance is an appeal, even if implicit. Very well then. I have written it and I appeal to you to read it, set your own parameters and criteria and commit yourself to judgement. The theme is exile. Could I possibly make an appeal

Address for correspondence: Damian Ruth, Department of Management and Enterprise Development, Massey University, Private Box 756, Wellington, New Zealand; Email: d.w.ruth@massey.ac.nz

in terms of the theme? I cannot imagine what the substance of such an appeal might be. To whom could such an appeal be made? On what grounds? And who could respond? Where, when, does an exile begin?

The very nature of the exile described seems to vitiate attempts at contextualization. There is no point in time from which I can track my sensibility of my exile. This makes it difficult to describe the genesis of this work. I can say the following: the poems were written over the previous 25 years; the seminar notes are actually that, and in one case redrafted from a sociology of literature thesis written nearly 20 years ago; the emails from friends are genuine and accurately dated; the letter to my daughter started out as a poem; very little of what is written here was originally written with this final presentation in mind. The final forming of it all was inspired by a conference on the theme of exile in a country in which I had recently settled and perhaps it was simply the serendipitous concurrence of those two events to which I owe the existence of this piece. The actual shaping is vaguely chronological, thematic and aesthetic and through successive editings the whole has been infused with cross-references and resonances. I have made a conscious effort to fracture readings of this piece through the use (abuse?) of academic conventions such as footnotes. Where, when, does the process of creativity begin?

Where, when, does an exile begin? Shall I count the days since I left my mother's womb? Shall I count each and every departure that left me freer, and her stifling tears? Shall I count my freedoms, and mark the distances that they entail? What restless calculations might I use to measure how far I am from home? Could such metrics assuage a yearning heart? Are we in exile when we cannot visit the graves of our fathers? Are we still in exile when we are haunted by the ghosts of our fathers?

I must tell you about my father. Oh blessed am I that have seen my father cry, and it was the sight of him crying, talking about his father, that led me to write this poem:

My father, my degree

I went to university because my father couldn't
and with every lecture brushed more of the
coaldust of Lancashire off my self.

Today, the depth of my inheritance
is written on a parchment rolled in a blue plastic tube
and I am standing with my father on Jameson steps,
outside graduation hall.

I pass it to him slowly and tenderly
and this stocky, white-haired, undegreed engineer
holds it, with me, in his stubby fingers.

It is December, and we screw up our eyes against the sun.
We are in the new country.
The coal dust between us is thinning.
His father could not read very well.

Perhaps it is this that saves us from hell
– that by the grace of our fathers
we have such stories to tell.
Stories that never get told in a seminar,
but that tell us who and what we are.

I have a family tree; its roots are not deep, a few generations only, but they cross channels, borders, oceans, rivers, mountains, but wait, wait. First, let me check: can I trust their memories? This exile is not mine alone, and one day, if I go home, I want to know how to find it. For I have been away from what I thought was home, and, listen, when far away, this is what I thought . . .

When I go home

When I go home
I'm going to find a stretch of road
in the Karroo
that lies flat and straight for miles.
I will come
over a crest of a koppie
and in the distance see
the windmill and its reservoir
next to the road.

I'll sit on the koppie
and look at it.
On the other side of the earth
under the huge pale blue sky
will be a thin line of purple koppies.
Eventually
I'll hear the insects scratching
and maybe a hot exhausted stone
finally splitting.

I'll walk slowly
towards the windmill
sometimes on the sticky black asphalt
sometimes next to it,
kicking stones
and lifting puffs of dust.

I'll climb through
the barbwire fence, strip naked
and swim in the reservoir.
I'll sit in the sun to dry.
After a while
I'll climb back
through the barbwire fence
onto the road again.

I lived in South Africa
for twenty-five years
and never did that once.

Do exiles deserve special dispensation, a kind of pardoning, that leaves them alone to explore the liberation of space? To explore the anguish of dislocation, the struggle for new language? We do not pay enough attention to the struggle for language – language in the broadest possible sense. I wrote to Adrian that I was struggling to write poetry here in Wellington. He wrote back saying ‘have you not read what academic hacks like me have written about the time it takes writers to connect to a new landscape?’ No, I had not, but I understand better now that landscape is a language and that sometimes we do not look at where we are but send ourselves mental postcards of where we think we are, even as we look. Perhaps this is a burden of our image-sodden age, but we will leave that conversation with Lukacs and Sontag and Postman for later. Let us return to language and that desperate search for connection . . .

London (excerpt)

...
I never meet the Londoner. They separate
into where they live, what they earn.
I can't learn how to speak.
I came here because I speak English.
It could have been, after a year on the Continent
a kind of home-coming. It wasn't.
English is almost an impediment.
The culture is only familiar enough
to conversationally, subtly, inform me
how often I miss the boat.
An Englishman's home is his castle.
His words are the moat.

This is no mean feat (explain that idiom!), this wading through the dense woods and mucky marshes of language, searching for signs in a new

world, hoping for correspondence with signifieds ... Yes, it is a game. It is a language game and surely our survival depends on speaking of that which we know, and how shall we recognize that of which we cannot know, and therefore should not speak, until we utter against the silence? Is silence the beginning or the end of exile? Come, let us play. We are gathered together here today to celebrate the holy mystery of exile, and so let us open the book, and see where it leads us ...

'In the beginning was the Word.' Not long after, Mr Roget developed a thesaurus ...

Might it be possible to create in our communities, as we can in language, the kind of pathways that would transform a state of exile into a state of liberation? The relationship between constraint and home, freedom and far away, is a complex balance. We can 'get to' the psychology of it by considering language (this is easily done in South Africa). The colonists arrived and stole the land; they indentured and enslaved others and ensured their own relative freedom from labour; they shed the shackles of moral constraint; and through a complex web of cynical treaties, deceit and legal legerdemain they justified what they had done. And then they routinely said of the indigenous peoples, 'they steal', 'they are lazy', 'they have no morals' and 'they tell lies'.

As the strands of fear and loathing are plaited with our tongues, we can hear, in the twisted speech of the children of immigrants, the same labels being lashed to their totems of terror about current immigrants as waves of fear finger their way into their hearts ...

Dear sons and daughters of conquerors, colonisers, empire-builders, bearers of civilisation, paid guests, assisted passengers and mere immigrants,²

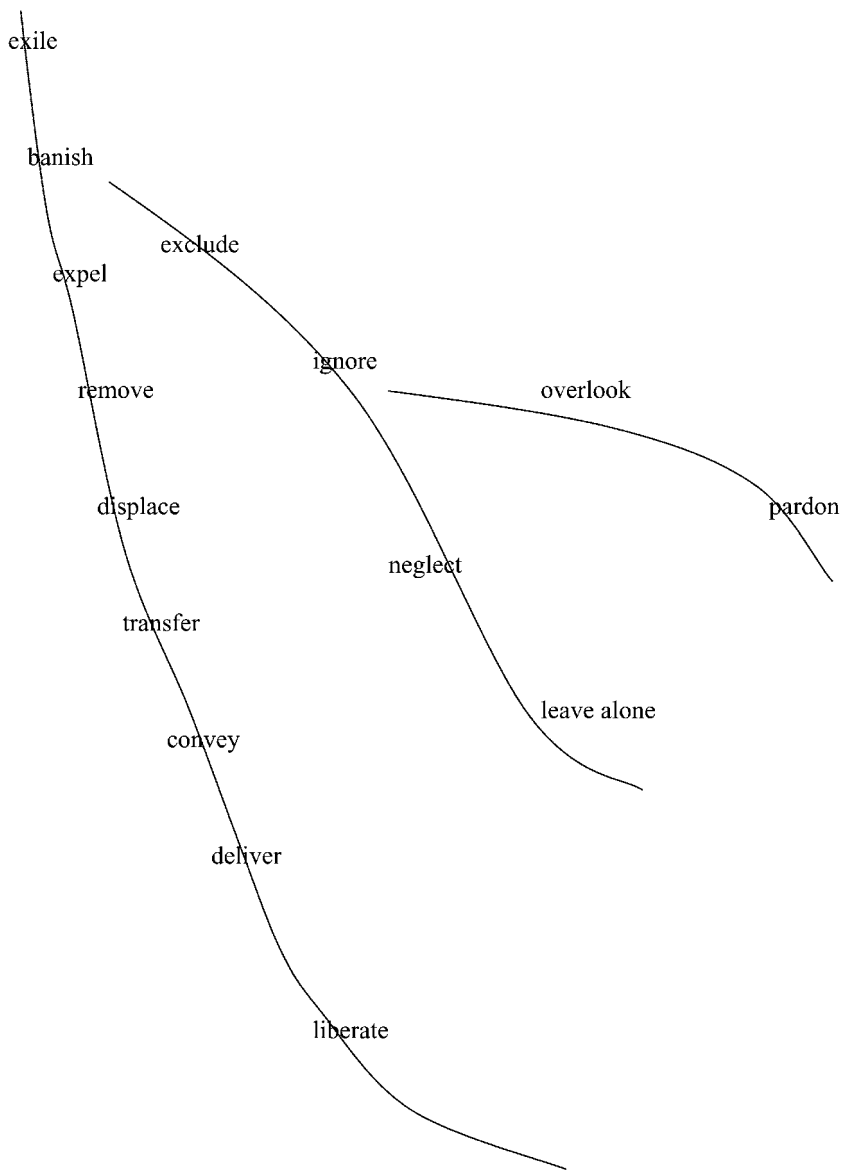
As you are aware, immigration is a wonderful idea for grandparents and parents, but enough is enough. These immigrants, these refugees, these asylum-seekers, these aliens,³ will take our jobs, they just stay on the dole, they will make our daughters pregnant, depreciate the value of our properties, be a drain on our taxes, they just don't fit, and, of course, they tell lies about where they come from ...

Is it inevitable that whenever the Other threatens entry into our lives, we will find ourselves running from our shadows into hearts of darkness, waving labels like flags of war?

The ultimate label, of course, is one's name, as Teodor Józef Konrad Korzeniowski well knew.

Would it help if people pronounced my name correctly? Would it help if they knew who I really was? Would it help if I did? I wonder how badly I need my name?

THREADS OF EXILE WOVEN THROUGH A THESAURUS



False name

When I was seventeen
 in the SA Army
 I used this trick:
 pretend it's happening
 to someone else.

Ten years later
 in a different country
 I work illegally
 and save money
 to go back.
 I use this trick:
 a false name.

This is worth investigating
 I think, and squeeze the mop.
 I remember saying (to a girl
 on a ferry crossing the channel)
 'People don't end at their skins.'

I flush the loos and wonder
 how difficult it would be
 for me to find such a job
 in my own country.

Perhaps it is not only our personal histories that save us, our personal stories that need to be told. Perhaps we can find, even in academic seminars, points to ponder, facts to digest . . .

EXCERPTS FROM A SEMINAR ON EXILE, LOCATION AND LANGUAGE

Bill Bryson (1996) writes, in *Made in America*, that place names were derived from many sources, some imported, like New Amsterdam and New York, and some derived in various corrupted forms from local languages. As all this naming was going on, 'all over the west, towns came and went . . . Iowa alone had 2,205 communities fade into ghost towns in its first century' (1996: 149). I can't help wondering, what happened to the names? Are they hovering, like tenuously moored ghosts, above the ground where the towns once were? And how would we find those places now? What kind of evidence is available to indicate that in this now unnamed place people once lived?

Tom Robinson (1984), the artist and cartographer of the Aran Islands, explains how the act of mapping Ireland empowered Dublin and created a

double tier of geographical knowledge, a double tier of languages with which to speak about the land. The abstract mathematical grids of Ordnance Survey were mapped onto the land, and entered into battle with the local maps, never drawn, but organic, flexible and constantly changing to a scale meaningful to those who walked over its rocks and crossed its streams, and who knew where forefathers had lain and whose bones lay still. As the British proceeded to change names in Ireland, sometimes Anglicizing, sometimes simply replacing, they named places that had not needed names before, and they never named places that had been named for the length of people's memories. Gradually, the power of Dublin infused the Ordnance Survey map, and as people moved from place to place, the power of the Ordnance Survey map grew, and its coordinates began to drain the local significance out of even the far-flung reaches of empire. The names of once significant places were forgotten: even stones can be exiled.

The naming of places in South Africa also involved a double tier of language, although it was complicated by the use of several different languages. Whether one was English or Afrikaans, one went from Springs to Kimberley. However, if one was a black South African one was likely to go from Kwa Thema to Galashewe. This is because Springs and Kimberley, like almost every town in South Africa, consisted of two towns, and in official 'public' language, it was usually the 'white' town that had a name, and the black town, often on the other side of the road, river or railway line, was simply 'the location', or 'die lokasie'. Thus, looking at the map of South Africa prior to 1994, one would see, from North to South, Louis Trichardt, Pietersburg, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Kroonstad, Bloemfontein, Beaufort West, Cape Town. Today, looking in *The Times Atlas of the World*, reprinted with changes in 2000, at a map drawn to a scale of 1:5 500 000, there is still only Louis Trichardt for Louis Trichardt and Pietersburg for Pietersburg, but now also, Shoshanguve, Mamelodi, Soweto, Maokeng, Manguang, Sidesaviwa and Cape Town. The next reprinting will have to indicate Pholekwane, the new name for Pietersburg. 'The location' was a place. The location was where black people lived. Later, the name for that place – for the apartheid government, in its later years, became linguistically quite inventive – was upgraded to 'the township'. But 'the township' never moved any closer to town.

It is useful to couple Hoogvelt's (2001) notion of core-periphery analysis, a new architecture of social relations in the world, in which the distinction is not a geographical one, but refers to one's location in the social structure of power, and by implication, wealth, with the insight of Bauman (1998) writing about mobility. Bauman points out that the mobility of capital is not matched by the mobility of labour, and that the mobility of labour is split – there is a hierarchy of mobility, in which some people become

relocated and others become refugees. In an age where for so many persons (especially 'corporate persons') so many borders are becoming more permeable, for so many persons, especially poor and dark-skinned persons, visa requirements are becoming more stringent. An especially crass expression of the hierarchy of mobility was produced in South Africa in the last years of the white-only government. In a land of poverty amidst great wealth secured largely through the migrant labour system, which was simply a complex form of legalized slavery, a BMW advertisement showed a BMW cruising through space, with the legend 'A new concept in migrant labour'.

The insecurity of tenure can provoke linguistic creativity, which makes telling lies a little easier. An official term (there were many such) for black South Africans at one point in time was 'temporary sojourners'. This meant that on one day, millions of people living below the Limpopo woke up to discover they were no longer at home. By the decree of colonisers, some of whom could trace their family's arrival in Africa back to the 1600s, many black South Africans' homeland was now a place that perhaps their forefathers generations ago had lived in, but that their parents and grandparents, due to the migrant labour system and urbanization provoked by colonization, did not know. The map was being tidied up; they were now in exile. Communities were destroyed, homes bulldozed, graveyards left to grass and wind, and people were put onto trucks and driven to desolate places, where only the politician's cartographer could have told them that they were now 'home', and one more black spot on the mad map of the apartheid architects was now 'clear'.

Town, township, shanty town. Shanty town is a well-known term, but the term widely used in South Africa is 'squatter camp'. The squatters were black South Africans coming to urban areas, not, this time, under the orderly process of migrant labour, but simply arriving and occupying empty urban land. ('Empty land' – a fraught phrase from settler mythology!) These squatters, living in cardboard and plastic huts – the luckier ones in zinc sheets – without the benefit of sewerage or water, were to feel the full wrath of the state, but they also provoked some noble acts of outrage by some members of the privileged settled urban classes. Bernie Wrangmore went on hunger strike and some lay down in front of bulldozers,⁴ but to little avail and a famous and notorious squatter camp in the Cape, Modderdam Road, was finally cleared by government machinery. But the story did not end there, and a sequel provides us with a simple key to understanding the nature of place, and absence.

The land along Modderdam Road lay fallow. Because of all the toilets and garbage pits, the ground was well-fertilized. Bushes began to grow back and gardens which the squatters had left behind prospered. Mieli stalks planted

shortly before the camp was destroyed stood up tall and ears began to form. Melons, carrots, cucumbers, and few tomatoes slowly ripened. In late February and early March, Africans were once again seen along Modderdam Road. This time, however, they did not bring their zincs with them but rakes and shovels. They built small fires in front of the plots and stood guard during the night. One evening, a resident of Belhar went to visit the men as he was taking his dog for a walk. They told him that they were the people of Modderdam. They had once lived there, and now they had returned because it was time for the harvest.

(Silk, 1981: 168)

South Africa erupted into civil war in 1976 – although there were widely different perceptions of the situation at the time. Mr B.J. Vorster, the then Prime Minister, was widely quoted: ‘Crisis? What crisis?’⁵ In the ensuing decade matters got worse, and the 1980s were marked by running battles and riots. It was a battle of ‘the natives’ to become citizens in the land of their birth.⁶ Meanwhile . . .

Immigrants swear oath

(Staff Reporter)

Twenty-nine immigrants from eight countries became South African citizens last night at a ceremony hosted by the European Immigration Organization at the Bellville Civic Centre.

The Chief of the Defence Force, General Constand Viljoen, was the guest speaker. After the Stellenbosch University choir sang three hymns, the immigrants were led into the hall by a Voortrekker youth bearing the South African flag, while the Navy band played the national anthem.

Each country of origin was represented by its flag. The immigrants had come from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Czechoslovakia, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Voortrekkers symbolically took the flags from the immigrants before they took the oath of allegiance. Each of the 18 men and 11 women bowed in turn before the South African flag and was given naturalization papers by Mr SS van der Merwe, Director-General of Internal Affairs.

(Cape Times, 10 May 1983)

Nearly a decade after the Modderdam Road harvest, between 26 and 29 April 1994, millions of black South Africans ‘came home’, by virtue of casting a vote. This change of status out of ‘exile’ happened notwithstanding the fact that nearly all of them went to sleep that night in the same beds from which they had arisen that morning. In the ensuing decade, thousands of – mainly white – South Africans left their country. They are not considered exiles. Viewed variously with contempt, understanding, envy,

they are hoping to find, in almost all corners of the English-speaking world, a secure and stable future. They cannot be accorded the accolade of 'exile', which remains reserved for those who, under threat of harassment, imprisonment, torture and death, left their country to learn to fight, in different ways, for their freedom.

Some notes not appropriate for a seminar

I am now one of the former. (I was once one of the latter, but that is another story ...) Since returning and over the last 10 years, I left many times, almost every year, to study. After that phase, I left for a full year, for a research fellowship. I left again, for I got married, had a child, and my Irish wife would not live in South Africa, and I am not sure I wanted to myself anymore. I may return. I have lost track of my leavings, my comings and goings, the borders crossed and reasons written, my exile is a moving wound, I no longer remember the first cut.

I listen to those who suffer, and I am looking at a photograph of someone I know in a place I remember, as I read their letter, and I understand what they are talking about. But sometimes their voices grow thin, the image grows faint, the horizon line slides away. And whilst I mean no lack of respect and hope not to hurt, I find myself pondering on the differences between homesickness and nostalgia.

I am blessed with many friends. I left behind several good friends in Haenertsburg. Some are still there, and I would go back, but many have left:

Petrus – to Detroit
 Hermien – to Joburg
 Aria – to Pretoria
 Dave – to Paris
 Sam – to London
 Chris – to Auckland

I wonder, if I did go back now, would I be going back to the same place? Yes, in a sense of course I would. Good friends are still there. I know that, and I wait, for I know that soon, one of these weeks, I will get a phone call or more likely an email, from James, telling me that Ken has finally died.

The shocks that root us still can still reach us, through optic fibres strung from point to point, and as if to make a nonsense of the space between us, the messages can really, really, get to us ...

I got this email one Tuesday at work in Wellington, not long after arriving here, but long after I had left South Africa:

[This message is being sent to all who are listed in Elaine's address book, so if you have heard already, please forgive the intrusion.]

It is my very sad duty to tell you that our colleague and friend, Elaine Pearson died at her home on Monday night, 23.09.2002.

She had been discharged from hospital only the day before, after having had cancer-related surgery, but she was still terribly weak and simply did not make it through the night. She was only 46.

South Africa has lost a highly skilled poet. NELM has lost a most valued colleague. We have all lost a special friend.

May she rest in peace.

My God Elaine, so that was what the long silences were about. From such closeness to silence, to this ... I did not even know you were ill!

Another:

Hi Damian,

Greetings from Oslo! Frøydis forwarded pictures of your beautiful, little family!

Congratulations!!

Is it a boy or a girl ... ???

By the time this mail arrives, you should all be settled in ... was it Wellington? Hope all works out for the best, and that you all enjoy!

I've just finished my degree, am now a licenced psychologist ... however, I'll not practise as one in another 3–4 years at least. Actually, I'm going back to South Africa, to continue the work I started ... love, Wenche

I must remember to write to Wenche.

Another:

Hi Damian

Many thanks ... The following is self-explanatory, so I have just pasted it in ...

Email from Helen

Dearest,

Found out 24 hrs ago that Liesl, lovely, vital young wife of Grove Steyn (they were married a month ago) had just died of a brain haemorrhage. No warning, nothing that could have been done – talking and breathing one minute, brain dead minutes later ... Spoke to him last night and found him unable to comprehend his loss – he was worried about her, was she all right wherever she was? Susanne says he went on talking to her long after the life support had been switched off ... It occurs to me that someone ought to tell Damian – can I ask you to do that?

Will Grove ever stop talking to Liesl? Is there any way of comprehending the metrics of a lifespan spent on earth?

I live and work here now, and I must apply for permanent residence soon. 'Permanent Resident.' What a ridiculously hubristic label!

One day I was counselling a man with advanced AIDS. He told me how some time previously he had asked his local bishop about becoming a priest. He was told that it was not feasible, since he had a limited lifespan. We laughed at the compounded ironies of a man of the church introducing the economies of ROI into the context of limited lifespans. Neither 'life everlasting' or 'permanent resident' has much to do with an allotted three score years and ten.

How odd to be applying for the status of 'permanent resident', being as I am a senior academic and as such a member of a mobile professional class. Since I do not wish to be naturalized (the word reminds me of the undergraduate essay topic on the notion of 'natural' in *King Lear*, the play of plays about inheritance), but merely raised to the status of permanent resident, I do not suppose I will have to swear allegiance to anything.

Extract from a search on Google conducted to find a site that would help me calculate how far away I was from home:

Prelude to Darkness

... the given area. The party's destination is marked by arrows. Will I have to walk full **distances between towns**? No. There is a map ...
www.zero-sum.com/faq.html – 16k – Cached – Similar pages

Sago pudding

*For Sarah Rome, formerly Lindsay, neé Cardwell,
born 5 January 1898, Dalton-on-Furness, Lancashire
(now Cumbria), England,
died 30 July 2001, Pinelands, Cape Town, South Africa.*

I am on the phone to my mother
in Cape Town, South Africa,
from West Wicklow in Ireland
at 9h30pm, July 30, 2001.

The diaspora turns back on itself –
her father (Joseph) left Dublin for Lancashire,
she (Theresa) left Lancashire for South Africa.
Later her mother (Sarah) left Lancashire,
to join her and Dad in South Africa.⁷
Recently I left South Africa for Ireland.⁸

My mother had been
at Nanna's deathbed in the nursing home
since 9 o'clock this morning.
At lunchtime they asked her
if she wanted to eat.
'No thank you, I can't eat now,'
but then –
'If there is a nice pudding . . .'
They went off to find out
and came back to tell her,
'It's sago pudding.'

My mother laughs,
telling me the story.
'I can remember Mum
giving me sago pudding,
and I wouldn't eat it.
"I can't eat the bubbles," I'd say,
and I would get it later, for tea.'

And there it is,
at lunchtime
in Cape Town,
July 30, 2001,
sago pudding!
Mum laughs again –
'I didn't eat it.'
From her father's land of birth,
I laugh with her.

Nanna died
not long after lunch.
She was 103 years old,
and 6 109 miles⁹ away from home –
physically.

NOTES TOWARDS A SEMINAR ON EXILE, LANGUAGE AND IRONY

I can remember everything, whether it happened or not!

(Mark Twain)

It struck me suddenly, one windy misty day in Wellington that had just gone on too long. We had not been here long and I began to muse on the joys of West Wicklow, and then realized I was musing on the joys of a place I had looked forward to leaving. One thought led to another and I realized I could think with great pleasure of places in the Cape that I have no particular desire to visit again. Which led me to wonder, what exactly is it we are homesick for, when a feeling of homesickness – at least that is what it seems like – can arise for a place that is not home?¹⁰

The physics of time and place are complicated enough. I wonder, if I did go back to the Cape or Wicklow or Haenertsburg now, would I be going back to the same place? Who would I be? The laws of physics indicate that if a twin were sent into space and returned a long time later, he or she would be younger than the one who had stayed, for less time would have passed in space. The psychics of time and space are even more complicated. Maybe Mr T.S. Eliot was right, and time past and time future is time present from any perspective.

The global village is a seductive metaphor and like all metaphors it illuminates in some ways and misleads in others. It is true that some of us – but only some of us – travel often and lightly, and some of us – but only some of us – conquer thousands of miles in a phone call. But it is not simply that phone lines contract distances. The density of time and distance and frequency and purpose of the connection are part of the quality of the contact. The fact that there are more phone lines in Manhattan than in the whole of Africa does not make the inhabitants of Manhattan better connected than those of Africa. Ease of access can diminish the value of access. I recall working in South Africa with a colleague from the Congo who would have to wait from one month to another to hear if his family was still alive.

I have often missed someone and wished they were with me or I with them. When I have missed them, I have thought of them in the places we have shared – a house, the mountains, evenings in the pub, and then I have thought I was homesick, but what I am really missing is an era, a quality of experience. Sometimes that is all I have missed and on reflection I realize that the person associated with it is irrelevant. The same can be true of place. I have walked over enough mountains now in enough different countries on different continents to know that I came to that wonderful mixture of peace and elation hiking over Table Mountain, but it is not Table Mountain that I yearn for. It could be the Wolfberg, the Burren, the Rimutakas.

In one of Luis Bunuel's films, *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, people scuttle off into little cubicles to eat their sandwiches in private, and then gather again to pee and defecate communally. How we apply the notions of public and private to an activity or condition can reveal much about it. Exile is like sex. It is a private activity, yet it is subject to communal mores.¹¹ Exile is like eating. Eating is intensely personal; what could be more personal than what one ingests, takes into one's own body? And yet we often and comfortably leave it to others to do almost everything to the food until the last final short journey into our mouths. And we are happy for that final journey to take place. Exile is a private anguish that can, through physiology, be forced into public. Exile strikes at the core of our being; we try to hide it, and yet so often we can barely contain it. We hide the pain, trying to avoid more, and thereby exile ourselves again, and our exile becomes a room of mirrors, repeatedly, endlessly reflecting our alienation.

I found it extraordinary that in the thesaurus game played earlier the word 'alien' did not emerge. Looking up the word alien, there is no immediate link to 'exile'. But the resonances are there:

Non-native, exotic, remote, extraterrestrial, unfamiliar, unknown, incongruous, outlandish, contrary, conflicting, differing, adverse, opposed, incompatible, antagonistic, hostile, inimical, repugnant, unacceptable, foreigner, immigrant, stranger, outsider, newcomer.

It is possible to be, in some countries, 'a resident alien'. The interest of this label lies in the sense in which it is NOT an oxymoron. The etymological roots of the word 'other' are of some interest here. 'Other' is an index word and has no substance in itself. Papadoupolis (1980: 14), examining 'The dialectic of the Other' in the psychology of C.G. Jung, describes how 'the Other' has deep roots in the Indo-European languages, indicated by its Sanskrit roots 'eka', linked to the Latin 'aequus' – equal. 'Other' includes some contradictory meanings. According to the *OED* 'the other' as pronoun is 'that which (in relation to something already mentioned) constitutes the other part of the universe of being'. In other words, the Other constitutes that part of the whole which is not 'this', 'us' or 'self'. An attempt to deny the Other is therefore a denial of the self. That is to say, when a resident or immigrant denies the humanity of the Other, they are forced to deny their own humanity, in other words, their own wholeness as humans. The mere acknowledgment of existence does not overcome denial, for to merely acknowledge the existence of the Other *as Other*, is not integrating, or, to put it differently, does not involve recognition.

There is an interesting link between 'the Other' and irony. The word 'irony' is based on the Greek for dissimulation or ignorance purposely affected. It is out of this sense that we have derived the notion of tragic irony, where the hero, subjected to cruel twists of fate, is also in some

sense held responsible for not knowing, or wilful ignorance. In this sense, the term resonates with the psycho-dynamic concept of repression or denial. It is not surprising that Freud was so interested in the antithetical meaning of primal words (Freud, 1953/74). Another *OED* definition of irony is ‘a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is *the opposite* of that expressed by the words used’ (emphasis added). Freud observed that patients frequently said the exact opposite of what they meant in the context of the subject imputing to the Other those unwanted parts of the self. Wayne C. Booth (1983: 735) in his celebrated essay on irony speaks of ironic communication as communication of the deepest kind, an ‘ensoulment’, and then speaks of his favourite cosmologists as follows:

As you would expect, I find most inviting those new cosmologists who talk explicitly about irony and who can use it themselves in great abundance. And I find it curious when I make a list of those they turn out to share another profound characteristic: they all find it necessary to develop a radical critique of traditional notions of the individual private self, the self that is bordered by the skin.

I remember saying, to a girl on a ferry crossing the channel, ‘People don’t end at their skins.’ I spoke as a white African, on a ferry, in a channel, trying to understand how a white skin and a black skin could constitute a border. If bodies are landscapes, what form could a passport take? Metaphorically we are all cartographers. We go further, and in our search for meaning, we blur the boundaries between cartography, genealogy, history and archaeology. We want the stony cairns to speak, we want the bones to dance, we want to hear the legends of our lineage lilting in the wind ... But the literal maps we have can be misleading for they cannot tell us who and what we are ...

Mapmaker

In the basic geographic act of mapping I find three conjunctions: that of the place mapped with the one who maps it; that of the mapper with the map itself; and finally that of the map with the mapped – this last a confrontation that tests the worth of the first and second

(Tim Robinson, *Setting foot on the shores of Connemara*)

The global gladiator swirls his tools through space;
with optic fibres strung from point to point
he claims all time and space have collapsed,
as if everyone’s rhythm and everyone’s place
are pinned by the coordinates of his fantasy.
But what manner of map is this that records

no shape nor contour, no colour, nor smell,
but makes the territory a mirror of madness?

How is one faithful to merely the measurable
when faced with a derelict archway dribbling stones
along lines that once enclosed dreams clamoured to the sky,
now nestled in worn flags, and barely a sigh?
If time has collapsed space, why do my arms
ache for a lover who is only a phone call away?
The mapmaker's eye is relentlessly forced back
to a body-bound socket, where face-to-face,
heart-to-heart, and shoulder-to-shoulder,
we can make sense of the space between us.

The eyes of the mapmaker who seeks his coordinates
in the lives of bodies, shine like beacons;
unlike the lacerated vision of the deracinated function
whose gaze is a gauge of control, managing the landscape,
pinpointing in metrics, marking influence, but, always,
drawing back from the collapsing cliffs and ravenous waves
to a gridlocked life of hallucinated certainty.

I'd rather dance down the shoreline of my life,
let the sea scrape my skin and pore over the debris
of interior journeys spewed by the rivers returning
from a land that, here at its edge, abandons bits of itself
to the sea that it captures between tides.

Bay into inlet into creek; peninsula, headland and spit:
tide turning one into lake and the other into island;
causeway cuts channel and rocks mushroom into sight;
channel cuts causeway and islands are unmoored;
a lunar schedule of one-act plays; a slow sashaying of fate
as a shifting shoreline fingers its way into our hearts,
to clutch us, and remind us, that our metrics are mindless
without a body to break the silence of stones and dance
to the songs of wind.

It was whilst living in Ireland that I read Tim Robinson. It was through him that I first really understood the profound and visceral connection between our sense of self, our bodies, our language and place. I understood then how, years before, when living in London, I could be wrenched to a halt on my bicycle, and nearly brought to tears, by the sight, caught through a broken fence of corrugated iron, of tussocks of grass growing

between rusted railways tracks; it was such a view that I had looked at as a child in Springs, among the derelict mines across the road in the veld. Red earth, afternoon rain on hot tar roads, a school playing field in the late winter sun; there are times I feel that beneath my skin, within my coherent shape, I am a vast console with thousands of buttons waiting to be pushed and a sight, a scent, a sound can send me home in a second.

When I lived in Ireland I met Sylvia, whom I married and with whom I had a daughter. We called her Sorcha (which is Irish for Sarah) Theresa Elizabeth. She was named after her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and two great-aunts and an aunt. I make no apology for giving her this weight of history. She has the names of strong, brave women, an inheritance to carry with pride.

A letter to my daughter on her first birthday

20 September 2002

Wellington

New Zealand

Dear Sorcha

The song I sing to you in my arms when you are having your night-time bottle is true in a special sense. You *are* an angel all the way from heaven. Most people would say that is a metaphor. I am not so sure.

Literally, you were born in Dublin. Dublin is 60 miles from Tullamore where your mother was born. She was born in a cottage that has been renovated many times, the cottage where her father was born, his mother was born, her father, and then we lose track. Your mother and I have stood on the spot where she came into the world. Where the bedroom was, is now the kitchen, and the birthbed stood near the counter, not far from the kitchen sink. I wonder how many people can stand on the spot where they were born? You were born on about the fourth floor I think of the Rotunda.

Dublin is far from where I was born, on another continent, thousands of miles away, but closer to where Nanna and Grandad were born, in Lancashire. Your Nanna's father was born in Dublin like you, and left for Lancashire when he was a young man, one of millions of Irish who went into exile. I thought of that when you, your mother and I bade her family farewell and she wept nearly all the way to Dublin Airport, to fly to New Zealand, where we now live. On the way I thought of my mother, who told me that she cried almost every day for the first ten years that they lived in the Transvaal.

I wonder if you have any memory of Grangecon, West Wicklow, which was where you lived for the first eight months of your life? Any memory of South Africa, where we stopped on the way to New Zealand and your Nanna cuddled you, and called you 'My girl', and I showed your mother the houses

I grew up in? Never mind, we have the photographs, and one day you will remember them as well as if you had been there.

People will struggle to pronounce your name correctly, and one day – the first of many – someone will ask you ‘Where do you come from?’ Do not scorn the question. Be generous in your response. Yes, it is often one of the most irrelevant, pointless and banal questions a person can ask of someone. It is also one of the most profound and complex questions we can ask ourselves. Personally, I think you should just sing them the song I sing to you when I’m giving you your night-time bottle: ‘*I’m an angel, all the way from heaven, I’m an angel and I love you . . .*’

Dadda.

I met Sylvia in Ireland in 2000, a year when Ireland was beginning to receive refugees. In so doing, Rosaleen¹² was beginning to discover that the self-congratulatory view of a warm and welcoming, fun-loving people was easy to maintain in the abstract, but in reality, when it came to *cead mille failte*¹³ and the refugees of Africa, eastern Europe and Asia, terms and conditions applied. An ugly, racist, bigoted, xenophobic and opportunistic Rosaleen emerged. The country that had, proportionally, given the world more refugees than most, found it hard to accept them. It was there that I wrote the following:

Roisin Dubh

A white African,
the son of parents wrung
from one continent to another
who themselves trace their history
across the Irish sea,
now trudges, as an invited guest,
along the West coast of dark Rosaleen
who is furiously refusing refugees.

From parents and colonial Christian Brothers
I learnt three facts of Irish history;
oppression, famine and exile.
Three knives that carved this island’s psyche;
oppression, famine and exile.
Three wounds that wrenched its soul;
oppression, famine, and exile.

And I wonder if the walking wounded of this emerald isle,
when they see the haunted soul
on the dock of Rosslaire or Dun Loughaire,

just escaped from oppression or famine or both,
see a stranger?

We laugh, we cry, we hope we will see loved ones again. Claire told me one night that Greg's mother had died a few months ago, 'but we decided when we left South Africa that we would not go home for funerals'. How far away from home are you when your mother or father dies? Now there is a metric to mull on, a restless calculation to assuage or torture a wounded heart on its journey towards that final funeral that *will* take us home.

NOTES

1 This paper is based on a presentation made to *The poetics of exile: an international conference*, University of Auckland, New Zealand, 17–19 July 2003. It contains poems that have been published.

2 It is assumed that the allusion here does not include transported convicts, indentured labourers or slaves.

3 It can be safely assumed that the allusion does not include relocated executives, peripatetic scholars, fee-paying students with limited study visas, well-endowed foreign investors, tourists and young adults having an overseas experience. Presumably those being addressed are citizens, or at least have permanent residency.

4 Or, as Mr Kruger, Minister of Justice, pointed out when explaining that he had not lied about using bulldozers, 'they were not bulldozers, they were front-end loaders'. It is important to get the labels right.

5 Vorster was quoted in *The Cape Times*, 28 August, 1976, as saying: 'If there is a crisis, then all I can say is that in my lifetime I have seen bigger crises'. He went on to suggest that South Africa could look forward to 'a rosy future'.

6 People do not need citizenship. States need people to have citizenship. People need food and a social context, and a sense of belonging. It is an irony of development that in order to acquire security of these innate needs, people have increasingly to appeal to imposed abstractions such as 'citizenship' and 'rights'.

7 My parents have been permanent residents in South Africa for more than 60 years.

8 On a UK EU passport.

9 In order to calculate the distance between two points on the earth's surface, one may use the following formula, which will yield the approximate distance in miles.

Approximate distance in miles = $\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$

where $x = 69.1 * (\text{lat}2 - \text{lat}1)$

and $y = 53 * (\text{lon}2 - \text{lon}1)$

You can improve the accuracy of this approximate distance calculation by adding the cosine math function:

Approximate distance in miles = $\sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$

where $x = 69.1 * (\text{lat}2 - \text{lat}1)$

and $y = 53 * (\text{lon}2 - \text{lon}1) * \cos(\text{lat}1/57.3)$

10 In Europe I am African, in Africa I am European. Sometimes, 'at the end of the small hours' when I ponder on a return to my native land, to 'my father, my mother ... the house ...', I have to ask in what direction and how long would I have to travel; to where would I return?

11 If the view of exile as an activity jars, consider how behavioural constraints would apply differently to a traditionally dressed Somalian woman in New York, or a Rastafarian in China. It is the failure to appreciate how a condition – such a race or gender – translates into physical limitations, control and even abuse, that leads to the invisibility of such conditions to those in dominant positions.

12 Another name, like Roisin Dubh, for Ireland.

13 Meaning 'a hundred thousand welcomes'.

REFERENCES

- Bauman, Z. 1998: *Globalization: the human consequences*. Columbia University Press.
- Booth, W. 1983: The empire of irony. *Georgia Review* 37, 719–37.
- Bryson, B. 1996: *Made in America: an informal history of the English language in the United States*. Avon Books.
- Freud, S. 1910/1953–74: The antithetical meaning of primal words. In Strachey, J., editor, *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 11. Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 155–61. (24 Volumes.)
- Hoogvelt, A. 2001: *Globalization and the postcolonial world: the new political economy of development*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Papadopoulos, R.K. 1980: The dialectic of the Other. D.Phil. thesis, University of Cape Town, South Africa, p. 14.
- Robinson, T. 1984: *Setting foot on the shores of Connemara*. Lilliput Press.
- Silk, A. 1981: *A shantytown in South Africa*. Ravan, 168.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

DAMIAN RUTH is a senior lecturer in Strategic Management and Change Management at Massey University, Wellington. He has published on institutional culture, on how research, education and management shape each other, and on perception and affect in academic work. He has published poetry in South Africa, Ireland and New Zealand, and is a keen manufacturer of bits and pieces that some people might consider art or craft.