

# THE GIRL WHO MADE STARS

## The Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic

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It was the eventually unhinged Nietzsche who said in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that God is dead and we have killed him. This is hyperbole and a venture into what Jacques Lacan calls the Imaginary which entails a suspension or a failure of Symbolic reasoning. It may however become part of the brutal Real. It is *as if* we have killed God.

In truth the ethical God can't be killed. Her immortality is part of Her divinity. If She exists. If there is no God S/he can't be alive in the first place. So S/he can't be killed either. S/he never existed.

Only a stranger to logic, that is the proper rules of Symbolic reasoning, could embark on this kind of dangerous philosophical journey. But if it is true that there is no God, this is serious. Without a transcendental basis for religion, one of the main supports of ethics disappears.

Nietzsche was not insane when he wrote that God was dead. God was indeed dead because a national and international ethics was dead. So, he puts this explosive un-reason into the mouth of he whom he calls a madman who is dominated by the Imaginary. Then, to the madman and to us who are in need of the comfort of the Imaginary it somehow becomes Real that God is dead.

Only the insane, or the illogical, or an immature reasoner, still a child perhaps, could derive the "Real" from the Imaginary without submitting it to the rigour of the Symbolic. But we all do it. We do it especially when we dream. When we sleep and have rapid eye movements (REM sleep) we live in the Imaginary which swallows up the Symbolic and *feels* "Real". We remember this when we wake, because we need God to quiet our fears, to support us in the face of the Real of pain and death. We create Her believing that She creates us. This is quasi-symbolic reasoning rooted in the Imaginary – what Freud called the unconscious, not the rational ego, but with all the ferocity of the super-ego, the punishing conscience. At best God is the ego-ideal in Freud, a benign guiding presence, the internalised good parents.

After the scientific and industrial revolutions in America and Europe perhaps it needed a madman to announce the demise of the Really divine: but only an honest lunatic with his foolish ultra-sanity about the irreligiosity of consumerism and materialism corrupting religion could offer what to the sane is a justified, *ironic* requiem for religion. This doesn't mean to say that we can do without God. If we need Her, we need Her.

At least God had once "lived" even if only as a quasi-Real character in the Hebrew bible giving strength to the Israelites and the Judeans and then the Christians and the Muslims although about their holy books I as a Jew cannot speak.

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Fictions and the divine pseudo-real are very much part of the social construction of reality. Where would we be without the Hebrew and the Christian bibles and Shakespeare? A church, a mosque, a temple, even a theatre is part of institutional reality inspired by the Imaginary and becomes pseudo-"Real". The Real includes the brutality of a persecutory death for Jews and originally for the early Christians and some Christians in dangerous political environments today.

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Death is ultimately the object of care, concern and solicitude in Heidegger, as is Being and beings. Being (a noun) is also part of the Real. Being (noun) beings (a verb). The primitive faith in a real God, brought by the early Israelites and the Jewish Christians to a pagan or a Hellenic world *could* become as Real to them as Jesus' or any other convicted person's crucifixion was agonisingly Real to the crucified and meaningful to his significant others. I refer to Jesus the Jew.

Many Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, New Age people and pagans in the developed and the old indigenous worlds still believe in a divine supernatural force accounting for the universe.

But, rightly or wrongly, the monotheistic God and the pagan gods are threatened by the European Enlightenment which enshrines the Symbolic and is as important as the being-ness of the Real. It is possible that for billions of people one day there will be no "God" or "gods" left or "goddesses" except in popular cinema, pop music and mass-advertising in which "beingness" is what Heidegger and Sartre call inauthentic.

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After Nietzsche's death in 1900 by which time the great philosopher's brain succumbed to syphilis to which the "immoral" outsider at that time was prone, there was the mass disaster of the Great War and the influenza epidemic, the Great Depression, then in the 1930s Stalin's purges and anti-Semitic show trials of mainly the Jewish members of the original Bolshevik Politburo, who were all executed. The filling up of the Gulag Archipelago prison camps in Russia by a paranoid leader's supposed Enemies of the People accused of acting against the glorious Soviet Motherland by promoting international socialism, was, again, deeply subversive of all kinds of religious faith, but political faith too. Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico by an agent of Stalin. That Trotsky was a Jew and a Marxist-atheist must have put into further doubt both the secular if not the divine interpretation of a benign outcome for history. American conformism was guaranteed by McCarthyism and the Trumpism of our era. Americans, on the whole, are religious believers. The Japanese and the Chinese appear to combine the secular, the ideological and the remnants of religious belief.

For children of the Enlightenment it must have seemed and still seems that in modernity one can be sure of nothing except moral anguish in relation to the dying voices of God or the gods which totalitarianisms and secular democracies replace. Religion is hollowed out by science.

What further evidence would one need for the "death" of "God" and the need for a sense of a righteous human force in history? Outside India and the Hindu diaspora how many children today know who Gandhi was and what satyagraha means? How can goodness in people depend on God especially if She is Allah and Brahma, Elohim and Christ? All of Her adherents used to persecute each other in the name of God. Even in countries ostensibly connected to the dispassionate Buddha, like Myanmar which persecutes Muslims.

Yet if S/he exists, would S/he not transcend all Her names and manifestations?

But after the suicide of the German Führer, the Nuremberg trials, the evidence of the murder of millions of Jews, Roma, communists, criminals and the disabled in the Second World War, after Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen have we not seen the ultimate negation of a divine source for redemption in history?

Millions did redeem humanity in the fight against fascism in Spain, Italy, Germany and Japan but where is God, other than through rare religious or morally committed and unusually heroic people such as Von Stauffenberg, Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hannah Szenes? The British people under Churchill, the Americans under Roosevelt? And is S/he not just *conscience*?

Faith, in Bonhoeffer, emerges from a sacrifice when the martyr's life is put on the line and S/he endures torture and death in the name of duty or God. Then God or righteousness *does, but rarely*, become a living force in history.

As far as I am concerned, the philosophical I, one in 7 billion, just another human being there is another way of making sense of the horrors of existence: "God" – is an Imaginary, connected as a Symbolic to *the ethical* and *the political*, across a gap or abyss between the ethical/political and - what? Surely not a Real in Lacan's terms. God only becomes a Real if he inspires something like Camus's courage as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. More, the freedom to opt for what we know is a transcendent force for the Kantian good which would wish us to do this: *try to act as if for mankind* as long as the Imaginary and Symbolic include ethics rather than a *supernatural* force in the nevertheless Real astrophysical universe (Malcolm Bowie *Lacan*: 91-121). There is a Real universe. But why does it have to be supernatural rather than an astrophysical fact?

Again, and again the question presents itself: does Kant's "mankind" exist as a moral and ideological entity, what Lacan, a serious post-modernist psychoanalytic arbiter, would regard as a Real empirical outcome, whose empirical interests really are held in common? Of course, rationally, yes, it should be so. But it isn't. Not Really.

Mankind, *ideally*, is one, certainly one species. But the history of *homo sapiens* is of originally small groups of hunter-gatherers potentially always in competition with each other for resources despite the later on-coming of the national-state, a common language, common religious belief and so on. What, after all, *powers* Darwin's survival of the fittest or the most *adaptive* mutations? The powerful survive and breed. The gentle have to be protected to survive.

Nietzsche knew that the Enlightenment had above all introduced a *multi-interpretative* view of reality itself, even of the brutal and empirical Real and although Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, confirmed that "the world" is everything that is "the case," later he realised that it could be *contradictorily* "pictured" as "the case".

Sensation, perception and thought were not just impressions and understandings of reality, but they entailed pictorial interpretations that reach out their variable feelers to grasp reality which really is not just "objectively" the case, Real, but, as he said in his next book *Philosophical Investigations*, in essence, elaborating on Hamlet: "there is nothing either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet* Act 2 Scene 2 lines 248-250).

Animal and human verbal and non-verbal languages entail “games” – scenarios, power-processes enabling work, sexual competition, productivity, social and political attachments and hierarchies. These “games” are only good - in the interest of mankind - given that we can only *try to act according to the Kantian categorical imperative*.

But in all this, as W.B. Yeats put it, often “the centre does not hold.” Perhaps it is a metaphorically or Imaginary or a twisted Symbolic “beast” that “slouches towards Jerusalem”? Jerusalem is a Real place of terrible contention. If it were ruled by the pure logic of the Symbolic it would be revered equally by all the Abrahamic religions who would unite around it. The different Imaginaries stemming from the collective unconscious(nesses) and variable Symbolic-reasonings threaten to tear it apart. There is no pure logic in politics. So, the Imaginary tears into the Symbolic and the Real. What it does to the Real is an empirical result: genocide, murder, violence, racial and class discrimination. Symbolic systems of logic can be twisted so as to serve the Real as a gangster serves the Real boss.

Marx and Engels regarded the whole world’s industrial and colonial systems as not only intrinsically part of ruling class hegemony which is *made to seem* “objective”, indeed is empirically a fact, but, because supported by ideological interpretation, adherence to *class and race and national interests* is seen as the psychological heart of hegemony, *rationalised* by religion as “Real” but is a sham at heart. Hence Imaginary religion *is* the heart of a heartless world. It can be Real and Imaginary and supported by a Symbolic logic of a kind.

Because it reconciles us to existence religion is the heart of a heartless world. In Freud God reconciles us to the rules that protect us from the primal father of *Totem and Taboo* the Ur-Father who seeks to possess all the women and has to be castrated by the sons who then repent and eat and drink him symbolically. If God does not exist S/he would have to be invented in the form of at least the ethics of existentialism, the phenomenology of Being which in Heidegger (Heidegger who joined the Nazi Party in 1933!) shows itself as care in the face of facticity and fallenness – reminding us of our haplessness rather than our original sin. Even a Nazi party member who saves one Jew from death, as Heidegger did, expressed ethical Being as a form of being in his human being which both in according with the only Symbolic I can corroborate in a Nazi party member as logically following from Heidegger’s commitment to Kant. This has to do with one of his Jewish students, not his undergraduate lover in the 1920s Hannah Arendt although she saved herself.

To do him justice the Nazi spies in Heidegger’s Freiburg lecture theatres soon found him much too arcane to be of use to their genocidal programme.

There wasn't enough Aryan race-theory propaganda in Heidegger – too much scepticism about anything claiming to be “the truth”. To their credit Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Buber, Jaspers, R.D. Laing, Richard Rubinstein and recently Richard Dawkins locate ethics within or without a God but otherwise in a self-standing tradition, a discourse about right and wrong.

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It is a wise son who knows his father as part of the historic Real. My beloved, usually gentle and sensitive father whose sole language as a Polish-Lithuanian Jewish boy was Yiddish with some “yeshiva” (Jewish religious seminary) Hebrew, was suddenly reborn into a new consciousness under the South African sun. He was evangelised at the age of perhaps 8 in about 1907 at Cleveland Primary School, near Johannesburg, by an ardent Christian teacher who in some way caused in him a mystical neo-Blakean version of the world. This Mr Von Brandis (a pseudonym) must have given him the “New” Testament and something like *The Treasury of English Poetry* as English texts through which he would, when he was older, be taught the language of the post-Anglo-Boer War British imperial hegemony in South Africa - mitigated by Jesus's warning to give unto Caesar (Rhodes, Beit, Barnato, Smuts, Botha, Joe Chamberlain) what was Caesar's and to give to God what was God's, mediated through his heroine, Olive Schreiner and bizarrely, later, Mary Baker Eddy whose Christian Science denied the existence of evil and disease which could be cured by prayers and devotion.

Now that he was liberated from the near-ghetto claustrophobia of his mother's and great aunts' East Polish village Milajiciz where he was born in 1899 and his father's Lithuanian city of Kaunas (called Kovno by its large Jewish population), he felt he was on the way to what one of his devotional publications called “*The Path of Truth*”, through mystical or rather meditative Christianity, whilst never forgetting his original Judaism. He wrote a poem in praise of the Palestine of our forebears.

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My father was a gifted poet who won a Bardic Chair at the Johannesburg Welsh Eisteddfod in 1922 for a poem called “The Gates of Dawn” and silver medals for other pieces about jacarandas and mimosa trees in which, like his hero William Blake, he saw the reflection of the divine order in mother nature. He saw God in the veld, in the parks and the suburbs of *eGoli, Gauteng*, the Golden City. His fate was to be an English and maths teacher in Jo'burg's and the “Rand's” tough schools like Troyeville, Krugersdorp High, Yeoville Primary, Athlone High and King Edward's VII High. These were white boys' schools and the pupils often played him up. He was only truly happy as a teacher at the Johannesburg Asian High School because he shared with Hindu, Muslim and Chinese

students a deep sympathy and understanding of Eastern religions, by contrast with the then current orthodox Judaism on which my paternal grandfather insisted and the muscular Christianity of his white pupils. Some, a few whites and many Indians eventually became Marxists and joined the African National Congress in the Congress Alliance. But that was in the 1950s and later. Gandhi's *satyagraha* was tried in 1953 during a Defiance Campaign which did not succeed as it did earlier in South Africa (after the Anglo-Boer War) for the Indians themselves. Later, the Afrikaner Nationalists were much more determined to hold on to power than the vastly outnumbered British in India. So much so that my father counselled me in the spiritual aspects of Rajah and Hatha yoga, as alternatives to radical politics.

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My father's father was Mr Moses Joseph Pekarsky, who as a *kaffereatnik*, ran a restaurant for African gold miners on mine near Cleveland, and then moved up the social economy to become a men's outfitter. He threatened his son with a revolver if he even mentioned the name of Jesus whom the otherwise dignified and respectful old man called Joska Pandera. Scurrilously, *Pandera* was supposed to be the Roman centurion who was Jesus's father, according to embittered Orthodox Jews. Jews had become a mercantile class some of whom voluntarily emigrated from Palestine in ancient times, but also had suffered 2000-3000 years of invasion, deportation, slavery, wandering, searching, persecution, expropriation, torture, death and countless exiles as a result of Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman polytheisms, and now Western and Eastern Christianity, not to mention Nazism and Stalinism.

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My father aged no more than 70 after my mother died in 1969 signed away a block of flats they had worked for all their lives out of which he was conned by a fraudster. No wonder my paternal grandfather wanted to knock some post-Christian Jewish common sense into his poetic head.

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Let alone common sense being absent, my father must have been tired of the Jews patiently waiting since time immemorial for a messiah who would bring not holy war but peace, indeed a golden age. He or She had not turned up for the Jews. So, he turned to the un-businesslike Yeshua ben Yosef, Jesus the Jew, son of Yosef and Miryam, otherwise known to the Christian world as the Son of God. The whole point of Jesus was sacrifice not material gain. But for you, me and my father this doctrine could be fatally impoverishing.

A considerable number of Jews turned to Zionism and found a perfectly justified moral high ground in Israel / Palestine – as long as Arab Palestinians were to be included in what should have been a one-state, bipartisan solution. It should have been quite different from South Africa. South Africa saw the supposed vindication of a repressive Afrikaner Nationalism getting its revenge for the Anglo-Boer War, and which had friendly relations with a partisan Israel, a land promised to the Jews only, a would-be chosen people, as was South Africa supposedly promised to the chosen Afrikaners.

At this point symbolic logic gives way to multiple Imaginaries and a fragmented sense of the brutal Real: the vanquished die and the victor, however injured, lives on. With six million deaths in the Holocaust overshadowing the ten million Jews left alive after Hitler, of course they would turn to Zionism, even those still strangely wedded to Marxist socialism which had betrayed them in the USSR and been wiped out by Hitler elsewhere in Europe.

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My mother had a very real sense of what was Real. She was a pianist trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London in the 1920s. She came to South Africa from Lithuania as a small child and learned English when my maternal grandparents struggled with the language in the years after the Anglo-Boer War at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They lived in a coal-mining town near Johannesburg called Balmoral where my maternal grandfather was a dairy-man. My mother went to a nuns' convent school leaving perhaps with a school certificate. For her "the truth" lay in classical music. She supported her sisters and parents by giving piano lessons to the daughters of mine officials. She would travel into central Johannesburg for lessons with a distinguished pianist called Adolf Hallis. Everything was a sacrifice. They were white Europeans but poor. Every effort had to be made for us to rise so as to become middle class, to be what they called "comfortable". Usually the poor whites in South Africa were dispossessed Afrikaners whose republics in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State the British had destroyed in a war Kruger and Brand desperately tried to avoid.

After their marriage in 1933 my parents lived with my maternal grandparents in Barnato Street, Berea, near the Johannesburg Girls High School, the latter housed in one of Barney Barnato's grand mansions. Barnato's life was very much the hollow truth about the gold and diamond industries which made South Africa an important power in the world economy. Barnato (really Barnett Isaacs) was originally a musical hall showman, and prize-fighter, and a Jewish Cockney. He became enormously rich in South Africa and had sold the partially consolidated Kimberley Diamond Mine to Cecil Rhodes who fully consolidated the claims.

South Africa was also Barnato's undoing. He apparently committed suicide by going overboard into the Atlantic near Madeira on a sea-voyage in a Union-Castle liner sailing from Cape Town to Southampton. Some blackmailer may have tried to implicate him in a plot to murder Paul Kruger or of involvement in the Jameson Raid which was intended to overthrow the Kruger government, and this may have depressed him.

So, this is at least some part of the truth about post-colonial early industrial South Africa. My parents' marriage in 1933 between such disparate although both Polish/Lithuanian-Jewish people, must have been arranged. Neither of them expressed much interest in sex, although my mother wanted a child and had a still-birth in 1935. She stuck to Jewish Orthodoxy and all its rituals and customs. My father was fascinated by world religions, mysticism, Christianity, literary achievement. On a trip to Britain he met Bernard Shaw, one of his idols, at Shaw's house in Ayot St Lawrence. When he quoted even a phrase or some lines of Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, William Blake, Whitman, Emerson or Shaw to make a philosophical point he might sob with suddenly unsuppressed passion and weep if only for a few seconds. It was as if he felt the life of *poesis* – Aristotle's creativity-drive - had been denied in him.

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I was born in the Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital in Hillbrow in August 1936 two months premature and weighed under 5 pounds. I was put into an incubator. My first experience of attachment was not only to my mother's breast, but to a paranoia-inducing glass box within which I must have had to scream to be released. I was greatly loved and cossetted into normal health.

My mother was determined she would build blocks of flats to achieve financial security. She raised a mortgage and built a block of maisonettes called Leighton Court in De La Rey Street, Bellevue East.

Then she sold this and built another block of maisonettes, around the corner in Isipingo Street. It was then, in about 1939, that I became aware of the Africans in our lives and how we trusted them and they us.

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Herbert and Peter Ngubane became my mother's servants. Herbert was tall and black-brown and had a deep voice and when he spoke English people discerned what they called an Oxford accent.

Peter, probably a distant cousin of Herbert, was short and apricot-brown with crescent-moon eyes and high cheekbones. He was part-Zulu and perhaps descended from the remnants of the Cape Bushpeople, the San, and gifted with a facility for and knowledge of the folk-tales and animal stories of this persecuted people, who were almost completely wiped out by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch farmers' genocide and the few left mostly absorbed into the tall, Bantu-speaking nations like the amaZulu and the amaXhosa. Hence the click sounds in the Bantu languages and a so-called "Coloured" group which contain the vestiges of the ancient Hottentots and the Bushpeople.

Whilst my parents were teaching and managing the flats Peter Ngubane entered my life as another attachment figure – more like an uncle or an older brother. He and I played together at the very end of Isipingo Street, in Gascoyne Street, a safe dead-end whilst I rode my tricycle at the age of about 3 to 5. When I was with Peter I was safe and rooted in Africa itself.

He told me stories which I imagined were originally recorded by the ethnographers Bleek and Lloyd in their *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*. These fragments of stories were about baboons, lions, the stars, the moon, the Hare and his sleeping mother in an Edenic Bushpeople's world where there was no death, only life rounded by "a little sleep" as Prospero puts it in *The Tempest*.

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I have attributed to Peter a San heritage which met the need in myself to rid myself of fear, anxiety, living in a world outside the incubator which gave me an extra time in an artificial womb to become mature. In a sense writing is now my protective incubator. There is a fictional Peter made up of the Imaginary and the Symbolic as much or more than the Real. The Real Peter and the other Ngubanes were weighed down by land shortage and low income forcing them into migrant domestic labouring or work on the gold mines. They had been deprived of the South Africa of 200 years ago when Shaka Zulu ruled as tyrant of a Zulu Empire that with assegais and shields kept the British empire and the Boer republics at bay.

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I must have been anorexic or enjoyed being small and thin and being carried weighing next to nothing on strong but short Peter's shoulders as we made our way from Gascoyne Street back to the maisonette on the corner of Isipingo and De La Rey Streets.

As a toddler, what I imagine I was really digesting with my mother's baby food, without knowing it, were Peter's Bushman stories: the story of the baboons who killed the son of Mantis, Gaunu-Tsaxau, and played ball with his eye and then was recreated by his father from his rescued eye. I gaped when Peter mimed the Bushpeople and their animals. Then my mother put a spoonful of food into my mouth.

I discovered Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* when I was a university lecturer at Oxford, then Cardiff and then Botswana. In some ways Peter educated me long before then into a practical anthropology. When I was about 4 and couldn't read yet, Peter must have already studied at a missionary school in the foothills of the Drakensberg and perhaps had contact with a great-grandmother who at the age of about 90 may still have remembered the San or Bushpeople's language, legends, poems and songs. Peter may have learned them by heart. I was astounded over 20 years later to actually see them written down in phonetic European/Latin script by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd preceded by an introduction explaining the special orthography of the San language including the five click sounds in their book.

Peter might have been able to reproduce cave-paintings with my crayons and coloured pencils from memory using delicate and subtle outlines, colouring them with the markings of the sacred dying eland being hunted by Bushpeople, and in particular the figure of a shaman, a trance-dancer and rainmaker with a special head-dress, to and from whom dotted lines emanated to show what I later realised was *kia*, outpourings of magic energy which enabled the hunt to be both successful and reparative – apologising to the eland for killing her and promising that she would go on living in the spirit world.

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My journeys were first to nursery school when I was 5 and then to King Edward VII Preparatory School Grade One when I was 7. Sometimes if we weren't late Peter and I would walk hand in hand imagining ourselves to be in the Drakensberg or the Kalahari. He might tell me for the nth time the story of the girl who made the Milky Way and the stars.

Peter had learned from my story-books that he should start even a Bushman's tale with "once upon a time". I would ask him some mornings on the way to nursery school or proper school for a story. This would be a sign that I was feeling nervous about my very first teacher at K.E.P.S. in Grade One, Mrs Hibbert, the only adult in my life-path at that time with a capacity for inducing terror. Peter was an intuitive child psychologist. If courage and insight were to be brought to bear perhaps Mrs Hibbert would not make me want to escape and run home. So, out came the story of the girl who made the stars.

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Sometimes if we were lucky there might be a red-painted Europeans-only Observatory tram at the terminus at the end of Rockey Street, where a friendly white conductor would allow an African like Peter, who was obviously in charge of a Jewish boy from a “liberalist” family to see me onto the tram and get me ready with my sixpences and shillings whilst Peter promised to tell me another story *again* when I came back from school. I knew most of the stories and would tell them to myself until I had to change trams and catch the Yeoville tram from Raleigh Street down Bedford Road to King Edward’s Preparatory School at the corner of Oak Street and Louis Botha Avenue. The story was a kind of comfort blanket appropriate for an emotionally vulnerable child. It must have been the incubator-experience rearing its ugly head.

Mrs Hibbert always wore a black dress. Perhaps she was a widow, perhaps a war-widow. It was 1943 and I was 7 – emotionally – but cognitively much older because of the intellectual climate created by my father and my knowledge of the war and incessant reading of encyclopaedias. My two uncles were in the South African Medical Corps in Libya and Egypt attending to the wounded and sick in the fight against Rommel and the Afrika Korps.

Mrs Hibbert taught us how to read and write – I already had more than the basics from my father - but she chalked lessons up on the black-board on grammar and the rules of English spelling. Mr Nuttall, the headmaster of the primary school, had an office right next door to Mrs Hibbert’s classroom and he might suddenly walk in if there was a noise. He was hot on caning. So was Mrs Hibbert.

I was subject to moods of high-spirits and then, if something went wrong, sudden, frightening depression or at least extreme fear. I might feel the need to talk, usually to a Jewish boy like Ike Jaff who was a kind of second cousin and Mrs Hibbert would reprimand me, or even order me to hold out my hand and receive one cut from her bamboo cane. Tears would spurt from my eyes and I would swear to myself to thenceforth be good.

I would turn out to be a quick learner, but lacked concentration. Mrs Hibbert asked us to read the first sentences of our stories if we could read and write. I dropped the “Once upon a time...” and started with: “There was a Bushgirl who made the Milky Way.”

I was intrigued with writing which I had been practising at home, guided by my father partly for my benefit and partly for Peter’s educational aspirations which were already attested by his excellent English.

Mrs Hibbert was initially impressed. Then some sort of usually hidden aggression emerged, and she asked me to stand up in front of the class and read out the story. She didn't smile, her black dress seemed blacker than ever and sweat stood out on her fine, blond moustache-hairs on her upper lip.

I went on with the story which I had written out: "She was 12 years old and her mother had put her in a special hut because she was now almost a young woman."

The class were either astounded at my intellectual precociousness and giggled with embarrassment or were dumbfounded at my daring to mention the unmentionable or for most of them, the incomprehensible. What did happen to girls at puberty? Perhaps the majority of boys of 7 had no sex education whatsoever. My mother a few years later burst into tears when on the occasion of my puberty which started at a precocious 11 years of age, my father re-told me the facts of human procreation. I had already by then tried to read Havelock Ellis's multi-volume *The Psychology of Sex* including "Auto-Erotism" and "Sexual Inversion", openly displayed on my uncle Jerry's bookshelves in flat number 32 Mount Sheridan. Havelock Ellis's researcher was South Africa's first novelist Olive Schreiner, revealing in her case-interviews the cat-like truths the Oedipal Jewish mother didn't want to let out of the bag.

Mrs Hibbert asked the class what they thought of my story. This must have been a terrible double-bind for the less-enlightened 7- year olds. My father showed me how to use the encyclopaedia and a dictionary at home and a primer in English grammar to check on spelling and syntax. I had guessed some of the implications about development from what I knew from boys coming from homes more liberal and enlightened than mine. With my father's and the encyclopaedia's help I wrote. I have to say he was very reluctant to have anything to do with my astonishingly determined up-front revelations of the facts of sexual life, and confined himself to the spelling and the grammar.

"So the girl got herself out of what they called the menstrual hut – I can't explain what that means but you'll have to wait till we are all older to find out - and went to the camp-fire where she was not allowed to eat springbok meat because that was reserved for the young men and her saliva being that of a girl, almost, but not quite a woman, might contaminate the young men's weapons which had killed the meat. That wasn't true but it just shows you what a thing the Bushpeople had about girls becoming women. Anyway, she grabbed hold of the quite cold ashes of the fire and threw them up into the sky and said: 'You, wood ashes, must become the Milky Way so people can see at night, hunt, and visit people in their huts.' Then she found husks of a reddish bulb good to eat with white roots and threw them up into the sky and they became the red stars which go and fetch the sun and the white stars which rise and set with the Milky Way. And so, she grew and grew

year by year and one day she got married and had many children and was happy because now she was allowed to go about at night in the light of the moon and the Milky Way”.

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No one thought I was an English literature prodigy. Everyone knew that my father taught English and must have helped me internalise a prodigious amount of English language and literature. As for Peter, I was probably seen as a sentimental negrophilist which caused great scorn amongst the philistine mob, my fellow pupils.

Like the Bushpeople telling their stories to stuffy Victorians a hundred years previously, I had to learn how to conceal the way they revealed the facts of life in case the honesty of the Bushpeople was mistaken for savage disinhibition in the process of which, in white South African eyes, a people would be seen as primitive because they projected embarrassing sexual functions through their folklore.

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My grandparents, were born in the Russian Empire in the 1870s and were now getting old and dying. At least they had been spared the Holocaust, but, in part-gratitude to a Zionist God, Rose Sacks my maternal grandmother had committed herself to a Jewish Palestine and went in for blue boxes in aid of the Jewish National Fund which now appeared on most Jewish mantel-pieces. The JNF bought up Turkish- and Palestinian-owned land for Jewish settlements. She talked about the existence of a life hereafter where she would meet Theodore Herzl who conceived of the Jewish state in his eponymous and prophetic book. She asked me seriously what I saw in Peter Ngubane and Bushman culture. I spoke of spirits. She asked me to tell her what would happen to her soul when she died. She became melancholy despite my optimism about her posthumous reputation for kindness. When she was sad she said gloomily: “There is Nothing beyond the grave”. I said I agreed with her since by adolescence I had overcome another terror: the spirits of the dead were earlier witness to my own auto-erotism and would tell my father as such during the seances he gullibly frequented and held for the consumption of the credulous by spirit-mediums enabling this awful fraudulence. How to make death tolerable: as, so far, her only grandchild, I would always love her and so would the rest of the family. Besides, I would

have my bar mitzvah soon, and I would one day have a profession and a family of my own and make her proud of me. This, I sensed, is what Jewish grandmothers wanted to hear.

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The Bushpeople believed, as did the devotees of the Hebrew bible, or at least those who, taking it with a pinch of salt, appreciated the myth of Adam and Eve, that once there was no death. In the Genesis story the serpent which is “subtle” persuades Eve that, despite God’s warning she will not die if she eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which enables wisdom and the progenitors of mankind becoming immortal gods.

In the Bushpeople’s story the moon reassures the part-animal, part-human Hare that his mother has not died, but is just sleeping. But the Hare won’t accept that his mother has not died. As a punishment for the Hare’s lack of trust, the moon comes down to earth and hits the Hare with a stick, splitting his upper lip, and Hare’s mother does die. From then on, the moon carries the spirits of the dead in its crescent even when it disappears from the sky.

The Hare is afflicted with vermin and not even its zig-zag retreat can save it from hunting dogs which tear it to pieces. Eve is afflicted with the pain of childbirth and Adam has now to cope with weeds to practice agriculture by the sweat of his brow because they betrayed God in trying to become God by choosing “consciousness”. In both stories travail and death are given a meaning. Consciousness is ultimately consciousness of death.

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I remember I was 15 when I had an epiphany about Being. It was 10 years after that when I became a devotee of philosophy that I realised with Heidegger that death is ultimately itself: that which cannot be outstripped. Death is actually part of our “fallen-ness” our “factitude” or “facticity” and that despite his opportunism in joining the Nazi Party in 1933 at least he was right in saying that the only lasting meaning in living is being-in-the-world through care, concern and solicitude. Sartre put it another way: “man” (the human being) is “a useless passion” without *engagement*. *She/He* tries to become God by holding on to both the *For Itself* which is the *totality of being*, the transcendent the *Pour Soi*, and the immanent, the infinite complexity of the immanent, the *En Soi*, *the empirical details of being*. He is actually saved by Nothingness, when he renounces the Without End, infinity. Or he affirms the Without End, infinity, and thus avoids Nothingness.

But existence in the form of the *Ein Soi* interacting with the *Pour Soi* comes to Roquentin in *Nausea* in a transcendent and immanent vision of an ordinary chestnut tree’s roots sucking up moisture from the soil in a public park. This is his only epiphany.

Followers of Kabbalah will realise the discontinuity between Sartre's Nothingness and *Ayn Sof*, the Without End as the context for Kabbalah's quasi-Platonic Forms ranging from *Keter*, sovereignty, to *Malkhut* or *Shekhina*, the ground of the Real, God's female counterpart as it were. Another mythology entirely.

#### THE BROKEN STRING: THE LOSS OF EXISTENTIAL MEANING IN A COLONIAL SOCIETY

Since late middle childhood my mother sent me to a speech and drama teacher in Johannesburg called Mabel Montague. Acting seemed to be my *forté*. My best pal Edward Byrd also at King Edward's School was another devotee of the stage and a pupil of Mabel. Since going to the university we used to drink brandy together and support multi-racial causes such as the Liberal Party and the Congress of Democrats. Edward would fall in love with girls in the drama groups Mabel entered for the Eisteddfod, but by the time we got to the University Players it was clear to Edward that, in the jargon of the time, he was queer: in today's street-speak, gay. There was simply no accessible affordable psychotherapy in the 1950s in Johannesburg to support gays. Edward died in England of alcoholism in the mid- 90s at the age of 60 after taking early retirement from his profession as a teacher of what were called ESN – "educationally sub-normal" - children.

When Edward was young and still a good actor by local amateur standards, and not yet addicted to alcohol he could be male and sublimate his gay sexuality. What broke his morale was a cruel, driving director of a repertory company in the English Midlands who hammered him for a lack of technique. Instead of going to drama school to acquire some depth of feeling and access to, say, Stanislavsky's "Method," and in London to find either a psychotherapist or Alcoholic Anonymous, he trained as a teacher of educationally subnormal children so as to sublimate his gay Imaginary and avoid the Real nature of his sexual orientation.

Edward's life was cut tragically short in a way not unlike that experienced in a Bushman lament sung to Dr Bleek and Lucy Lloyd which poignantly sums up the grief of Xaa-ttin about the death of the magician and rainmaker Nuin-kui-ten, and given voice by Xaa-ttin's son Dai-Kwain. Nuin-kui-ten, the magician and rainmaker died "from a shot he had received when going about by night in the form of a lion": here the Imaginary conceals the Real of Bushman magical belief: perhaps it was a jealous husband and his kin who killed Nuin-kui-ten or maybe Boer farmers out to destroy cattle-raiding Bushpeople, whom they regarded as "vermin".

It struck me that what the "failed" gay actor who abandons the Real and drowns in alcohol suffers from is unmitigated reality: the Imaginary and the Symbolic simply disappear as if they once were music holding the sky and the "old, sweet places" together so as to unify the Real, the Imaginary

and the Symbolic. This lament, whatever the immediate cause, must also reflect the genocide of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bushpeople as the autochthonous people of Southern Africa.

#### THE BROKEN STRING

They were the people, those who

broke the string for me

and so

this place was a grief to me

for what they did.

Since it as that bow-string which broke for me

and it sounds no more in the sky ringing,

hereabouts it feels to me no longer

like it once felt to me

just for that thing.

For

everything feels as if stood open before me

empty, and I hear no sound

for they have broken the bow's string for me

and the old places are not sweet any more

for what they did.

From *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* by W.H.I.Bleek and L.C.Lloyd (1911) at [sacred-texts.com](http://sacred-texts.com)