

Kojo Laing

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BOOKS:

Search Sweet Country (London: Heinemann, 1986; New York: William Morrow, 1987).

Woman of the Aeroplanes (London: Heinemann, 1988; New York: William Morrow
1990).

Godhorse (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1989).

Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992).

UNCOLLECTED SHORTER WORKS

FICTION

"Vacancy for the Post of Jesus Christ," ⁱⁿ Contemporary African Short Stories, edited by
Chinua Achebe and C.L. Innes (London: Heinemann International, 1992), ^{pp.} 185-
196.

POETRY

Four poems: "Love in Accra," "And What?," "Fever and Light," "What am I to Say?," Lines
Review 25 (Winter 1967-68): 11-14.

Four poems: "Birthplace," "If You Dare to Swim," "Get Rid of Social Death," "Let Fields on
Winter Food Break Your Leg," Scottish International (April 1968): 36-39.

Three poems: "Funeral in Accra," "African Storm," "Jaw," Lines Review 27 (Nov. 1968): 22-
30. "Jaw" was republished in Scottish Poetry 4 (1969): 59-69.

"Resurrection," Okyeame 5 (1972): 23-40.

"Two poems by Bernard Kojo Laing: Festival, Grasscutters in the West," West Africa (19
March 1984): 617.

Three poems: "Jazz Song," "Poem on a Runway," "Bring it Here," A New Book of African Verse, edited by John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984), 40-41.

Eight poems, The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English, edited by Adewale Maja-Pearce (London: Heinemann 1990), 113-133.

Kojo Laing belongs to the generation of Ghanaian writers that immediately follows Armah and Awoonor. He gained prominence during the 1980s as one of the most prolific and original imaginative writers in West Africa, first emerging as an important poet in the 1970s, but not widely known until after the publication of his first novel in 1986. His densely packed physical imagery and allusive style, which various reviewers have regarded as either surrealist or a version of magical realism, are fundamentally African, indeed specifically Ghanaian, in their emotional, spiritual and material sources, without however having recourse to exclusivist forms of cultural nationalism, or to direct imitation of the structural patterns of either indigenous Ghanaian languages or local non-standard varieties of English (except, of course, as appropriate in the mouth of a particular character). As a contribution to the continuing debate on the value of the European official languages as media for African literary expression, Laing's linguistic achievement demands attention.

The elder son and fourth of the six children of George Ekyem Ferguson Laing, an Anglican priest, and Darling Laing, née Egan, Kojo Laing was born in Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, where his father was the first African Rector of the Anglican Theological College. He was named Bernard Ebenezer, but has dropped his Christian names for literary purposes. (Ferguson and Laing are names of historically known

Scottish origin that have been established in Ghana, especially the Fante region on the coast, since the nineteenth century.) His early education was in Accra, where his father was Provost of the Holy Trinity Cathedral from 1952 until his death in 1962. The family thus belonged to the educated middle class, indeed the educated elite of the Gold Coast of the time, but was not wealthy by either local or foreign standards. As a child he sold baked snacks on the street in Accra, an experience he disliked at the time, but which informs his writing about the city.

After five years at the Bishop's Boys' School in Accra, Laing went to Scotland in 1957, at the age of eleven, in the care of a clerical friend and associate of his father's, Richard Holloway, later Bishop of Edinburgh. There he spent two years in Bonhill Primary School, followed by five years at secondary school at the Vale of Leven Academy, both in the small town of Alexandria, Dunbartonshire, where he lived at first with Richard Holloway's parents. From 1962 he lived with Holloway in Glasgow. Holloway's erudition, and his circle of social activists and religious thinkers, which included Dame Lilius Graham, made a considerable impression on him. Holloway also encouraged him to write poetry.

After a short holiday back in Ghana, he entered Glasgow University in 1964, having received distinctions in English and History at secondary school, and graduated with the MA in Political Science and History in 1968. He claims not to have enjoyed his years at the university, ~~and~~ his choice of degree subjects ~~was~~^{being} motivated mainly by a desire (not fulfilled) to enter the Ghana Foreign Service. At school he was an enthusiastic reader of the modern English classics and Shakespeare, and at university he discovered the French moderns, especially Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Existentialism, and the new African poetry then becoming available (especially the anthology Modern Poetry from Africa published

by Penguin in 1963). He determined very early to be a poet, but he considered formal literary study inimical to this vocation, and has remained a firmly non-academic writer.

From earliest childhood, Laing was sensitive to the sensuous nature of his surroundings, and developed a great love of forest, garden, and sea, of the city, which he thought of as another form of nature, and later of the Scottish hills and lochs. Although he could hardly be called a Christian poet in the usual sense, Christianity, high Anglican ritual and symbolism, and the fact that his much-admired father was a priest and a writer on theological subjects, and died relatively early, are relevant to the development of his art and thought.

At the age of 19, against the wishes of family and friends, Laing married Josephine Forbes (née Connelly), a Scottish social worker slightly older than himself. The marriage and immediate entry into fatherhood (there were already two children and a step-daughter by the time he returned to Ghana in 1968) seem to have been at least in part a reaction to the death of his own father in 1962, and unhappiness with his position at the university, where he felt oppressed by racism both covert and overt, and in Scottish society generally. All of these facets of his personal and social life are clearly discernible in his early poetry, and have affected his work ever since.

In 1967 and 1968, while Laing was a student in Glasgow, a number of ^{his} poems appeared in various Scottish poetry magazines. Some of this early work won the BBC's University Notebook Award for Poetry in 1967. His father's death is commemorated in "Funeral in Accra", written in 1965 and first published in the Lines Review in Edinburgh in 1968. Laing considers this poem to represent his break with juvenilia. In it he was able to shake off the inhibiting influences of the European authors of his schoolboy reading, and begin to use a poetic language that, while following the norms of standard

English in grammar and syntax and even vocabulary, was uncompromisingly his own, and also distinctively African, in image and idiom. This considerable achievement was developed and consolidated in “Jaw” (1968), a much longer poem published together with “Funeral in Accra” and “African Storm” into a powerful, dense and wholly original diction that has remained the hallmark of his writing ever since.

“Jaw” reflects Laing’s reaction to his experience as a student, and the strength afforded him by his marriage. It is also the first of a trilogy of three long poems that is central to the oeuvre as a whole, the others being “Resurrection” (1972), which was begun in Scotland but mainly written after the return to Ghana in 1968, and “Christcrowd” which was completed in 1973, when he was working in the Ashanti Region, and is still unpublished. These poems are very long: “Jaw” is about 265 lines, “Resurrection” about 600, and “Christcrowd” at least twice that. They contain the seeds of all his subsequent work; he himself considers his shorter poems and even the novels to be footnotes to the long poems.

Each of these poems is cyclical in its internal structure. As a trilogy they are also a cycle, moving back and forth between the worlds of inner and outer reality in the struggle to forge a unity of the social and the psychic, the physical and the spiritual. The starting point of “Jaw” is adolescent anger and psychological dislocation arising from culture shock, the shock of the experience of racism in a strange land, and especially the determination to fight back. Life is seen as a struggle for self-realization, and literature is a principal weapon in the struggle. Most of the images that inform all Laing’s work are present here, at least in embryo: language as physical substance, the sea, the concrete imagery of organic hands, animals, plants and food, opposed to metal, mechanical cars and aeroplanes, guns. We also find the deliberate mixing of images from different

continents that is part of an insistence on the falseness of racial barriers. The poem ends with an assertion of faith in the value of personal relationships and the possibility of wholeness: "You are the inner jaw and the resurrection"¹⁷

The last word leads directly into the second member of the trilogy, for which Laing shared a VALCO Literary Award in 1977. If "Jaw" represents the author's assertion of defiant existence and the inner integrity of his being, 'Resurrection' represents an aggressive movement outward, to face the threat and challenge of society with its false and destructive categories, prime among which is race. The image of the "Town" that is at the core of the development of the novels makes its first appearance in "Jaw"¹⁸ but it is much more extensively developed in "Resurrection"¹⁹. It represents the social world, the multiplicity of social presences that must be dealt with if the individual is to maintain inner wholeness. The imagery of the physical as the foundation of the spiritual is greatly extended, as are the themes of social lies, false priests and language that fragments instead of bringing together. At the end of the poem the poet is still angry, but he has gathered strength and courage to approach the Town on his own terms. "Christcrowd" defines a spiritual world that integrates the physical and social.

Existentialism is an important intellectual source for these works, including Sartre and Kierkegaard but particularly the existential phenomenology of the Scottish psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, whose writings were popular at the time Laing was a student. The central theme here is psychological alienation, the idea that the central problem of modern life is the conflict between the inner and the outer modes of the individual's experience, of himself and his surroundings, which results in ontological insecurity and fragmentation of the personality. The goal of human life, and the goal of the long poems, is wholeness of being and experience, the "concrete"²⁰

An original aspect of (Kojo) Laing's literary approach to the struggle for wholeness and authenticity is the role he gives to language as both symbol and instrument. Its symbolic function underlies the title of "Jaw". The jaw is the meeting place of spirit and body. As the last line of the poem indicates, it represents a physical foundation upon which the head rests. It also represents the faculty of speech, which makes both expression of the inner self and communication, or participation in the "town", possible. But language is also a weapon, both of the struggle for self and of the hostile outer, in the form of inauthentic speech, and so the jaw is also the battle ground for authenticity in interaction between the inner and the outer:

For only a few kept insults burn,
angered and impotent on my jaw,
in the hospital of the poem. (Jaw)

I see a crowd of people on the corner of my mouth.

They talk there, they wipe their feet there.

They exchange their lies ~~there~~^{there}. (Resurrection)

The other aspect of Laing's treatment of language, language as substance, is seen in the quotation from "Jaw" above. Language as literature is a concrete object. Laing seems to have been influenced in this area by the French Concrete poets, and by the Scottish Concrete Poetry movement, whose members also published in Lines Review. The fascination with language as object, especially as graphic object, is particularly important in "Resurrection" with its numerous linguistic metaphors, even puns, in lines like "And I hold hard onto the two Rs of inner presences", and "He sticks his thumb through the E of HEAL". He even combines puns with "concrete" graphic devices, in a line like "I will listen quietly to your woes in the next four blank lines" - followed by

four blank lines. The writing in this poem (as in much of Laing's work) sometimes teeters on the brink of the ridiculous, but is usually saved by its manifest passion.

Ironically, language is also a concrete obstacle to be overcome. This idea is already present in "Jaw" and "Resurrection", although it is more fully developed in later work:

I am the letter T joined onto an H while E looks on
unwillingly. (Jaw)

I make war on the ten letters of Past Tenses! (Resurrection)

Laing's only published collection of poems, Godhorse, is a selection of work covering twenty years, from "Funeral in Accra" of 1965 to "Twenty years flying", written in Accra in 1984. The book is therefore antecedent to the novels, even though it was published later than the first two. This is also true of the poems anthologized by Reed and Wake (1984) and by Maja-Pearce (1990), although the poems in Maja-Pearce are generally later than those in Reed and Wake. Quite a number remain unpublished. Many of the published poems work out themes of the long poems in relation to personal events and concerns, or in otherwise limited contexts. Most are ultimately related to the concern with existential authenticity and psychic wholeness.

In 1969, Laing joined the Ghana Civil Service, and worked as District Administrative Officer/Chief Executive in various towns in the Ashanti Region, Offinso, Obuasi and Konongo, for the next decade. This extended period in small-town Ghana, broken only by four months at the University of Birmingham for a training course in rural administration in 1975, reinforced his love of nature, not merely as an observer but as an active participant: a favourite pastime during this period (and since) was hunting. All of this is reflected in the imagery of the poetry written during this time and later.

In 1978 Laing moved to Accra, where he worked at first in government headquarters in the Castle during the last days of the Supreme Military Council under General Akuffo, the first Rawlings coup, and the transition to the elected Limann government. In 1979 he left government service for a job in the administration of the University of Ghana, where he was Administrative Secretary of the Institute of African Studies from 1979 to 1984. By this time, there were eight children of his own, Ghana was in a period of exceptional economic hardship, and the strains on his marriage were considerable. In 1981 his wife left for England, where she now lives with five of their six children. In 1984 he left the university to head St. Anthony's Schools, in the western suburbs of Accra. St Anthony's was founded by his mother in 1962, and remains a family concern. The changes of physical environment, the career changes and the stresses and alterations in his personal life coincide with a change in poetic style, a new maturity, which can be regarded as a development toward the style of the novels, which were begun during this period.

The selection in Godhorse is reasonably representative. The shorter poems may be roughly divided into two groups, written before and after 1979. The fundamental themes do not change, but a shift in emphasis is detectable. In the collection, thematic continuity is illustrated by "Funeral in Accra"², "Soon father"², written in 1976, and "Zoom sail the graves" from about 1984, which are all meditations on his father's death. "Three Songs"², from 1969, "The Prime Minister's Daughter" and "Godsdoor"², both written in 1972, and "Festival" and "Funeral in Cape Coast"², written in 1976, are all concerned with authenticity in religion and social life, although from different points of view, as is the more light-hearted "Black girl white girl" from 1973.

Some themes gain greater prominence in the later poems. Thus, "Zoom sail the graves" and "No needle in the sky" also from 1984, are both concerned with language and the poet's task. "I just can't sit on chairs" and "Courage" both written about 1979, are also concerned with the poet's burden, but the focus is on his relationship to the social world. The difficulties attending authenticity in personal relations, and undoubtedly his own marriage, are explored in "The huge car with the sad voice" first written in 1970 but revised in 1980, and "The rain slants" written in 1980. The title poem, from 1984, represents the human striving for spiritual wholeness, which includes the social: the failures of the man and woman in the poem reflect the failure of their society, for Ghana too is "half a country".

Although the existential concern with an authentic relationship between inner and outer experience does not lessen, the poems that were written beginning about 1979 exhibit a somewhat different view, almost an obsession, in which the outer world appears as oppressively impersonal and morally neutral, governed by almost uncontrollable external forces, to a degree not obvious earlier. At the same time, the human world is seen as necessarily organic and fundamentally social, so that there seems to be a deep disjunction between the inner and the outer, particularly apparent for example in the title poem. This seems to indicate a more somber approach to the problem of the social individual in the world, and the magnitude of the struggle for wholeness both personal and national, but no lessening of the struggle. In "Godhorse" the old man's struggle to stay on the horse, and to make contact with Mansa, represents the struggle for complete and meaningful life, so that his failure expresses the failure to create a world in which such a life is possible, but not the impossibility of doing so. The impressionism of "Wall" the lightness of "Three Songs" and the youthful enthusiasm of "If you dare to

swim" (1968), all written before 1975, give way to the implied experience of "The rain slants" (written 1981), the politically situated anger of "Tatale Swine" (written 1983), and the passionate parable of "Godhorse", which presages the battles with the natural world of *½ Allotey* in the first novel. The early influences of the Concrete Poetry movement and existentialism have been reworked into a concrete existentialism of the author's own (Dakubu 1991).

The obsession with Christian imagery, and with inadequate and racist priests, that informs "Christcrowd" and appears in "Godsdoor" and several other shorter poems, such as "Grasscutters in the West" (1984), begins to include the non-Christian, for example in "Godhorse". This does not however mean that Laing thinks they are necessarily better than the Christian kind, for the "bishops and fetish priests" of "Godhorse" are equally unable to make what has been fragmented into a whole: "the religious men wanted to bless the impudent hooves", that is, they accept the horse's uncontrolled speed, without relating it to their lives.

A prosodic shift complements the new approach. In the later poems the lines are still fast moving and forceful, but they are also more regular in length, uniformly long. There are no more very short poems, like the "Three Songs" or "Dog". The result is a solidity of form that expresses a consolidation of inner resources, in the battle to make the outer a part of the inner self, that Laing refers to as the abjuration of "speed". The aggressive imperatives and declaratives characteristic of "Jaw" and "Resurrection" and present in many of the shorter poems have for the most part disappeared.

The three novels build on this broadening and thickening of prosody and imagery, as well as the reorientation towards the outer. *Search Sweet Country* (1986), written when Laing was working at the university and living near the campus, was finished in

1984. It was therefore written during a period of hardship and major disruption in the life of the country, as well as in his personal life: 1983 was a year of agricultural disaster for Ghana, the country was under curfew for more than a year, and the university was closed for many months. Both the other novels were begun during 1985, when he had left the university neighborhood to live in Mamprobi in western Accra. Woman of the Aeroplanes (1988) was finished early in 1987, and Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars (1992) by September 1988.

If the long poems can be viewed as cycling between the inner and the outer, the novels represent a definitive movement out, externalizing the psychic "Town" of presences that beset the individual of the long poems into actual towns and cities and large numbers of characters. At the same time, they are also concerned with the necessary interconnectedness of inner and outer, and can be viewed as a parallel cycle.

Search Sweet Country is set in Accra, the capital of Ghana, in 1975, during the era of corrupt military government led by Col. Kutu Acheampong, and his "Operation Feed Yourself" program for agricultural survival. This period of course coincided with Laing's government service in the Ashanti Region. His thesis is that the political situation will not change for the better until the people learn to relate to themselves and to each other in an honest and open manner. By the end of the novel some characters have done this, but others have not quite achieved it, and yet others probably never will. The conclusion seems hopeful but not unduly optimistic.

Characters proliferate, involved in numerous intertwining plots and sub-plots, but the central story connects the search for identity of Kofi Loww, intensely concentrating on his existential situation, to the beginnings of a parallel search by Kojo Okay Po1, foil to the Loww character, who has almost no connection with his inner self, and when he

first appears is leading a life that is a paradigm of inauthenticity. Both names are puns, and the name of Loww evidently includes a pun on the author's own name. The searches of the other characters all comment on this central one, adding up to ^{a statement on} the whole country.

This novel represents an independent development from the existentialism of the long poems that owes little if anything to R.D. Laing. The individual cannot achieve wholeness by becoming a member of a pair or a small group, but must move out into the world, and then apply what has been gained to intimate personal relations. There can be no retreat from public failure into private concerns, hence the long delay before Kofi Loww and his lover Adwoa Adde can settle down together.

Search Sweet Country carries further Laing's linguistic endeavour, to create a unity in multiplicity of the language of concrete experience, both physical and spiritual. The language of the novel is at least as allusive and metaphorical as the language of the poems, and the images themselves continue and at times repeat the images of the poetry. The search for unity and the obliteration of false social distinctions is thus directly mirrored by the language, which deliberately ignores distinctions between poetry and prose, and draws on the resources of both English and African languages as the author sees fit.

The linguistic project is inseparable from the overriding theme of the book, the need for all-encompassing change, in which all aspects of life—social, spiritual, psychic and physical—are inter-dependent. The need for and the difficulty of such change is articulated in different ways by most of the major characters. In Chapter 18, Loww's father articulates the son's conclusions: "... Change everything except the roots that do the changing! And in change we must look both backward and forward... ". The matter is most lengthily and explicitly examined by Professor Sackey, a character plainly derived

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from his creator's acquaintance with the University of Ghana, in Chapter 21. According to Sackey, the educated Ghanaian moves easily between the abstract and the concrete, among the different cultures and spheres of society, but does not really make connections among them. Facts are collected but ideas are not applied to them, or not with any originality, so that theories and ideas remain unintegrated foreign imports. A contradiction between the traditional and the contemporary is internalized, and the result is moral paralysis, with a "deepening dichotomy between action and thought". Existentially, this represents a loss of wholeness, ending in cultural parasitism. The crux of the problem is the paradox that the very willingness of Ghanaian intellectuals to identify with the ordinary, often illiterate, traditional person leads to avoidance of the originality of thought that is absolutely necessary if the country is to advance without losing whatever value there is in the traditional. The available freedom to create new wholes, new meanings for old symbols, is not used.

Laing makes great demands on his readers, despite the program to communicate in the most concrete manner possible. None of his work is easy to read, and although Search Sweet Country had many very positive reviews when it appeared, and won several prizes in Ghana and Britain (including the VALCO Award, the Ghana Book Award, the Ghana Association of Writer's Kwame Nkrumah Prize, and Special Mention for the David Higham Prize), most reviewers referred to this problem. There are two related reasons for it, one linguistic, the other having to do with narrative method. Especially in the novels, the imagery and sometimes the syntax employ many features of Ghanaian popular speech. Although glossaries are provided, they cannot solve all the problems for a reader not familiar with this idiom. However, even though Laing's language shows an affinity with that of some very popular Accra newspaper columnists, Ghanaians also find

him hard to read. The real problem seems to lie in his highly original poetic syntax, and the intense concentration of images that are symbols primarily of themselves (Dakubu 1993). While this language is truly expressive and often very beautiful, the fact that it owes almost nothing to English literary convention leaves the reader without the usual guides to what the author is doing.

The other problem is the flattened dramatic structure. Plots and subplots are balanced against each other in terms of symbol and thematic argument, not people and events. This probably underlies the impression, likely to be shared by many readers, that the characters are interesting but two-dimensional representations of familiar types, not real people (Amoako 1988: 105). Many things happen in Search Sweet Country, but it is hard to find a climax to the book as a whole. The climax as far as the story of Kofi Loww's personal search is concerned surely arrives when his father finds him with his mother and son, so that all the fragments of his life are brought together. Yet this scene is anti-climactic, for the dramatic moment has happened already, when his mother found him in a police cell and got him out, and the reader only learns of that indirectly, almost as an afterthought. Further, the fragments do not stay together, for his mother and father are not reconciled. These events happen in Chapter 18, the same chapter in which Nana Esi, Araba Fynn's grandmother, who has no connection whatsoever with Loww and his family, is buried. This funeral represents a turning point in the relations between Araba and Kojo Pol. The connection between the two events lies in the thematic structure, not the plot structure, for while Loww is finally gaining the capacity for wholeness, Araba Fynn and Kojo Pol are both losing it. Similarly, the march on the Castle in Chapter 20 is an undeniably dramatic event. It brings matters to a spiritual head, and should probably be regarded as the climax to the book as a whole, but not one of the major characters is

involved in it, except Osofo Ocran, and he quickly loses control of it. The event represents his failure.

This kind of fictional structure is certainly interesting, but it is not easy to follow. Combined with the density of the writing, it gives the reader great difficulty in keeping track of what exactly has happened, and why. The denseness is deliberate, imitating in art the solidity of the physical world, ^{and offering} a weapon in the battle to dominate it, but the price paid is that the reader must be prepared to study the book, not just read it.

While Search Sweet Country is situated in real historic time, Woman of the Aeroplanes takes place outside of time in what appears to be an eternal present. It parallels "Resurrection" in representing a movement outwards on the basis of an already strong inner self. The novel declares the author's confidence in the desirability and possibility of inter^rracial and inter^ccultural trust and harmony, but like both Search Sweet Country and "Resurrection" it ends on a note of open possibility and hope, rather than outright optimism.

The plot develops the theme of the urgent need for change expressed in Search Sweet Country, on another plane. The town of Tukwan ('travel' in Akan) is populated by people of all types, from all over Ghana, not just Ashanti, although it is set in the forested Ashanti Region, significantly inland from Search Sweet Country's coastal savanna city of Accra. It has been banished by the authorities in Kumasi for "subversive activity, for refusing to listen to all the songs of the ancestors" (1). It is therefore known to the authorities, but hidden from them, being immortal and out of time. The town is looking for an identity that will allow it to progress and prosper, and at the same time to keep its soul, which is its great strength. It is therefore, ironically, striving to lose its immortality, for progress means change, which implies mortality. It is joined in the

search by a sister town in Scotland, "Levensvale". A group from Tukwan visits there, and then a Levensvale group visits Tukwan, to their mutual benefit.

In Woman of the Aeroplanes the conflict between inner and outer in the search for authentic wholeness is expressed in the two towns, and also in the conflict between technology and spirit in modern life, personified in the twins, Kwame Atta, the "bad" twin, representing amoral inventiveness, originality and technology, and Kwaku de Babo, the contemplative "good" twin and passionate moral spirit who does not reject technology but requires that it be organic. Technology is treated as necessary but fragmenting, antithetical to imagination and the inner life. Laing's naive equation of technology with science, which reappears in Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars, and the omission of any indication of what organic technology might look like in real life, weaken this aspect of the argument of the novel.

Numerous characters illustrate the value of balance and interaction between peoples and cultures, but the structure of interlaced subplots is on the whole less elaborate than in Search Sweet Country. Not surprisingly, this novel draws upon the author's experience of Scotland in a way the others do not. The writing is somewhat more relaxed than in Search Sweet Country, and this is particularly noticeable in the chapters set in Scotland. Laing also makes a direct comment on his relationship to the English language. During the flight to Levensvale, Pastor Mensah asks Kwaku de Babo, the town scribe, and as a reflective observer a character parallel to Kofi Loww and the persona of the author, what will happen to the English language when they get there. He replies "...you are not going to get me to be defensive about a foreign language that I knew before I could walk..." (46). Mensah replies that he too loves the language, and de Babo seems

to suggest that they maintain it better than the natives do. That is, both Twi and English are part of the Tukwan birthright, with no need to apologize for either.

Unlike Search Sweet Country, Woman of the Aeroplanes develops in a frankly fantastical manner. Not only is it outside time, the airplanes on which the Tukwan people travel (jet planes, despite the dust jacket illustration) have trailers for the baggage, and can apparently hover to let the passengers descend by rope ladder. Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars, which won Laing his third VALCO Award in 1993, is set in the future, in 2020 AD, and is at least as fantastical as Woman of the Aeroplanes. It parallels the spiritual flight of "Christcrowd" (which begins with the line "BIRD!") by moving literally up: the town of Achimota City has colonized the moon, some of its people move easily back and forth between moon and earth, and at least one character has his eye on the sun. Yet it expresses a much angrier, less optimistic view of both interpersonal and international relations than the previous novels, as it deals with the threat to poor countries, who are fighting for their very existence, from faceless manipulators in the rich countries.

Again the community must come to terms with the outside world, but this time the outside world is evil, impersonal and remote, and coming to terms with it means defeating it utterly. Europe has given up humanity altogether, and is indirectly conducting a war to dominate Africa in general and Achimota City in particular through Torro, a half-assimilated agent with an unsavoury international background that combines mafia, Nazi and South African connections. Achimota City, a suburb of Accra which by the time of the novel has engulfed Accra and Tema but become cut off from the rest of the country, has achieved an ideal of civil happiness, in which invention and organization thrive but do not eliminate the soul. If half-crazy Beni Baidoo's village in Search Sweet

Country is a symbol of a new Accra, Achimota City could be its sane realization. Its major political achievement is to have made politics unglamorous. All this is threatened by the war being conducted by Torro on behalf of his unseen foreign masters. He is especially dangerous because he is accepted as part of the local scene, and because he has hidden machines that steal the Achimotans' energy for the benefit of their enemies, and even cause them to forget who their enemies are.

The novel develops as a series of battles of gradually increasing violence. The leader of the Achimotans against Torro is Major aMofa Gentl, who has already led them to victory in an earlier war but refuses all promotions and decorations. Another important character is Pogo Alonka Forr, a creative and powerful businessman, but not altogether trustworthy, being given to intrigue and attempts to play both sides. Unlike Major Gentl, he yearns for the glamour of power that Achimota has done away with, and he is very much a man of the physical world. His golden horse recalls the brown horse of the poem "Godhorse", that represents the impersonal world of uncontrolled physical force, except that unlike the old man of the poem, Pogo Alonka Forr is generally able to control his horse. An old lady, Nana Mai Grandmother Bomb, is the scientist, inventor and chief brains, with aspects of the priestess.

The final battle is fought between Torro's rats and Gentl's snakes aided by Nana Mai. The snakes win, the destruction of Torro's computers is complete (technology is still essentially hostile), and life returns to normal. Achimota City is the standard of the future, "a place where power was the last resort, and humanity and invention allowed even the smallest human being to open out into the trees and into the universe, to see the whole, to touch the inner" (180). Unlike the previous novels, this one ends on a note of

completion and optimism: the war has been won, and the children will cope with the future.

Although, like Woman of the Aeroplanes, the design of Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars is not so multilinear as that of Search Sweet Country, it is not an easy read, for the same reasons. The imagery is dense and direct: the struggle for meaning in the universe is not compared to a horse and its rider, it is a horse and rider, and many sentences on most pages involve several such images, connected with a minimum of interpretive signposts. For example, we may examine the opening paragraph:

Major aMofa Gentl was feared in Achimota City for his gentleness, since it was this quality that won the first war for the golden cockroach, the emblem of the city. And this emblem, accompanied by its friend the silver mosquito, would shed its symbolic nature and become a real city cockroach crawling about looking for truth. (1)

The reader must determine what this quality of gentleness consists of and why it is feared, how it won the war, what makes the golden cockroach a fitting emblem, what the silver mosquito means, what it means for the cockroach to shed its symbolic nature and what it has to do with the truth. The apparent contradictions (between fearfulness and gentleness, golden and cockroach, cockroach and civic emblem) are typical of Laing's method, as is the peculiar use of "would". By the end of the novel he has told us, in his way, but since every paragraph adds more such puzzles and direct explanations are not provided, the reader must make considerable effort to find this out.

Laing's work is pervaded by an intense concentration on the physical life, both for its own sake, expressed for example in abundant images of fruit, food, and football, and as a source of strength, as in the image of hands, that appears everywhere except perhaps

in Major Gentl, or even a weapon, as in the insistent phallic imagery, which appears everywhere but takes over in Major Gentl. It is the foundation for the life of the spirit, hence the governing irony of Woman of the Aeroplanes. The physical life sought is not an unthinking one, however, and as foundation for the spirit it involves continual struggle, hence for example the image of the struggle to stay on the horse in "Godhorse"¹², or Major Gentl's struggle with the camel in Zone Nine of Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars: "The camel sat on the major, then the major sat on the camel" (84). The horse as image of impersonal physical existence that must be tamed goes back to "Resurrection": "And I turn the horse round"¹³ In Forr's golden horse and in the horse of Kwame Atta "bursting out of the forest" (12), the outer physical force has been tamed, but made to support only the non-spiritual wisdom of the businessman and the technologist respectively. It appears in another aspect in the independent-minded, goal-keeping camel that chooses eventually to be tamed by Major Gentl.

The strong element of play in Laing's work (both poetry and novels) arises from this physical base, which is not invariably impersonal and amoral. The football games that represent the opening skirmishes of Achimota City's Wars of Existence first appear in "Jaw"¹⁴ and nearly distract the returning travellers in Woman of the Aeroplanes from completing their mission. Children are a fundamental aspect of the moral side of the physical life, and a natural source of play. This theme is particularly prominent in Woman of the Aeroplanes, where children are also involved in images involving school, because of the need for both sides to learn. The chapters are named "classes" (equivalent to calling them "grades" in an American novel), arithmetic as a metaphor for fragmentation is particularly prominent, and much of the language suggests or directly quotes Ghanaian children's language, rhymes, nicknames and jokes.

Most recently, Laing has been writing short stories. They are intended to appear together as a book, and ^{to date} ~~at the time of writing this essay~~ only one has been published, "Vacancy for the Post of Jesus Christ" (1992). A man appears from the sky driving a lorry made of golden wood, ironically recalling the Asante golden stool. This "first evil galactic African bronzeman" has murdered Jesus for his sympathy and spirit, but is now violently seeking to replace him, for his peace turns out to be necessary, even in outer space. This character personifies the terrible neutrality of the universe, that earlier appeared as various horses. By the end of the story his neutrality has been altered by the human spirituality of the town. He is shown up as not as invincible as he seemed, and Jesus was not dead after all. Indeed, the "terrible neutrality" seems to be a sort of hubris on the part of the outer galaxies; continuing from Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars, the moral domain, if not actual human control, has been extended throughout the universe. But the story reverts to the doubt with which all the long works end, except Major Gentl: the metallic man has become "...almost human now. But had he found his peace?" (196).

The shorter form induces a restriction on the diversity of the narrative, so that its structure is relatively easy to grasp. The tension between violence and peace, spirit and body, tradition and change, divisive and unifying force is again expressed in an eccentric Christian/African imagery, that sets up unending dualisms in order to oppose them.

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