

Language as an Instrument of Transformation in De Groen's *The Rivers of China*¹

If as Elizabeth Perkins has suggested, "more than any other aestheticians, feminist thinkers are concerned with the kind of transvaluation and transformation possible in no human activity other than art", ²then *The Rivers of China* exemplifies this. Transvaluation and transformation is the central theme of *Rivers*. *Rivers* urges us to embrace both transvaluation and transformation with an open mind: to make the journey for the journey's sake, not necessarily as a means to an end. The weakness, if indeed it is a weakness and not a major strength, is that this demands intense focus from the audience and a willingness to participate in a series of climaxes that are without a final straightforward resolution (catharsis). In other words it requires the audience to participate in the play's open text — an essentially feminine experience of a feminist philosophy, and the audience must take the journey "wrong-footedly".³

It is, besides being highly imaginative and evocative, a political play that demands of its audience a journey into the feminine psyche the better to understand the suppression a woman feels when her creative voice is stifled. *Rivers*, besides showing and telling us what this experience is like, evokes an emotional as well as rational response through the use of the symbolic and the poetic. It therefore marries — in simple stereotypical terms — what is traditionally seen as feminine (intuitive) and masculine (rational) traits in the play's plea for an understanding of the ongoing problem in feminist politics, while at the same time it refutes the possibility of binary solutions. *Rivers* demands the audience partake of its transformative experience.

The shared experience that is demanded of both the characters and the audience, is the experience of self-transformation. As Katherine, Wayne and Rahel embark on their separate quests for self-transformation through the uncensored expression of their own experience of language, the audience, if willing, is drawn into a quest of their own. As Sue-Ellen Case says:

The feminist in theatre can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression — gender — can be exposed,

dismantled and removed; the same laboratory may produce the representation of a subject who is liberated from the repressions of the past and capable of signalling a new age for both women and men.⁴

Wayne, a product of the new age, struggles in his quest to find self-expression and self-knowledge in the beauty of creative language, a language skill that is denied him in the society of which he is a part. Katherine, already skilled in language, struggles to find metaphysical reality. A metaphysical reality which, though Katherine does not realise it, is anti-phallogocentricity. Katherine's "mysterious core" is the unknown — the (w)hole the phallus cannot fill. Katherine's longing is for Gaea⁵ — the eternal womb — the centre of both chaos and creativity; the dark side of which is the Medusa; and here we confront one of the play's many ambiguities. Katherine longs to yield to the unknown, but turns to Gurdjieff for help:

I've felt more and more lately that there's a whole world into which we're received if we can just yield to it. With all that we know, how much do we not know? I used to think I might know all but some mysterious core. But now I believe just the opposite. The unknown is far greater than the known. The known is only a shadow. I believe the real cause of my illness is not my lungs, but something else. If I could find that something else and cure it, all the rest would heal.⁶

Katherine, on the brink of discovering and yielding to a new spiritual awakening mistakenly narrows her focus to Gurdjieff, thus limiting her vision and giving Gurdjieff the power to determine the nature and scope of her quest, and bestows on Gurdjieff the authority of the phallus. Gurdjieff does awaken Katherine to a new self-awareness. Unfortunately, having achieved this, he then seeks to impose his own limits on her. In *Rivers* then, there is a conflict between Medusa and the patriarchal God-hierarchy that places women at the bottom of the chain of command and places men at the top (the head) as the source of spirituality — the basis of phallogocentric power:

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband and the head of Christ is God.⁷

Male gurus like Gurdjieff can therefore see themselves as the way, the truth and the life:

GURDJIEFF: Only way for woman to evolve — go to what you call "Heaven" — is with man.

KATHERINE: If one happens to have misplaced one's man?

GURDJIEFF: She does not go anywhere.

KATHERINE: We don't cross the border without you? You provide the passport? Password? Maps?

GURDJIEFF: Good. Understand now On earth is man, not woman, who climb mountains, paint picture, write books —

[KATHERINE picks up a copy of her stories, "Bliss", and holds it aloft]

There are women try to become man, but this wrong for her nature. Man has aspiration to find heaven because has possibility for immortality. But such aspiration poison for woman unless has man to help her...

Without me never be anything *but* cow. When die only have value for fertiliser.⁸

Just as Gurdjieff says of Katherine that she is a "series of imaginary events"⁹ so Rahel says of the Man, "I made him. Or what you think is him. You can give anybody a history that never happened and they'll believe it."¹⁰ Gurdjieff, like Rahel, **imposes** transformation on others, rather than encouraging **self-transformation**. De Groen dramatically reveals through Rahel, that a matriarchy¹¹ based on the domination and subjugation of men is not a legitimate substitute or replacement for a phallogocentric patriarchy which dominates and subjugates women largely through its (mis)use of language. As Wearne says:

Feminist analysis of language and literature has identified the attempt by patriarchy to construct language as a totalising regime, in which the dominant interpretive community constricts all voices other than the privileged ones — the voices of patriarchal authority ...¹²

Gurdjieff demands Katherine transform spiritually, but physically he wants her to become his. The Man has no choice. He is physically already in Rahel's power and is transformed while asleep through hypnotic suggestion. Subtly, with wry humour, De Groen reveals that it is dangerous for women to replace one form of domination only to impose another of their own making. Rahel challenges the new order's suppression of male autonomy and voice, but at the same time she robs the Man under her care of everything that makes him his own person. The death of his Self culminates in the death of his person. De Groen's point — that no human being can be in control of another without the controlled subject's death of self — and in this play, the death of the self culminates in physical death.

Rahel realises too late the extent of her error. What she has committed is rape. Moral hypocrisy in a patriarchy in its extreme form condones pornographic violence. Condoning pornographic violence allows a man to force himself sexually on a woman by exerting his physical strength (hence the violent rape scene at the beginning of Art Two), raping, not only her body, but her psyche (her innermost self). A woman who violates a man's mind by forcing and superimposing a woman's mind over his own, commits psychic rape. When she exerts the strength of her position of power and trust to ensure that his body is no longer his own, when his body is invaded and taken over by another, she is committing physical rape. It is the only possible way a woman can penetrate and overpower a man sexually.

One of the messages I glean from this is that in a patriarchal or matriarchal society the only way one sex can dominate is by turning the other sex into the victim. The principal way we construe "the other" as less than ourselves (and therefore deserving or needing a dominant leader) is through language. As Bolen quotes:

According to Merlin Stone, author of *When God Was a Woman*, the disenthronement of the Great Goddess, begun by the Indo-European invaders, was finally accomplished by the Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem religions that arose later. The male deity took the prominent place. The female goddesses faded into the background, and women in society followed suit. Stone notes, "We may find ourselves wondering to what degree the suppression of women's rites has actually been the suppression of women's rights."¹³

Women's rites were (and to a large extent where they continue, still are) based on symbology, whereas the Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem religions are primarily defined by language. Judaeo-Christianity then is responsible for women in the Western world finding themselves without a voice:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.¹⁴

The patriarchal God-centred and male interpreted religion is at the heart of the conflict in *Rivers* and at the heart of the conflicting nature of patrifocal versus matrifocal language. But by replacing it with a Medusa-centred and female interpreted religion the women in the play are faced with the problem of realising that they have skirted the issue not solved it.

The Man is forced to submit to a matrifocal religion and society. He is denied the freedom to express himself creatively in this society. By inverting the female role — woman in submission to a society governed by a male-God patrifocal religion — we are encouraged to look again at women's predicament in such a society. Ironically, by removing the physical "femaleness" of the Man, we are better able through his experience to see the female (and feminist predicament). A predicament engendered by the denial of his/her creative and self-expressive power of language.

While Gurdijieff imposes *non*-history on Katherine, the Man has a history imposed on him which endows him with powerful creative expression considered in the New World as the sole prerogative of the female. He is therefore denied the right of expression. He is further denied any form of literature written by men; and is denied access to others with like minds. He is isolated. This accurately mirrors by inversion, the history of women writers who for years had to use male names to be accepted¹⁵. In part, through the power of Rahel's imposed suggestion, and as much through the power of his own creative imagination, the Man has intuited not only Katherine's physical condition but also her way of thinking and creating with words and, her behaviour.

Through the Man, De Groen reverses the notion of woman as object of the male gaze and makes a man the object of the female gaze on and off the stage. She thus evokes the need to rethink both male and female role constructs if we are to attain genuine harmony between the sexes and to move from the patriarchal world, not to an equally corrupt matriarchal world, but to one where true equality allows for a liberal exchange of ideas and a language which embraces aspects of the male and female within us all.

Therefore *Rivers* is, among other things, a powerful play on sexual politics that subverts some currently held social, political and humanist priorities. Like all plays that challenge the *status quo*, it evokes a strong response from critics and audiences alike but leaves the responsibility for change squarely on the shoulders of the individual. Elizabeth Perkins writing on several of De Groen's plays had this to say:

The complexity of theme in De Groen's plays refutes assumptions that women are uninterested and incompetent in handling abstract thinking in their art. Feminist aesthetics requires intellectual abstraction, analysis and synthesis, and the act of intuiting is ... important in feminist aesthetics ... feminist aesthetics is also closely attached to social and political realities. Beyond this, more than any other aestheticians, feminist thinkers are concerned with the kind of transvaluation and transformation possible in no human activity other than art.¹⁶

Only in art is it possible to watch the transformation of a man into a woman by the transvaluation of a soul. The transvaluation and transformation De Groen is pursuing in *Rivers* requires of the audience that men walk the journey, not in a woman's shoes, but, [no pun intended] in her soul. To make the journey accessible she has a male actor show us how this can be achieved, not through any form of cross-dressing which would completely change the emphasis. Quite the contrary: the Man is seen first swathed in bandages, his sex completely unrecognisable. He is a man who genuinely *believes* he was originally a woman and who shows us how that makes him feel. If the male actor playing the Man does so with sincerity, and IF the male members of the audience are prepared to take the journey, that is the beginning of transvaluation and transformation.

When compared with De Groen's earlier plays, *Rivers* is the culmination of her grasp of the power struggle inherent in our use of language. Katherine's religion is her own word:

Shall I be able to express, one day, my love of work — my desire to be a better writer — my longing to take greater pains. And the passion I feel. It takes the place of religion — it is my religion ...¹⁷

This is a direct challenge, not only to patrifocal religion, but also to the patriarchal order of language. Cixous argues:

... that masculine sexuality and masculine language are phallogentric and logocentric, seeking to fix meaning through a set of binary

oppositions, for example, father/mother, head/heart, intelligible/sensitive, logos/pathos, which rely for their meaning on a primary binary opposition of male/female (or penis/lack of penis) which guarantees and reproduces the patriarchal order. This hierarchization of meaning serves to subordinate the feminine to the masculine order.¹⁸

Through her work (her words) Katherine knows the power of being the source and creator of herself and her world. She is an object to herself, "a characteristic possible only ... by means of language"¹⁹ and through her power over language:

MAN: When I write a story I choose not only the length of every sentence, but the sound, I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit the mood or the character on *that* day at that moment. After I've written it I read it aloud, until I get it right, until there's not a single word out of place, and not one word that could be taken out. While I am writing I am engulfed. Possessed. Anyone who comes near is my enemy. It takes the place of religion for me. It is my religion ...²⁰

The irony here is, the Man who speaks Katherine's words is in a society where he is denied the power of creative self-expression because of his gender, much as women are now. While he has the necessary equipment to exercise power in Gurdjiev's world; the female with a phallus:

GURD: You do not have a soul.
KATH: What about you? If you've got one and I haven't, it's not hard to guess where you keep it ...²¹

In the new society, the Man wakes up to a world where his sexual equipment excludes him from the same rights Katherine was denied as a woman. Katherine, in Freudian terms, is physically a castrated male; the Man therefore is the *inversion* of woman as the castrated man.

It is difficult to assess fairly the strengths and weakness of this play when so many of the tools of critical analysis and its assumptions, are patrifocal. Sue-Ellen Case in her chapter on "Towards a New Poetics" in *Feminism and Theatre* states:

Within the study of the theatre, several versions of masculine and feminine morphology have taken hold. For example, some feminist critics have described the form of tragedy as a replication of the male sexual experience. Tragedy is composed of foreplay, excitation and ejaculation (catharsis). The broader organisation of plot — complication, crisis and resolution — is also tied to this phallic experience. The central focus in male forms is labelled phallogentric, reflecting the nature of the male's sexual physiology. A female form

might embody her sexual mode, aligned with multiple orgasms, with no dramatic focus on ejaculation or necessity to build to a single climax. The continuous organisation would replace this ejaculatory form ...²²

Given the theory Case posits as a basis for the critical analysis of De Groen's play, *Rivers* conforms well to feminist structure and indeed makes a strong argument in favour of the open text. There is no single climax — at no time does the play “come to a head”. Instead there is a series of climaxes — Katherine's decision to go to Gurdjieff; the Man's realisation he is a woman in a man's body; Wayne's discovery of male literature; Katherine's recognition of Gurdjieff's motives, and so on. This keeps the audience, as De Groen puts it, “wrong-footed.” The contiguity is maintained by the similarities (and no less by the differences, no simple “binary oppositions” here) of the Man's, and Katherine Mansfield's experiences; Gurdjieff's and Rahel's parallel yet dissimilar experiences; and the similarities yet dissimilar natures of Middleton-Murray and Audra; as well as the comparisons between the Wayne/Audra relationship and the Katherine/Middleton-Murray relationship.

To quote Perkins once again:

Further analysis of the dialogue and other signifiers would reveal more about the play and extend its meaning, but would not exhaust our understanding, because the final meaning lies in its effect in the theatre, in the form that it takes when it moves on stage. Moreover, in feminist aesthetics, form is not fixed, but depends on movement appropriate to its medium. Instead of rising action, crisis, revelation, denouement and resolution, there are a series of shocks, moments of transvaluation, and **at the end a suspension, as though we are on the brink of a transformation that lies beyond our present understanding.** [emphasis mine]²³

That form of ending (the suspension which is on the brink of transformation) leaves us with the sense that something is hovering just outside our reach, yet with the underlying hope that it will not always be so. De Groen reflects this hope in a highly artistic way and through an inversion that provokes mature — though at times humorous — reflection and self-reflexivity.

Because *Rivers* is, like many feminist plays today, an open text, it moves to a close but not to closure. Katherine's final aria has the sun “streaming”, turning to “pale fire”, the light then fades, and finally we are “in the dark”. The lighting effects following the language:

Oh, God! The sky is filled with **the sun**, and the sun is like music. The sky is full of music. Music comes **streaming** down these great beams. The wind touches the trees, shakes little jets of music. The shape of every flower is like a sound. My hands open like five petals.

Isaiah — or was it Elisha? — was caught up into Heaven in a chariot of fire *once*. But when the weather is divine and I am free to work, such a

journey is positively nothing ... Cold. Still. The gale last night has blown nearly all the snow off the trees; only big, frozen-looking lumps remain. In the wood where the snow is thick, bars of **sunlight lay like pale fire**.

I want to remember how **the light fades** from a room — and one fades with it, is expunged, sitting still, knees together, hands in pockets ...

I would like to hear Jack saying “We’ll have the north meadow mowed tomorrow”, on a late evening in summer, when our shadows were like a pair of scissors, and we could just see the rabbits **in the dark**. [emphasis mine]

[*The lights fade.*]

The poetic prose of the ending is a challenge to language. Kristeva says of poetic language:

... this kind of language, through the particularity of its signifying operations, is an unsettling process — when not an outright destruction — ... of “religious sensibility.” On that account, it accompanies crises within social structures and institutions —²⁴

Katherine, because her work is her religion, and because she considers her journey into the creative world of words as greater than the religious experience of being, “caught up into Heaven in a chariot of fire”, does indeed challenge “religious sensibility”: and, through her unnatural yoking in language of, for example, abstract and concrete, she challenges form in language — as does De Groen. In Katherine’s poetic language normal, logical and categorical distinctions are erased; seeing and hearing are fused (sun-music). Shape and sound are fused (trees-music, flower-sound). Physical form and Nature fuse (hands-petals). Abstract and concrete fuse (shadows-scissors). Metaphor is fused into simile (“like”) and language is liberated from having to be Logos and from the need for closure.

In one sense the entire play is a parable; a fictitious narrative displaying typical moral and spiritual relations between men and women by **inversion** (the Man-Katherine; Wayne and Audra; and, Gurdjieff and Rahel). The mythical level explores and exposes the **perversion** inherent in trying to “own” another’s soul (Gurdjieff, Rahel, the rape). De Groen manipulates the language of an open text and cleverly utilises alienation devices, and she touches on unconscious aspects of our natures through the use of poetry and allusions to myth. *Rivers* does not resolve the conflict between Medusa/God, patriarchy/matriarchy, to do so would be to use language in a patrifocal way. Patrifocal language, as De Groen shows in her plays, stifles both sexes from reaching their true potential and from the liberating experience of transformation.

3,800 words

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1. Much of the argument contained in this article comes from Ch. 3 of an unpublished thesis — *The Power of Language and Language as Power in the Plays of Alma De Groen*, Jeni-rose Hall, October, 1992, UNE Armidale.
2. Perkins, ADS, 1987, 5-21.
3. Perkins, *LiNQ*, 17,18.
4. Case, 132.
5. In the beginning, Hesiod says, there was Chaos, vast and dark. Then appeared Gaea, the deep-breasted earth ... Gaea the omnipotent not only created the universe and bore the first race of the gods, but also gave birth to the human race. The power of Gaea was also manifest in her gift of foretelling the future. The Oracle of Delphi, before it passed into Apollo's hands, had originally belonged to Gaea. *Mythology*, 87.
6. De Groen, *The Rivers of China*, 16.
7. I Cor. 11:3.
8. De Groen, *Rivers*, 51-53.
9. *ibid*, 22.
10. *ibid*, 54.
11. I reject the term "dystopean" society used by some critics (Perkins) to describe the new order in *Rivers* because it implies that a female-dominated society is somehow worse than a male-dominated society, whereas it is more correctly, a society **equally as corrupt** as a patriarchy.
12. Wearne, 62, in ADS.
13. Bolen, 21.
14. I Tim. 2:12-15.
15. The Brontes and George Sand to name a few.
16. Perkins, A.D.S., 1987, 15.
17. *Rivers*, 55.
18. Weedon, D., 66.

19. Mead, G.H., in Martindale, 1967, 356.

A Self is possible only to a creature that can be an object to itself, a characteristic possible only in society and by means of language.

20. Rivers, 46.

21. *ibid*, 52.

22. Case, 129.

23. *LiNQ*, 20.

24. Kristeva, 124-5.

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