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Reading Nicholas Mosley

Context N°14

by Shiva Rahbaran

“People are trapped in their characteristics. They act parts. If you see that, then part of you has a certain degree of freedom.” This is how Nicholas Mosley, in an interview in the *Independent* with D. J. Taylor (who saw Mosley as “a novelist who is about as unfashionable as it is possible to be”), summed up his long literary career. His critics, both those who admire and those who dislike his work, almost unanimously agree that the “unpopularity” of Mosley in England lies precisely in his endeavor to dramatize an “Idea.” The position of Mosley in contemporary British fiction is well observed by John Naughton in the *Listener*:

Given that the British are inclined to regard abstract theorizing on the human condition as a kind of disease, Mr. Mosley had better resign himself to charges of pretentiousness—an intellectual vice which is tolerated in foreigners but abhorred in natives. Mr. John Berger has had to live with such criticism in his time—which is perhaps why he now lives happily in the Alps.

In England the tag “novel of ideas” is often associated with “unreadability.” “Novel of ideas” is seen as a novel in which ideas, instead of the protagonists, are the “real” characters; thus they are considered uninteresting and inaccessible. When Allan Massie (in his review of *Children of Darkness and Light* in the *Scotsman*), an admirer of Mosley, calls Mosley’s main concern “philosophical,” he actually contributes to the unpopularity of Mosley:

[Mosley’s] interests are primarily philosophical. . . . This does not mean that his novels can lack what is conventionally called “human interest.” . . . Human interest is precisely what his novels offer in abundance, because he is always asking such questions as what it means to be human, what obligations to ourselves it offers.

Mosley’s preoccupation with the meaning of being human—of being free and responsible within a greater whole—keeps him out of fashion in the literary world. He should perhaps be grateful for that, as “fashion” per se signifies transience and consequently unimportance. The big questions of life remain unchanged: September 11th poignantly and painfully destroyed the *Sprachspiel* castles and lifted the veil from our deconstructed eyes. The urgent question on the agenda of the reality-shocked enlightened world is now: what does it mean to be human? In such times, reading Mosley becomes a matter of life and death.

The novels of Nicholas Mosley could be seen as chapters of a single novel in which a single theme evolves: the possibility of man’s freedom through overcoming the paradox of freedom. The paradox (or, as Mosley often calls it, the “impossibility”) of freedom arises due to man’s awareness of the *necessity* of limiting structures for freedom. All choice-making and all action would end up in paralysis in the absence of limiting structures. In other words, freedom is only possible in the presence of “nonfreedom.” Hence the question is: how could man fulfill the paradoxical task of overcoming these structures in order to attain freedom?

Mosley’s writing career could be divided into four different phases in which a series of novels dramatize one aspect of this endeavor and consequently lead onto the next phase, which supersedes the previous one by addressing the possibility of overcoming the paradox of freedom on a higher level and in a more complex context.

In the 1950s, under the influence of existentialism, Mosley was mainly busy showing the impossibility of freedom. His characters were placed at moral crossroads and asked to make use of their freedom of choice and take one of the roads, where as the best possible choice was either *both* or *none* of the ways. The moral dilemma always came in the shape of two women, for both of whom the protagonist felt equal love and responsibility, but could not have both without being socially and morally despicable; that is, without being a cheat or cynic. On the other hand, choosing one over the other would have meant hurting the other and thus being morally despicable as well. This of course meant that the only possible choice was an “evil” one. The protagonists were asked to make an ethical choice where none was possible. In other words, they were asked to make a (Kierkegaardian) *disjunction* (taking *either* this *or* that one of the mutually exclusive options) where the only “good” choice was a logical impossibility; that is, making a *conjunction*. This meant that the only “good” choice was taking *both* of the mutually exclusive options. Being existentialist antiheroes, Mosley’s protagonists were either predestined to choose *none* of the ways, which meant fleeing into death and renunciation—as Iris Murdoch showed in her *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953)—or doomed to take one of the mutually exclusive options (usually the wife) and fall into an existentialist “despair.”

Mosley’s break away from tragic doom and existentialist “despair” was only realized after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1955, and later his “signing-off” from “the regular routines of organized religion” in the first half of the 1960s. It is important to note that Mosley’s break away from organized religion was not a break away from religion but from *dogmatic* Christianity. Dogmatic Christianity, however, was pivotal for his understanding of the paradox of freedom as it showed him that choice-making was only possible if man had *limiting* structures—i.e., values—to act by. Thus for seven years, Mosley committed himself to Christian ethical behavior, which taught him to come to terms with this paradox by keeping to the rules. This, however, was a “negative” activity—the rules mainly meant “renunciation.” It was in Spiritual Christianity that he found that the paradox of freedom could be overcome (and not only be *accepted* as was the case in dogmatic Christianity) outside the realms of ethics—but only *after* one has gone through the path of conventional, ethical Christianity and come out on the other side. Having read the Bible, Mosley realized that paradox was at the heart of Christianity: wasn’t the Church—the Keeper of religion—founded on St. Peter, who denied Jesus? Wasn’t Jesus’ death a prerequisite for the seeds of (Christian) life to scatter and grow, as suggested in his *Experience and Religion* (1967)?

One of the things that Christians won’t think about, they refuse to think about this, is that when Jesus founded his Church upon St. Peter, he said: “You are Peter and on this rock I will found my church.” Almost immediately after this he is saying: “But Peter, you know you will—when I have been taken off—deny me.” And Peter does. Jesus knew he was going to deny him, but he founded his Church on this disciple. That is the most extraordinary thing to do. . . . Why did Jesus do it? It is a reasonable question. But this is in tune with how the world works. Everyone has to learn for themselves. There are no straightforward

answers. I mean, what the real Jesus is, the Church can't show. . . . If the Church got everything right, there wouldn't be any life! Everyone would know the Church is right and that's that. The Church gets it wrong the whole time and you have to work it out for yourself. (Interview with the author, 2000)

Mosley learned that in Christianity such central paradoxes were kept alive and operated in the shape of parables—i.e., works of art. This unorthodox interpretation of Christianity was the turning point in Mosley's writing career: he now started on his anti-Kierkegaardian journey in which a moral choice was possible *only* within an aesthetic instead of an ethical framework; a framework in which the ethical and logical impossibility of “either/or” at the crossroad could be overcome in the form of a life-affirming *conjunction* instead of life-renouncing *disjunction*. (“The contrast between Kierkegaard's move from aesthetics to ethics and mine in the opposite direction is something I had not thought of before; and it is a way of dealing with my move away from ‘conventional’ religion but hoping to be still in the center of ‘religion.’” [Letter from the author, 1999]) It was within an aesthetic framework—within an aesthetic vision—where paradoxes and opposites could be held together and thus overcome. This aesthetic vision, however, only liberated man from the paradox of his freedom of choice, if it was aware of and thus connected to a Greater Whole:

How can there be any aesthetics (as opposed to “taste”) without the belief in, the experience and validation of, something objective that might as well be called “God”? I think the experience of “pattern” is a reason to believe in—to trust in—well, whatever you call it. The dangers of aestheticism, as those of an unenquiring trust in God, are, as you see, that they can just be a grandiose justification of subjective tastes. It's the existence—or the enquiry into the existence—of some sort of objectivity to test them against that may (does not always) give them some validity. (Letter from the author, 1999)

For this purpose he had to do away with his previous “conventional” tragic mode of writing and try to find a form where such an undertaking was possible. This was the beginning of Mosley's writing career as an “experimentalist.” Mosley wrote some of his best-received novels after his break away from organized Christianity. His novel *Accident* (1965), filmed under the collaboration of Harold Pinter and Joseph Losey, marks his ascent into the pantheon of avant-garde writers in the sixties. This novel was followed by the highly acclaimed novel *Impossible Object* (1968) (of which George Steiner in the *New Yorker* said, “what Virginia Woolf's pointillistic fables were to Bennet's solid carpenting, the art of Mosley is to Snow's workmanship. *Impossible Object* is all witchfire and mercury”). His name was from now on to be accompanied by names such as Robbe-Grillet, Butor, and B. S. Johnson. This, in a country such as Britain, was more often than not to his disadvantage and prevented him from building a large readership—he soon came to be known as a writer's writer.

His following Catastrophe Practice series (*Hopeful Monsters*, the winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1990, was the last novel in the series) only reinforced this reputation. In his review of *Serpent* (1981), Malcolm Bradbury admired Mosley as “one of the most significant instances” the British have that experimental writing “can still be brilliantly done,” without having “anything small about the experiment that [the author] has engaged upon.” In this phase of his writing the focus of Mosley's explorations into the possibilities of achieving freedom by overcoming its paradoxicality shifted from the outer world to the inner world. That is to say, whereas in the previous novels the protagonists tried to liberate themselves from the moral dilemmas that the conventions and dictates of the outer world—such as family, society, duties, etc.—provided them with, here they set to free themselves from the restricting structures (patterns) of the mind. Consequently, Mosley was not concerned with moral dilemmas—these being primarily due to social conventions—any more, but concentrated on philosophical and scientific concepts of the mind. Mosley was now investigating the dilemma that the freedom of the mind is restricted by its own structures. His guides were now scientists, artists, and philosophers who had been intensively preoccupied with the workings and the evolution of the mind and its (self-)observational faculties:

The driving idea at the back of *Catastrophe Practice* was Brecht's. . . . “What matters most is that a new human type should be evolving and the entire interest of the world should be concentrated on his development”—and Brecht's way of illustrating this potential type as the actor that can act and at the same time see himself as an actor. The “new human type” idea was echoed by . . . Husserl with his idea that one might “study, with the mind, mind's phenomena”; Monod with his demand for a “new covenant” between scientific knowledge and ethics; Popper with his idea of “learning from mistakes”; Bateson with his conjecture that one might be able to see not only patterns in the outside world but patterns of the way one saw these patterns; Langer's image of art as “a vision of thinking itself”—and so on—all these being ways of trying to express what might be the “new human type that was necessary.” (Letter from the author, 1999)

Mosley, especially being the son of the Fascist leader Oswald Mosley, is well aware of the dangerous connotations of the term “new human type”—but he leans on Brecht (“I'm sure that it wasn't in [a] political sense that Brecht was talking”) and uses this term for a free human type that can guarantee the sustenance and continuance of the human race imprisoned in its (self-)destructive patterns of thought and action.

Analogous to his previous novels in which the protagonists freed themselves from the patterns of their moral dilemmas by way of observing them in an aesthetic framework, here Mosley suggested a way of freeing oneself from the restricting structures of the mind by means of observing them. He was well aware that this sort of self-reflexive observation could, as many of his contemporary fellow-novelists have shown, lead to solipsism and *regressus ad infinitum* and, instead of liberating the individual, plunge him into an even more self-destructive entrapment. Mosley, however, maintained that “valid freedom and healing and choice” (*Catastrophe Practice* [1979]) only had a chance to prevail through the consciousness's observation of the *split* between the conscious self and the self it is conscious of as that which unites the two halves—or as the *unity* of the division. To show this, Mosley appropriated Bateson's three levels of learning, where each level is a standing back from and an observation of the former pattern of learning and thus a liberation from it. These levels culminate in the third level of learning, where the individual can fire himself from the patterns of his consciousness by being aware of and thus being in contact with a greater whole—a “circuit of circuits” (*Catastrophe Practice*). It is from the locale of his connection with this greater whole that the individual has the chance to see the patterns of his observational faculty and by this not just be free of it but perhaps even influence and change it. In this sense, his self-reflection will not fall into the trap of solipsism and tautology.

Catastrophe Practice, the first novel in the series, could be regarded as a “manifesto” of this phase of Mosley's writing. *Catastrophe Practice*, in the same vein as *Impossible Object*, has a highly experimental form: it consists of three plays and a novella, which are separated and at the same time interconnected by four essays that illuminate the highly complex pieces. These essays hence reveal the plethora from which the author has drawn the ideas upon which this novel and the ones following it have been built. The result is a very difficult, if at all “understandable” and “readable,” work. The following novels of the series, culminating in probably Mosley's most widely read novel, *Hopeful Monsters*, depict the philosophical and formal ideas introduced in *Catastrophe Practice* in more linear and accessible forms. In these novels the possibility of the individual's (and

hopefully mankind's) liberation from his destructive self-entrapment are shown on personal and sociohistorical levels. *Hopeful Monsters*, a weighty historical novel, is especially concerned with the meaning of the scientific, philosophical, political, and artistic achievements in the first half of the twentieth century for the liberation and extinction/survival of the human race. Mosley called this novel *Hopeful Monsters* as a homage to the long-ridiculed anti-Darwinist Jewish German biologist Richard Goldschmidt, who argued that the appearance of totally new characteristics was possible through mutation in a relatively short period of time.¹ Goldschmidt called the “mutants,” who survived to give rise to a new species despite their unlikely chances of survival, “hopeful monsters”: “‘Hopeful Monsters,’ that is, are things born perhaps slightly before their time; when it’s not known if the environment is quite ready for them” (*Hopeful Monsters*).

The “flaw” that Mosley conceived in the ideas that he had appropriated in his *Catastrophe Practice* was the reluctance to see this sort of self-liberating and self-creating self-reflection on a spiritual and mystical level. Bateson, for example, would use the word *oceanic* for a greater pattern, but not *God*. This in Mosley’s view was also what made such scientific conjectures more of an instrument to show the trap of the split-self, with little potential—or courage—to explore ways of getting out of it. These conjectures, to use religious imagery, had little potential to “deliver” mankind. One could thus conclude that Mosley’s investigations into the possibilities of achieving freedom on a “scientific” level inevitably led him to investigations into the nature of freedom on a mystical level.

The present phase of his writing sums up Mosley’s examinations of the paradox of freedom on a mystical level. That is to say, whereas in his previous novels Mosley saw man’s freedom in his ability to choose one possibility rather than another by way of observation, in his present novels he sees man’s freedom in choosing one reality rather than another. And whereas this choice was possible by man’s awareness of the connection of these possibilities in a greater network, now his choice is possible by his awareness of a greater network of realities; of an Ultimate Reality—i.e., that of God. In this sense, the present novels examine man’s freedom on spiritual and mystical levels. Considering the preoccupation with modern scientific theories in the previous phase of his writing, the concern with universality and mysticism in the present phase seems to be only a small step: just as quantum physics operates on a level beyond rationality/irrationality, man’s liberation could be achieved only beyond the scientific chance/determinism plane.

The new novels of Mosley, as their titles so often indicate, respond to the present millennial feeling of confusion and chaos: the sense of an ending and standing at the threshold of an utterly unknown future. Looking into the uncertain future of mankind and mapping the unknown have always belonged to the realm of mystical activities. Mosley’s novels now are trying to find out how man with the “help of God” can liberate himself from the chaos that he has created—especially in recent history—and sustain the continuation of Life and the human race.

Inventing God (2003) is the most recent novel in Mosley’s present phase of writing. He himself believes that it is the “culmination” (letter from the author, 2001) to this stage of his writing and in this way “sums up” (interview with the author, 2001) what he has been trying to show after his break with conventional Christianity.

Mosley opens his novel with two quotes, which in a way sum up the message of the novel:

If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.—Voltaire

Invent / v.t. . . . 1. Find out, discover, esp. by search or endeavour. Now *rare* or *obs.*—*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*

What the protagonists try to do in this novel is reminiscent of what Max Ackerman and Eleanor Anders in *Hopeful Monsters* did. In that novel the focus of the story was how “mutants” or “hopeful monsters”—having re-created themselves once more and become a “higher human type”—could go out and live in the real world and thus help the liberation and survival of mankind. *Inventing God*, in the same vein as *Hopeful Monsters*, is the story of the completion of a journey—the journey of the protagonists in this phase of Mosley’s writing. Like Bert, Jason, Lilia, and Judith in the *Catastrophe Practice* series, these protagonists too entered the “Garden of Eden” a second time from the back² in order to fulfill what being human demands from them.

We humans had to go—this was our liberation or curse—we had to go over deserts and plains, in cockleshell boats over rough seas we had to set things to rights; we had to die in order that things could come alive. (*Hopeful Monsters*)

However, what distinguishes these travelers from those in the *Catastrophe Practice* series is their acute awareness of God: that greater other outside of them, which becomes part of them and of which they become part through their observation of it. They have thus attained a higher awareness and are, in this sense, on a more “advanced” level in their journey than the characters in the *Catastrophe Practice* series.

Inventing God is a continuation of the idea behind the present phase of Mosley’s writing—i.e., the idea of seeing man’s freedom in light of the relation between science and spirituality. Here, as in *The Hesperides Tree* (2001), Mosley uses the latest scientific findings in order to render their helplessness in face of explaining what makes men *different* from other creatures. In other words, Mosley reveals the inability of science to *talk* about the “seat” of man’s freedom—his observational faculty—convincingly. As one of the characters, the biologist Prof. Andros, puts it:

While the mapping of the human genome is giving us the chance of much power to treat and eliminate abnormality and disease, the prospect of planning to alter or enhance human nature remains something of a fantasy. Scientists cannot tell the result of their experiments until they have been tested; and phenomena in the brain and in the outside world are so intricately interconnected that possible effects and side-effects are almost infinite, and cannot be known in advance. So it seems that what might be called enhancement of human nature will continue to remain in the realm of chance and natural selection. However it can be claimed that what scientists call “chance” might be subject to enquiry outside the realm of science.

It is that “other” outside us the observation of which—or, in this vocabulary of (Sufi) mysticism, “making love” to which—makes the idea of aesthetics and ethics possible. And it is within these domains that we sense our freedom of choice. It would hence make sense to say that it is that “other” which guarantees our freedom. Considering the taboo of speaking about the reality of God in our enlightened time, this novel comes across as an almost “shameless” work of art.

The protagonists’ “religiousness” or their awareness of God explains the difference between the form of *Hopeful Monsters* and that of *Inventing God*. Both novels, as mentioned earlier, mark the culmination of a phase of Mosley’s writing. *Hopeful Monsters* only focuses on two characters because the series, of which *Monsters* is the culmination, was concerned with showing the process of the development of Bateson’s three levels of learning. In this sense, Max and Eleanor superseded the other characters in the series and thus personified the third and highest level of Batesonian learning (and the beginning of a knowledge beyond this level of learning).

In contrast to *Hopeful Monsters*, *Inventing God* does not have a “hero” and a “heroine.” It focuses equally on the story of all the characters in the present phase of Mosley’s writing. There is no hierarchy of awareness anymore: all characters have reached the highest level of awareness and have now the vocation to “set things to rights.” *Inventing God* consists of stories about a certain group of people, who by a series of “natural” and “miraculous” coincidences meet each other and help out one another to make the right choice. The novel shows the greater hidden network, which keeps the protagonists together and apart simultaneously (like gravity) and which can operate in the lives of the protagonists through their awareness of it.

Although the novel is very crowded, the reader can keep track of the characters and their relationships to each other. Mosley has simply added new characters to a hard core of old characters from the previous novels of this phase of his writing. The reader’s familiarity with the old characters helps him place the new ones and in this way identify the greater network that these characters make up. There are Julie and the Boy (now called Ben) with his parents Melissa and Harry from *The Hesperides Tree*. Harry was also the name of the journalist in *Children*, who had a son called Ben with his wife Melissa. Joshua and Hafiz, Lisa and her uncle Nathan, are featured in *Journey into the Dark* (unpublished); the angelic, seventeen-year-old Lisa (who one day appears in Ben and Julie’s life and helps them with the birth of their child) is also referred to as Gaby; Gaby was the name of the fairylike twelve-year-old “gang leader” in *Children of Darkness and Light*, written five years earlier. The new characters in turn are introduced through their relationship to the old characters and to each other. Laura is the best friend of Melissa, Prof. Andros is an old friend and admirer of Laura; Maisie, Laura’s niece, becomes the girlfriend of Hafiz, who in turn is the best friend of Joshua. Joshua and Hafiz are both students of Richard Kahn in Beirut, who has an affair with Leila, who in turn is also in love with the policeman Leon and so on and so forth. In this way, whenever these characters bump into each other, they weave yet another thread in the complex tapestry of the network of relationships.

Having wanted to break out of “conventional writing,” Mosley has always been uncomfortable with the idea of the “plot.” In his eyes, the plot of the story often diverts the attention of the reader from understanding the idea behind the novel. In *Inventing God*, as in *Hopeful Monsters*, however, the plot is essential for showing the network that the protagonists make through their connectedness. *Inventing God* has an intriguing plot, which keeps the network of the protagonists together. Like *Children* the story unfolds in the form of a detective or espionage story. Maurice Rotblatt, the guru figure of the story, has disappeared, and all the characters seem to be searching for him either directly or indirectly as the result of bumping into somebody who is looking for Maurice. Their search for him brings forth with it the coincidental meetings (Hafiz and Maisie’s meeting is especially a good example for this) that weave a network of relationships.

In the same vein as Max Ackerman and Eleanor Anders (and in the spirit of detective stories), these protagonists are depicted as agents in hostile territory—or as saints with the vocation of saving humans; humans who in their ignorance can become dangerous for their saviors. Having rewritten the story of Genesis in *The Hesperides Tree*, Mosley is now reinventing (or rediscovering) the story of God’s messengers sent to liberate humans from their old deadly shackles—their destructive patterns of thought. There is the guru scientist, Maurice Rotblatt. Like Ben and Julie, who made an unconventional ur-couple, Rotblatt makes an unconventional prophet: he is a mixture of a trickster and a scientist; a bit of a womanizer and a bit of a drinker. However, like all of Mosley’s protagonists, he seems to be behaving in this way as part of an experiment, through which he hopes to break the old patterns of thought: those patterns that had been liberating once but are now proving to be deadly. At a conference in war-ridden Beirut he (the parallels with Moses’ fury at the gathering of magicians, Jesus’ behavior towards the money-lenders, or Mohammed’s conduct at the congregation of idol-worshippers in Kaaba are obvious) insults Jews, Christians, and Muslims equally in order to convey that “people should no longer see themselves as Jews or Muslims, or Christians, because to see oneself like that is not properly to have been born.” Instead of labeling oneself in relation to others, man should see himself “in relation to God,” this viewpoint being that which all of Mosley’s characters—his hopeful monsters—in this phase of his writing have been trying to adopt: that is, seeing oneself in partnership with the Creator.³ In this novel, too, Mosley is interested in showing that this kind of attitude is actually a hidden undercurrent in all established (and by now destructive) organized religions. Therefore, as he saw hope for humanity in the teachings of monks such as John Scotus Erigena (cf. *The Hesperides Tree*), here he sees hope in the nonconformist beliefs of the Muslim sect, the Alevis, or in the way of life of the most ancient Christians, the Armenians.

Maurice even adopts the methods of a trickster and considers forging a document “supposedly from the time of King Zedekiah, that might alter things.” In it he hopes to tell people to grow up and start being “responsible for everything.” A biblical document does in fact turn up in Jerusalem, which is kept under wraps since it could both be a forgery—as governmental bodies claim—and *claimed* to be a forgery, as it gives backing “to views at present inimical to the ruling forces in [Israel]” and other countries. This statement of uncertainty—or this “either/or”—reflects the central idea in Mosley’s novels since the Catastrophe Practice series: the idea that hope for a “higher human type” at the end of the twentieth century can operate only on a knife’s edge, where all possibilities are open. “The experience is that in spite of, or *because of*, wild uncertainty, everything is all right” (my emphasis).

Mosley is concerned with the uncertainty in our Nietzschean “hundred-act play”; however, he makes it clear that catastrophes and disasters have always been an integral part of human history. God’s messengers had always been sent to teach humans “how to learn through failure; even disaster.” The book of Jonah is a leitmotif in this novel for illustrating this idea. No matter how hard Jonah tried to hide from God and avoid the responsibility of preaching to the gentile people of Nineveh, he did not succeed. He finally had to yield to God’s will and could successfully convert the people of Nineveh. Mosley’s modern prophet and his disciples too have to fulfill the same task as biblical prophets.

For this purpose they have to revisit the same sites as their predecessors: “Oh Jerusalem. Nineveh. What is the difference?” This novel takes place in the Middle East, where from ancient times humanity seems to have so obviously been on the edge of catastrophe. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the civil war in Lebanon offer good examples for the seemingly eternal trap that humanity has brought itself into by way of sticking to labels and destructive patterns of mind. It is here that the protagonists meet and carry out the teachings of Maurice, who by now, in the manner of prophets, has disappeared. What now matters is his message “that everything is all right.” The birth of Ben and Julie’s baby at the foot of Mount Ararat is yet another rewriting of the Bible and symbolizes the hope for the birth of a new human species, which can see itself in “relation to God” and thus grow out of the destructive rivalries that had befallen its ancestors.

One might say that the optimistic view of Maurice/Mosley proves itself as rather naive considering the catastrophe of September 11th. The attacks happened just a few days after the completion of the typescript (interview with author, 2001). For Mosley, however, the attacks were exactly in the spirit of the novel’s message—it was, in a way, in the spirit of the message of all of his novels since the Catastrophe Practice series. He had often expressed this message through an image out of Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*: the image of the beautiful couple walking hand in hand on a beach while hags were dismembering a child in a temple. Appropriating Mann, Mosley believes that the state of grace could be achieved only if man observed himself as the beautiful couple, the hags, and the child simultaneously. At the end of this novel the “holy” family is on holiday at the Red Sea and learns about the attacks via an almost coded telephone call from a friend in England. Once again, Thomas Mann’s metaphor would apply here very well: the setting is that of a beautiful Byzantine or a medieval painting; its backdrop is the awful news from America. For the protagonists, the awareness of this oxymoron is something that “might change the way people see things.”

The novel ends with a recognizance scene as if out of a miracle play: Lisa, who is traveling with Ben’s family and the newborn baby, meets Hafiz, who had once saved her life. The party witnesses their embrace and reunion with solemn joy. There is also a feeling of a Nietzschean *déjà vu*: “the great hundred-act play reserved for the next two centuries in Europe; the most terrible, the most questionable, the most hopeful of all plays.” The crash seems to have marked the end of part I—the twentieth century—and the opening of part II of this drama. The hope that this part—the twenty-first century—carries in its awful bosom is the dawn of the knowledge about the real and secret dramas in human life—the dramas that have always been going on.

Not just the war between the Jews and the Arabs, because that has never been secret: nor the war between capitalists and anti-capitalists, because that will go on for ever. But the drama about evil not being localized but pervasive and people being trapped in their minds . . . The hope is that there can be a learning, a healing, going to and fro between the inside and the outside worlds; *the terror is that this is an illusion*. (my emphasis)

This knowledge would enable all humans to stop seeing themselves as victims of outer and inner forces—be it in the form of neurosis, natural disasters, or warring parties—against which they could only bang their heads or give up in resignation. In this sense, for the protagonists, the positive side of this catastrophe is that it could bring people—like the people of Nineveh—to start to observe themselves in relation to a force—a network—much greater than themselves and much greater than good and evil, within which everything has its proper place and, consequently, will be all right.

¹See also Bowler (1984), 324. Bowler further mentions that Goldschmidt was taken up in the 1970s by major biologists such as Gould and Allen, who based their theory of “epigenetic evolution”—i.e., evolution in big jumps rather than gradual Darwinian processes—on his “hopeful monsters” conjectures.

²Mosley was fascinated by Kleist’s Marionettentheater and appropriated it in order to show what he meant by saying that the consciousness overcomes the split that it caused in the “self” by being conscious of it—i.e., by self-observation: “We must make the journey around the world and see if it may perhaps be open again from the back somewhere.” This is Kleist’s anticipation of the solution given at the end of his story to the paradox of the split-self (i.e., *innere Zerrissenheit*). The lost grace could be regained—a return to our ur-form were only possible—only if human beings ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil a second time, cf. Kleist (1991), 6.

³In Mosley’s eyes it is the awareness of a partnership with God that makes man a Nietzschean “superhuman.”

Selected Works by Nicholas Mosley

Accident (<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/product/accident/>). Dalkey Archive Press, \$11.95.

African Switchback. Out of Print.

The Assassination of Trotsky. Out of Print.

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