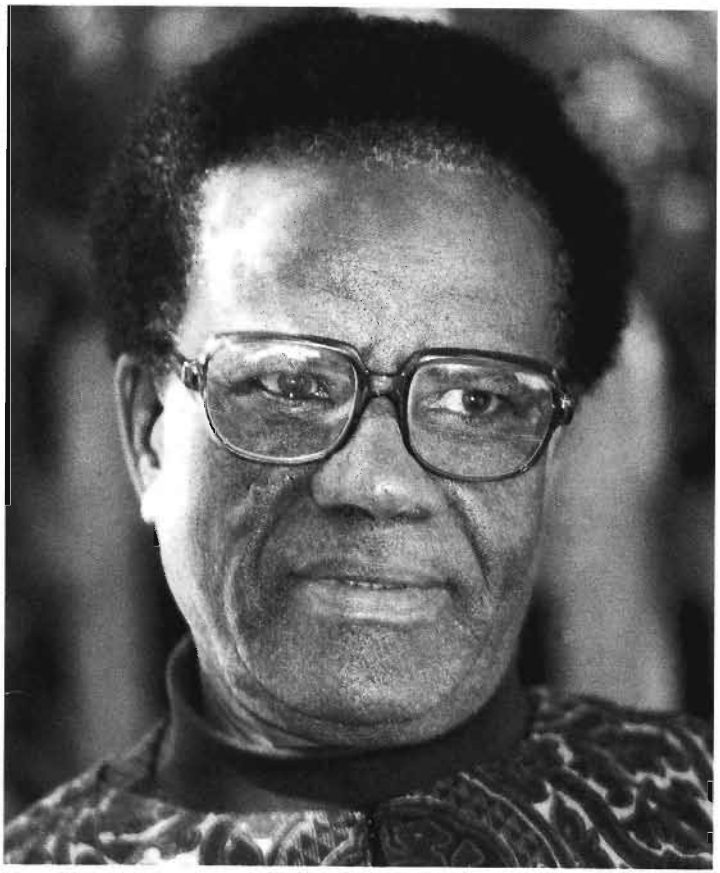
AUGUST 2011
VOLUME 38 NUMBER 2

One

ENGLISH IN AFRICA



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Review Articles

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Review Article

Chris Mann: Belonging, the Shades, and Redemption

Nicholas Meihuizen

Chris Mann. *Home from Home: New and Selected Poems*. With artwork by Julia Skeen. Fish Hoek: Echoing Green P, 2010.

The appearance of Chris Mann's *Home from Home: New and Selected Poems* (2010) – at once a retrospective and an offering of current work – provides the occasion for an overview of his career. His *First Poems* appeared in 1977, and since then readers of South African poetry have been treated to *New Shades* (1982), *Kites and Other Poems* (1990), *Man Alive!* (1992), *South Africans: A Set of Portrait Poems* (1996), *The Horn of Plenty* (1997), *Heartlands* (2002), *Beautiful Lofty Things* (2005), and *Lifelines* (2006). There have been other works, such as his classic anthology, jointly edited with Guy Butler, *A New Book of South African Verse in English* (1975), the plays, *The Sand Labyrinth* (1980), and *Thuthula: Heart of the Labyrinth* (2004), the 'meditation in verse' entitled *The Roman Centurion's Good Friday* (1999), the contribution to Patrick Cullinan and Stephen Watson's *Dante in South Africa* (2005), the 1970s excursions into traditional and township music with Grahamstown band Izinkonjane ZaseRhini, his work with the bands Zabalaza and, most recently, Nia, some multi-media shows which feature the delicate and luminous art-work of his wife Julia Skeen (who added new dimensions to *The Horn of Plenty* and *Lifelines*, and who also contributes some fine monochrome artwork to the new book), and, stemming from this, the CD and DVD of *Lifesongs*, the latter of which might

English in Africa 38 No. 2 (August 2011): 95–108
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/eia.v38i2.6

be described as 'cave art' in digital format (<http://www.chrismann.co.za.html>). *Home from Home* itself has a parallel performative existence, witnessed by audiences at the Spiritfest (organized by Mann as part of the Grahamstown Festival) in June, 2010 (Gush 2010, 17). If this brief overview tells us anything of significance about the poet, it is that Mann is a multi-faceted creator and communicator, eager to express himself in different ways and through different means. His work prompts a range of reader and listener responses, from the gut-level sense of *joie de vivre* associated with traditional song and dance, through the intricate array of feelings and thoughts attending matters of love and belongingness, to meditations on existential symbiosis – both material-scientific and spiritual-religious – which almost tease us out of thought. It seems to me that Mann's urge to express himself thus variously is not based on the imperatives of the egotistical sublime, which would re-present existence as seen through its own unique lens for the sake of inwardly directed creative satisfaction or need. Mann has found a perspective on life that he wants to share, because – to use a simple term with complex enough overtones – it is redemptive.

This observation requires some elaboration, as, although it is well known that Mann is a practising Christian, his poetry is not doctrinal. Yet the clarity and commonsensical *nous* of his perception of the ineffable scale of existence and its underlying forces imbues his writing with authority; as a consequence, the world-view he passes on to us bears the strength of an optimism that is largely immune to the cynicism of the late capitalist era. And this view is premised on his wonder at the nature of the cosmos and the earth, along with its inhabitants. He is a naturalist with the vision of a poet, or a poet with the awareness of a naturalist. Consider the visionary, if scientifically informed, model he presents to us in the following:

> I believe that the plants and animals that inhabit this biosphere are the visible tips, as it were, of lines of life that unfolded from one or more originating cells somewhere on earth, in a puddle of brine or at the bottom of the sea next to a hydrothermal vent, some four billion years ago.
>
> These organisms are all in their own way literate. They read their niche with the skill of the cell which interprets its position in a redwood tree or a pot-plant, a mouse or a lion.

Or the following:

> If language is rooted in the biosphere, then so is poetry. The evidence seethes in the genes. In addition to the metaphors of the astronomers and biologists, I accept with the baffled compliance of the laity the metaphors of the geneticists who state that natural selection evolved within the genome of our species a specific twist of amino acids which prompts a yearning for meaning and significance.
>
> (Dimitriu and Mann 2007, 22–23)

Though the perception is cosmic, the language is simple, crystalline, at once accessible, communicative, and profound. If this is the case in certain of Mann's prose, it is doubly so in his poetry, which comprehends so empathically the range of universal existence from nebulae and constellations, down to "maggots, viruses and bacteria" (Mann 2008). But what makes Mann exceptional, and this is especially important in the case of present day South Africa, is the deep comfort – redemptive, in my view – the reader and auditor derive from his thoughts on 'belonging:' that we as a species 'belong' is the *telos* of all his writings and performances; we belong in the universe however much beyond the limited capabilities of our thought the universe and existence range. In his "Poetry of Belonging" acceptance speech for the Thomas Pringle Award of 2008 he couches his relation to this *telos* in both mediate and immediate terms. The mediate approach involves conscious decision and acceptance: "We reduce our sense of separation, of unbelonging, when we humble our anthropocentric hubris and accept that the habitat in which our life has emerged in the cosmos is sacred." There follows soon after an expression of the immediacy of feeling: "we belong most when we love" (2010). The dual pattern here is typical, as we will see – conscious deliberation and deep feeling complement each other in poem after poem in order to generate belongingness.

The sacred nature of our 'habitat' is not dictated by theology, theory, or philosophy, but, surprisingly (at first glance), by the logic of cosmology, or cosmogenesis, by the "neo-Darwinian" insights (Lavey and Mann 2007, 220) which buttress Mann's religious faith:

> We are made from the dust of a vanished star. We carry the imprint of cosmic genesis in each cell and molecule of our bodies, in each of the fundamental force-fields that structure the trillions of nuclei in our bodies with exquisite finesse. The echo of the founding explosion of energy still rumbles in space, in this very room, like fossil static.
>
> (Mann 2008)

This is an extraordinary perception; but it is a perception based solidly in science. In a talk to the students of Singapore National University given in 2003, "Engaging the Cosmic Dust," Mann had elaborated on this idea, first

quoting from Einstein, "[t]he purpose of art and science is to awaken cosmic religious awe," and then going on to point out (in relation to Heisenberg) that "[u]ncertainty had entered the academy as a defensible scientific concept. Strangely enough this brought science a little closer to the humanities and the hesitations and complexities that writers and artists know are integral to our experience of life" (Mann 2003). Thus, where zoologist Richard Dawkins, for example, sees, for all his qualifications, estrangement between science and the humanities (his specific target, of course, being religion [Dawkins 2008, 33]), Mann sees continuity. How is it that the same scientific material absorbed by two thoughtful minds should result in opposite poles of perception regarding the nature of existence, the one infused with spirit, the other emptied of spirit? To put it another way, how can Mann be so excited by science, and yet remain committed to spirit? Is Dawkins right in thinking that science has emptied the world of god and spirituality, and are poets such as Mann and their ilk deluded primitives, dazzled by explanations beyond their understanding, and blind to the endless materiality of existence, brought into being by accident and maintained by predictable chemical and physical processes? Whatever the case may be, this much is clear: where Dawkins sees manifestations of ratio based on slowly evolving natural selection, Mann sees miracle centred in the whole process of creation, including slowly evolving natural selection. Evolution for Mann implies that the universe and all it contains is conscious, not just dead, matter. As he states in a recent piece in the *Mail & Guardian*: "Earth is the Holy Land" (2010a 34). The view is Blakean, and reminds us that the current standoff between science and spirituality takes us back to Blake's quarrel with the Enlightenment's mechanistic view of the universe. In the same *Mail & Guardian* piece Mann states: "I find it needs a leap of faith to look up over my roof at night and believe that the moon, the stars and the billions of unimaginably huge galaxies scattered across the cosmos exploded from a dot of energy much smaller than a pinhead" (34). Mann's sense of the miracle, one feels, should also be appreciated by scientists, considering the astonishing improbability of the universe, which he dramatizes so well in an interview with David Levey: "Were these sub-nuclear relationships [in the cosmos] to differ, by even a tiny amount, the whole universe would collapse" (2007, 224).

And Mann does not dwell on the difference between the humanistic and scientific world-views, as Dawkins tends to. His poetry bridges the difference as he *inspirits* the many subjects with which he deals. One might say that all poetry is a type of inspiriting, a breathing of new life into familiar words in order to uncover what is not usually revealed to the literal

gaze. But Mann is expressly concerned with doing so, which makes his poetry appear to verge at times on didacticism, a word dreaded by poets since Keats's denunciation of poetry that has a "palpable design" on us (1925, XXXIV). But Mann uses literal means to transcend the literal limitations. Take the poem "Bees," reprinted in *Home from Home*,[1] which concludes with a literal statement, "*True science [. . .] begins and ends in mystery*" (Mann, 2010b, 11). My ellipsis, however, omits these words: "it breathed." The literal statement in italics is a type of transcription of the life breath, a rendering into rational terms of the being of the creature with which the poet identifies in the immediately preceding final stanza of the poem:

> I shut my eyes. Brooded in the dark sweet combs
> lobed in the brain the soft pale grub of a thought
> nudged from its crib, unerumpling a gleam of wings.

The material of the brain and the honey-comb coalesce in consciousness, expressed imagistically in a way that (on first reading) undermines the concluding literal statement by highlighting its limitations, while at the same time supplying the substance necessary to give that statement (on reconsideration) its force. It is the tension between the literal and figurative (themselves an aspect of the mediate–immediate dualism mentioned above) that Mann manages so well; on the basis of this tension he is able to communicate with both brain hemispheres (as it were), left and right. The arrangement of the new book, which takes its alphabetical pattern from his previous book, *Lifelines* (2006), also reflects this interplay. The book gathers together 122 poems, from *First Poems* to the present, under alphabetically sequenced sections, thus highlighting links between language (the letter, the word) and existence. The precision of placement might also be seen as Linnaean, scientific, and so, once more, an alignment of ratio with spirit, logos with the creative force. In *Home*, this force is often signalled by Mann as "GΩd" (8–9); the omega sign distinguishes the word from "God," a word that he comments on in his interview with David Levey:

> To me the mere verbal deed of drawing such a word into the syntax of a sentence [. . .] diminishes the energy and complexity of the metaphor and turns what to me is a vocative, a salutation, an infinity, a glimpsed presence, an unfolding, an opening out of consciousness into a noun as humdrum as the word 'potato.'
>
> (2007, 223)

Mann's inspirited alphabet derives its "energy and complexity" from the "breathing" life beneath its structure. Its assimilation is part of his sense of "belonging," a sense where "potato" too, in *The Horn of Plenty*, finds its place (1997).

Reading through Mann's autobiographical passages in "Engaging the Cosmic Dust," one is struck by the indication that the poet himself did not always experience a sense of belonging, but acquired it through the African notion of the 'shades' or ancestral spirits. Mann explains in the Singapore talk: "a traditional African spirituality has enormously expanded my inner life." Studying in England, feeling dislocated, with a sceptical mind afloat in a sea of materialism and rationalism, Mann came across Axel-Ivor Berglund's *Zulu Thought Patterns and Symbolism* and gained immense nourishment from reading it. A central concept within the book is that of the 'shades:" "The term 'shades' is a broader concept [than "the spirits of the ancestors"], a modern revival of an older term that embraces the ancestral spirits as well as people who are absent physically and yet influence our daily lives by being present in our consciousness" (Mann 2003). In a way the shades are a literal inspiriting of one's own consciousness with those of ancestors, teachers, loved ones, even people with whom one has quarrelled. The influential books one has read might also be one's shades. In "A Contemplation of the Soul" (2010b, 36) Mann writes of the "private self" "being / nurtured in a parliament of shades." Awareness of the shades and their 'nurturing' potential involves a conscious recognition of what has always been: "The shades were part of me and had always been part of me. They were as ordinary as memory, as numerous as the swallows who come skimming out of the depths of the sky into the sight of the mind" (2003). His Christianity, too, is centred in the notion of a "dominant shade:" "The man of Nazareth, Jesus, is a dominant shade" (2003). "African spirituality," then, gives the poet identity by opening up his mind to a world of influence, spiritual and temporal, while rooting him in African consciousness. He speaks of "*Our* ancestors, the hunter-gatherers of the plains of Africa" (my emphasis). The ancestors, in a traditional sense, are the localized forms of the illimitable, and as such provide a human foundation for Mann's excursions into the illimitable. Herein is located the powerful force of 'belonging' that Mann wants to communicate so passionately and multifariously; it is a force that has taken on cosmic proportions for redemptive purposes which might be located, as indicated above, in the meanest aspects of existence, "maggots, viruses and bacteria." These lines are from the poem "Compost" (2010b, 56):

> Inside its shaggy tilth, the fading pink
> of crumpled petals, the softening peels and rinds
> erect delicate groves of pale fungus;
> a cabbage-leaf sweats out a grass-rich mould
> where micro-animals browse and die back into humus.

Even the filth can be, and is, redeemed, as "tilth" – carefully and lovingly described by Mann with all the precision of a naturalist.

Descriptive precision has been his strength from the start. In *First Poems* we find the love poem, "Thinking of You" (1977, 2), and language simply and aptly modified to perform a fine descriptive function: "I woke up with the bees / which honey in the thatch." Here is a rich thickness of sound and sense, along with the magical transformation of noun to verb (a fairly well-used but always effective device in Mann, as the new book shows [2010b, 3, 40, 44, 52, 69]). Also, even in this early volume, the personal is entwined with planet-life, its rhythms and life-forms. The husky thickness of 'thatch' combines with the sticky thickness of 'honey' to suggest substance and sweetness at the heart of things. The experiencing subject is immersed in his material, and that material is local. "In the Dead of Night," from the same book (Mann 1977, 3), contains the repeated refrain, "breath, breath alone," itself requiring a performance of the act of breathing which links us to the life-force in most of its manifestations (one of which, as we've seen, is located in "Bees"). Here is the rootedness in the African soul that distinguishes Mann, in his life as well as his writings. An early mental image I have of him is on my black and white TV set in the late 1970s or early 1980s, wearing a miner's helmet, gumboots, and overalls, and singing and dancing with a group. Was it Izinkonjane ZaseRhini? I cannot be certain. My impression at the time was that this performance, like those of Johnny Clegg and Juluka, broke down barriers, and located a popular voice among people of different races in troubled times. It was nationally redemptive in its way, and it was being broadcast on apartheid era TV.

In *First Poems* Mann depicted, too, his sense of the interpenetration of dimensions – the spiritual coexistent with the material, or the materiality of the spiritual, as in "In Praise of the Shades" (1997, 26–27), which is also to be found (with slight typographical variations) in *Home* (128–29). Of the shades he writes:

> And they have always been our companions,
> dressed in the flesh of the children they reared,

gossiping away from the books they wrote,
a throng who even in the strongest light
are whispering, You are not what you are,
remember us, then try to understand.

They come like pilgrims from the hazy seas
that shimmer at the borders of a dream,
not such spirits that they can't be scolded
not such mortals that they can be profaned,
for scolding them, we honour each other,
and honouring them, we perceive ourselves.

Experience beyond our experience informs our lives, whether genetically "dressed in the flesh of [. . .] children" or through the written words we read of authors and ancestors long dead. Informs but also questions; questions at least any comfortable sense of life: "*You are not what you are.*" In remembering those who came before us, we can at least "*try to understand,*" where the word "*try*" is pivotal, for who can attempt more in the face of the dislocation of life's certainties which most of us experience?

Belonging, then, is not necessarily unproblematic, as other poems show. I think, for example, of "Bougainvillea" (2010b, 44), "Prickly-pear" (55), and "The Dark Side of the Moon" (151). "Prickly-pear," to single out one of these, tells of a survival instinct within the very plant life of Africa, and, by extension, of the demands involved in the right to belong. The concluding metaphor would include humankind within the "rubbery pelt" of the fruit, where the harsher aspects of African existence are kept at bay. And yet despite the soft interior's need for protection, the way the plant belongs in the environment is apparent in the precise and appropriate description. Such attention to detail is a type of love, a reception of the attributes of the other within the self. I quote the whole poem:

The fruit of that bad-land's prospector
the cactus, they're shaped
like small green hand-grenades.

The skin's rubbery pelt
that's pockmarked with holes
each sprouting a cluster of spines

erect like a sea-anemone's
to foil depredation.
Even the goats, omnivorous

and hard-mouthed, have decided
the gritty sweetness inside
isn't worth a gumful of such thorns.

Of the crownlets of red
and orange petals that sprouted
as fresh and fierce as the flames

of a gas-ring atop each fruit,
only rough rims like the craters
of dead volcanoes remain.

Transcendence, in sour soils
and arid heat, can perhaps
only be sustained from within.

Another way of treating the final stanza might be to say that the question of belonging in Africa, an issue which so tested Guy Butler (who offered an opposite comfort, through the hard thinking with which he confronted alienation), has to be a conscious decision and is not a matter of circumstance or background. The question can be extended to include the "sour soils / and arid heat" of the modern world as a whole, the existentialist desert Mann encountered as a student in London. Feeling alienated is not a necessary condition. If such is the case, "Transcendence" is paradoxically a type of immanence, a rootedness within the self, wherever that self might be. Adopting this generalization in an unqualified way, however, would be to underestimate the African particularities evoked in the descriptive lines: "[. . .] the crownlets of red / and orange petals that sprouted / as fresh and fierce as the flames // of a gas-ring atop each fruit." The simile of the "gas-ring" is extraordinary, a keen-eyed and apt image, coming as it does after the alliterative gleam and sonic flash of "as fresh and fierce as the flames." This quality of description elevates its subject into part of a collocation of imagery that defines African existence, providing a type of inner nourishment that almost obviates the need for the final stanza, even though this stanza guides the message of the poem explicitly home. Is this final stanza not too explicit?

I turn to another poem to help cast further light on Mann's incorporation of literally stated lessons at the conclusions of his poems. In the body of "Litchi," on the facing page, we find a similar brilliance of sensuous appeal (reminiscent of Seamus Heaney), and a similar sense of the 'embodiment' of more than is described – the deeper significance of material substance and experience:

The husk cracked open,
the pale sweetmeat
thumbed out in blobs

and placed on the tongue,
the taste of the fruit,
its chemistry, its Mecca

embodies a theory's
play of shadows,
theology's dance of bones.

(54)

The "play of shadows" and "dance of bones" are clichés which in their own way embody states: states of emptiness or paucity, especially in relation to the sensuousness of the fruit. My point touches, once more, on Mann's apparent didacticism, which does not stand apart from the poetry: that is, even as he states his message, he turns that message into poetry. The explicit, communicating, statement is embedded within the poem; it is not an imposition.

Mann was engaged in Non-Governmental Organization work for many years, specifically with the Valley Trust, in the Valley of a Thousand Hills in KwaZulu-Natal. The work involved the construction of ferro-cement rain-water tanks, pit toilets, and a spring protections piped water supply scheme, with the aim of providing clean water and adequate sanitation for rural people in the area (Mann 1986). This work too, then, was redemptive, materially redemptive, and although most of his energy went into it, at the expense of his poetry, it did result in a few fine poems, centred on this particular form of redemption. The following is from "Taps" (2010b, 110–11). The poet tells of how we usually do not spare

[. . .] a single thought about the webbed complexities
of miners, crusher-plants, furnaces and mine-dumps,
of labs and factories, banks, payrolls, roads and trucks
that bring it spigot and all to that counter in the hills.

He continues:

Consider too what pushes up and out of taps,
what shoots and glitters and splashes forth
overflowing a mug, a kettle,
a pair of cupped and dusty hands [. . .] .

So bless the manufacturers of taps, I say,
the water-board officials and engineers,
the clouds that rain into the reservoirs
and the people sweating in a trench with picks
so pipe after light-blue polyvinyl chloride pipe
laid end to end, for miles and miles
will bring a tap to every house across a thousand hills.

Taps!

Would that a cool and glittering strand of water
gushing from a small brass domestic figurine
could overflow without ceasing
each pair of cupped and dusty hands on earth.

Is this piece merely prosaic? The diction is (for the most part) ordinary, the thought is straightforward. And yet this is substantial poetry. The simple functionality of the subject is a virtue. An indispensible invention would be taken for granted, were it not that the poet evokes the effort that went into its making, a strategy that prompts us to appreciate the human labour, the materials, and the ingenuity involved in producing this simple object. The object is reappraised while it is praised, and this puts it in a new light; thus the praise is transformed into poetry, or an arrangement of thoughts and images which readjusts our vision, however apparently prosaically it is expressed. I say "apparently prosaically" because even the straightforward description of "pipe after light-blue polyvinyl chloride pipe" has its own elegance and aliveness in the pure colour depicted and the tumbling nature of the internal cluster of syllables of "polyvinyl" set against the constraining iambic and trochaic beat of the other syllables.

Mann's ability to remove the veil of familiarity leads me to the final area of redemption I would like to consider in this poet, to be found within his love poetry. I have chosen as representative of this type, "To Julia in the Supermarket" (2010b, 82), a title which in itself indicates the singling out of a special individual within a mundane, quotidian setting:

Ah strange, distant and beautiful woman,
pushing a trolley down an avenue of tins,
a child in tow, a shopping list in hand,

how much I adore the curve of your waist,
the sway of your body, the pause, the turn
and reed-quick bending to the one side of you.

Let me pile your trolley with new-baked rolls
and fill your arms with artichokes and wine,
let me explain that thinking you elsewhere

but finding you here has torn the membrane
that custom and routine thickens in my eyes
and through the fissure burst, as at the first,

the whole breathing, talking, hurrying, laughing,
soft-lipped, warm-hipped, red-scarfed woman of you.

The mundane nature of the setting and the activity of shopping is part of the point of the poem, but what is most important is the unexpectedness of the meeting, through which the familiar becomes defamiliarized. This unexpected meeting and its consequence is indirectly metaphorical of the function of poetry. Again, Mann 'explains' what is happening within the poem, but his explanation is of the substance of the poem. That is, its terms are powerful and appropriate: the meeting has "torn the membrane / that custom and routine thickens in my eyes" to reveal the living woman, seen as if with new eyes. The accumulation of sensuous adjectives at the end of the poem is related to the transformation. As in Castiglione, say, sight is the channel for the appreciation of beauty, where external beauty reflects a higher nature (1974, 306–07). The very environment has been transformed from an "avenue" of anonymous "tins" to an abundant store of wholesome particularities, of "piled" "new-baked rolls," and armfuls of "artichokes and wine." The poem is personal and private, and part of one shies away from even commenting on it, but the private love, of course, has public resonances, and if, as Mann stated in the *Festival Supplement* of *Grocott's Mail* in June 2010, "I am trying to help [people] find themselves" (Mqokeli), this poem helps us to remember similar moments in our lives, seed poems, perhaps, in our memories, which have never germinated. This poem, too, then, serves as part of Mann's redemptive mission.

Because of their present pertinence, two summative extracts from the long instructive poem, "Seeing the Cosmos in a Grain of Sand," kindly forwarded to me by Mann, offer a fitting conclusion to this review.[2] The first describes children in an art class. Note their sensuous delight at being involved in creative work, their redemptive strength centred in Blakean innocence which transforms into a 'rainbow' the darkness imaged in the stark "headlines" of the adult world of experience (Mann 2009):

Look! Child after child, a sleeve pulled up, an elbow raised, a
wrist bent back

deliciously pats and wiggles a hand in a pigment's wet meniscus
of molecules
then lifts the palm and lovingly, drippingly squishes the mark of
the rainbow
on headline after headline of human folly and disgrace, chortling
with delight.

Here is the ending of the poem:

Language. Language. Language. Metaphor after metaphor,
opening, linking.
If you by now have glimpsed, albeit for a flash, the cosmos in this
grain of sand
don't be surprised if awe shimmers a metaphor of metaphors
within your mind,
don't be reluctant to say with Newton, with Einstein, Blake and
other such seers
in different continents of languaged culture round the planet's
linguisphere,
*Laudate Dominum. Shanti shanti. Om Om. Masimbonge
Somandla. Amen. Amen.*

The poet binds together herein multiculturalism, world-wide religion, poetry, science, and certain giant shades of both science and poetry – not in an indistinguishable conglomerate, but as distinct expressions which yet conform to his sense of universal belongingness, as defined by cosmogenesis, creativity, language, and faith.

NOTES

1. Hereafter *Home*.
2. The two parts of the poem have been published in *Current Writing* (2008) and *Scrutiny2* (2009), but Mann holds copyright.

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