

scrutiny2



ELLEN
BIB SELAST –
"COURAGE IS
THE BEST THING":
EXILE AND
DISPLACEMENT
IN OLD ENGLISH
POETRY

Leontie Viljoen

WALKING
WITH
GHOSTS

Andie Miller



1812-5441(2010)15:2:1-A

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

UNISA
university of south africa
PRESS

Identity and failure

.....
 Anton Krueger speaks to Ashraf Jamal about his two recently launched books —
Experiments in freedom and *Sunnyside Sal*

ASHRAF JAMAL
 Art History and Visual Culture
 Rhodes University
 a.jamal@ru.ac.za

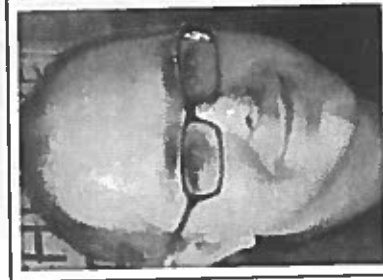
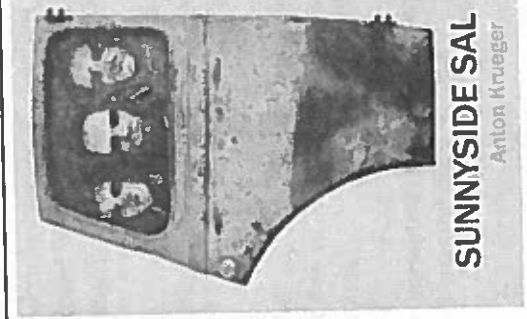


Image 1: Anton Krueger
 Image 2: *Sunnyside Sal*
 Image 3: Cover of
Experiments in Freedom



AJ: Welcome ... this evening at Thinkfest we have Anton Krueger, fiction writer, theatre practitioner and author of *Experiments in freedom: explorations of identity in new South African Drama*. This engaging critical study is published by Cambridge Scholars Press, a publishing brand which has the canny ability to pick up on promising global talent worldwide. Anton, how do you feel about the publication of your first major critical work?

AK: Nervous. You get involved with writing something like this and you just want to get it finished; but now that it's out there in the world of ideas it feels vulnerable. I like the idea of putting something out there, but I don't like the possibility of failure, you know? I like the idea of having written something, but I don't know if I really want to defend it.

AJ: Firstly I must congratulate you on a good read, something that's not always easy

to do in a context of academia. Anton is one of those few academics able to write very clear prose, which is a virtue, but it can also have problems. Tell me, do you think that the readability of the work stems from a two-fold interest in journalism and theatre? Do you find any differences between writing prose, writing a play, and academic writing?

AK: I think in this book I was trying to be as straightforward as possible, avoiding florid language and trying to argue in a viable scientific manner, which is completely different from other forms of writing. In plays one also has the actors to consider — the performer's body and the language of the character, which is a different ballpark altogether. Prose is perhaps the closest thing to "a voice" (if such a thing exists).

AJ: Given the dilemma or the paradox at the heart of the book itself, don't you think that — irrespective of the lucidity of your prose — perhaps one should also try to experiment with other modes of academic writing which seek to capture other paradoxes or modes of being in South African?

AK: Sure. Well, Ashraf, I find your academic writing to be very imaginative and creative. You seem to be a lot more confident in going out on limb and stringing together these long rambling sentences turning in on themselves. Perhaps it's a Germanic tradition of rationalism and logical epigrams, which has influenced me, which makes me wary of writing that way. I mean, I think I've experimented with a whole lot of different genres — manifestoes, songs, poetry films, documentary texts, physical theatre scripts and so on, but when writing academically, I'm wary of being caught out on a specific phrase or clause. Maybe it's a sign of insecurity, or being unsure of what I want to say, so I have to try to spell it out very clearly for myself.

AJ: To me, hearing you put it like that is an indication of a strong Calvinist tradition in South African intellectual culture, which is worth thinking about in terms of how we construct our prose, how we've constructed identity. This leads me to the first quotation from your book. In your introduction you declare that "our primary identifications are not biological, but social constructions." Could you please elaborate on this and unpack this whole idea of biological versus sociological construction? Why the emphasis on the latter?

AK: I think part of the trouble with rooting identity in the body is that it often ends up in a kind of stalemate; a static, immutable underlying ideology which cannot be questioned or refuted because it's based on an ostensibly material — and hence measurable — manifestation. Even if one resorts to discussions of biology, one is still talking about one's ideas about biology.

Identity is an idea. It's made up. And yet, having said that — even though identity is based on a kind of illusion, it's a shared illusion, because it's created collectively, not individually.

AJ: Are we not able then to choose our own identities?

AK: I'm not sure how much ability we really have in constructing our own identities. Maybe there's a tiny window of opportunity, but it's very limited; and yet possibilities for change do exist. I think people do have a great sense of attachment to their identities, but I think we must remember that they're not really substantial, that they're really based on a kind of discourse, on a culture, and that oftentimes our attachment to our identities does more harm than good.

AJ: Talking about identities as being always in flux and at the same time always intermediate constructs makes me think of ramp models,

scrutiny2 15(2) 2010: issues in english studies in southern africa
 ISSN: Print 1812-5441/Online 1753-5409
 DOI: 10.1080/18125441.2010.537097

54

INTERVIEWS

Routledge
 Taylor & Francis Group

UNISA

© Unisa Press pp 54-63

55

INTERVIEWS

who are like coat hangers for clothing, so identity is a thing you put on or take off. And yet at the same time there is a pragmatism involved in a social construction. That raises the issue — what is society, or more appropriately what are the societies that we are constructing here in South Africa? How do you piece together all the disparate elements, the heterogeneity of being, and give it some constancy some sustenance, some purpose? I suppose in this regard one could think of the World Cup as a great unifier, a special construct by a post-colonial multi-national — FIFA. You call your book *Experiments in freedom*. So the idea of the exercise, the assemblage, is in the attempt, the experiment. What attempts do we use to construct an identity?

AK: I suppose one of our main attempts at assemblage happens in terms of stories. So we were swept up this year in “the football story”, the myth about “the beautiful game”, which supposedly levelled the playing fields of the nations of the world in terms of fixed parameters and a shared desire for conquest. If you talk about being caught up in a story, of the football story, same as our nationalism, or gender, or ethnicity, we are in these stories that we are reading more than writing. And I think it’s an important process, that we need to become aware of the stories that we’re in, before we can even begin to make the attempt to write our own stories or create our own identities.

So I think the first step is to become aware of the stories we’re caught up in. Which may already be enough. Most people are oblivious, they carry on in a mechanical way, at the confluence of forces influencing them. So perhaps the first thing is to see those influences. It’s a long way away from taking any measure of control or wilful action on those influences, but it’s a start.

AJ: Speaking of stories, you seem fascinated by what you describe as “the debilitating impact

[of] the social construction of the apartheid identity ... on the stories South Africans [tell] about their senses of self.” Furthermore, you forcefully state that this problem is a consequence of “the classifications introduced by that system.” Here Verwoerd emerges as the core source of this problem. This also made me think of your play on Tsafendas in this regard. Please elaborate.

AK: This is similar to what we were saying about biological identifications; that apartheid rooted identity in race, which became a determinant, a barometer of one’s potential; it created a sterile, a static society, and that is still very much with us. Race is still our biggest problem in South Africa. I don’t mean inequality, I mean the idea of race, this powerful trope, this idea that race is the most essential quality of one’s identity. This notion of the racialization of identity is still in embedded in our consciousness (it’s not even our unconscious — it’s in our conscious). You referred earlier to Calvinism — the Calvinist drive to purity is very dangerous.

The play you’re talking about (*Living in strange lands*), is really about how Tsafendas saw Verwoerd as the cause of all his suffering and, feeling himself thwarted, murdered him. A theme emerges when he rages against the idea of purity: that purity is a kind of weakness. For example, the royal houses of Europe were very pure lineages, but as a result of their incestuous progeny they begat deformed ancestors. On the other hand, hybridity is a source of strength, it creates immunity, a constantly evolving, constantly transforming creature. Being too “pure” might end up making a more fragile creature, which was the point of Tsafendas’s diatribe in the play against purity.

AJ: I’d like to refer back to what you referred to as your Germanic tendencies, and the reason I’m bringing that up now is that I want to throw a bit of a dilemma at you. Having

isolated the problem you then declare — and I take this to be a key to your book — that “in order to exercise our freedom, it may be necessary to liberate ourselves not only from the identities imposed on us in the past but from the ways in which those identities were structured.” This, I take it, was the reason for writing this book in the first place? You then ask us “to notice the moments when stories change direction.” But you’re diminishing, for me, the heightened subtlety in the argument for us, and you allow this to happen right at the end. You basically describe yourself as being caught inside a paradox — what Ralph Waldo Emerson said a long time ago, that “consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds” — the obsession with rationality, the obsession with causality, with beginning, middle and end. No matter how it might be a driving force to get a project together, we know intuitively that it must also reach a limit and that’s the struggle I find exciting — the struggle that not only in *Experiments in freedom* but also in *Sunnyside Sal*, gives it its greatest impetus.

AK: I suppose the main paradox of the book is that it searches for identity in different arenas — in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationalism, race and syncretism — but right at the end of it, it appears that giving up the search for identity might be preferable. And in a way this might be seen as annulling the quest the book is undertaking. There is a sense that perhaps the search the book is undertaking is part of the problem; that the obsession with identity is not such a great idea.

I don’t know if you know of Ionesco’s first book *Nu* (“No”)? When he was a young, successful theatre critic back in Rumania, this book completely destroyed his career. In the first half he viciously criticises all the great Rumanian writers of the day, while in the second half he praises and restores them. So the book attacks itself, evens itself out. And it was the end of his career as a critic, as you can imagine, because people said — you said two

opposite things, how can we trust you? And yet, this may be an accurate reflection of the absurd situation we’re caught up in.

AJ: And yet, with the works of two of the main playwrights you talk about — Reza de Wet and Brett Bailey — there seems to be the feeling that they are experimenting with the frontier of dreams. You highlight them as exemplars of your thesis. Could you perhaps comment on why you chose these particular playwrights and what fascinates you about them?

AK: Well — just to give a quick overview — the book is about play texts published between 1994 and about 2005. It’s divided into five parts and each part looks at the problem of identity in the texts of a few different playwrights. And certainly, the ones I rate the most highly, towards the end, are Brett Bailey and Reza de Wet. This is because I really think they’re doing something interesting, covering new ground, while forging a new investigation of tradition. This is done in terms of ritual (in Bailey), and by means of a kind of fantastic Jungian unconscious drive in Reza de Wet.

AJ: To return briefly to this vexing point, you accept — if begrudgingly — that “the self as body is in many ways still taken as self evident.” You then reiterate the “urgent ... need to relinquish our desperate clinging to the supposedly fixed categories of race, ethnicity, and nationalism and begin to seek out new sources for our identifications.” This strident call is followed by the following striking formulation: “In order to be free, it may be necessary to abandon the pursuit of who we think we are.” Could you reflect further on this?

AK: I suppose this relates to the creation of what can become quite static categories; concerns with what we think we should be, and what we think we already are. The thing is, though, that people see us in very different ways, and to pursue a certain state of being can

only be disappointing, because it won't last, and it's not permanent or essential, and it isn't even real, in a way. So it's not a valuable thing to pursue.

I think the search for roots, history and genealogy might be interesting in terms of narrative, but I think that the value gained from such a search is little more than anecdotal, and that sourcing an ancestry cannot contribute much of fundamental value. I don't know if one really adds anything of substance to one's experience of life by having a strong sense of rootedness. Also, if you want to substantiate your identity in genealogy, another problem arises in how far back you're prepared to go to establish your "roots". When people say "I'm South African" or "I'm English" or "German" — these are very temporary states. If we go back a thousand years, a million, one's genealogy, one's roots — what are they then? Is it necessary to "know who you are"? One often hears it said that if you don't "know who you are" then you can't move forward, or: "if you don't know where you come from, then you don't know where you're going", and other, similar clichés. But where do we start formulating our origins? When we came down from the trees? Or before that, from the ocean? Or from, who knows, the starlight, God, an electrical storm — and before that? Who knows? Ultimately, it seems there's this beginning-less chain of consequences which lead to where we are now. So actually I don't think it matters at all where we come from. There are so many theories about it, and we can never really know for sure. Time is beginning-less.

AJ: Picking up on your remarks, I'd like to highlight yet another passage which, as I understand it, reaffirms the struggle at the core of *Experiments in Freedom*. You state: "I am interested in perceptions of identity in crisis and would also like to question whether a perception of identity as unstable, uncertain, and lacking unity should necessarily result in

psychic calamity, or whether this instability might turn out to be an indication of an inherently transformative ability which might be regarded as a sign of health." Do you think that we tend to have a negative perception of the unstable or uncertain? If so, why do you promote a contra perception?

AK: We're told that it's not good to be confused. Knowledge, clarity seems to be a victory, a conquest ... but certainty is dangerous. It can be deadly. Perhaps one needs a certain confidence to develop skills or abilities, but I think it can also be invigorating to confess that, at a fundamental level, we really don't know what's going on.

AJ: Shifting to the specific subject matter of your book — *Experiments in Freedom in new South African drama* — you state a particular interest in "those representations which not only depict transformation, but which are also transformative. These are plays which do not simply seek to represent identities but to create them, plays which not only read culture but write it." In terms of forms expressing how to be, when one thinks of any writing form, whether it's theatre or fiction or critical analyses, there remains a boundary point between number and wilderness, which is to me the identification of the problem. Is this what you mean by "Experiments in freedom"? Artists who can take what we all think and feel, obsession with race, sexuality, the performative, whatever it is, and who can actually transform this obsession not by abandonment but by working through them and discovering some other dimension. Could you add to this?

AK: This is what's so interesting about theatre, that it can operate exactly in this space between number and wilderness. It's a separation of people from other people so that they can be observed. They can see an identity displayed, so it's a way for people to reflect on themselves as social constructions. It's a very odd thing, it's

a very curious thing; a very ancient practice, a person stepping out of the group, representing the group, being looked at and watched by the group and somehow undergoing some sort of a change. The wilderness of the group becomes an identifiable number. I think originally in shamanic practice the origin of performances is people who are committing ritual and ceremony on behalf of a group of people for healing and transcendence. And that ancient function of theatre is transformative.

There's something paradoxical about ritual, because ritual is defined by repetition. And yet, you change during a ritual, you don't step out the same person that you went in. Something happens during that process. And this ritualistic frame is something that Brett Bailey and Reza de Wet are both very skilled at creating.

AJ: You seem to have a problem with the emphasis of text over performance. Why?

AK: I think I'm acknowledging a trend in dramatic studies. The book is about texts, but I felt something needed saying about performance as well. But to do the subject justice would take another book entirely.

AJ: Curiously, despite this emphasis on performance and the advocacy of a health inherent in experimentation, you still seem to have a lingering anxiety regarding the experimentation you advocate. For instance, Chapter One — titled "Identities fixed and fluid" — you conclude: "I would like to keep under consideration the question of what it means to have a fixed, and firmly grounded sense of identity (which might provide one with a sense of rootedness and belonging) and to contrast this with a more flexible identity (which might allow one to be more open to change, but which also runs the risk of becoming inchoate." Please unpack that last word — inchoate — and its seemingly negative implications.

AK: I think this has to do with sense and meaning. To write, to speak, to frame means trying to trap something, to carve something out of the endless possibilities of nothingness. It's a way of liberating form into meaning, but also of creating structures which become stultifying as soon as they're formed. And yet, we need them if we want to embody meaning at all. It's similar to the identity questions, in being caught up in language. For language to go against itself — a quest shared by the Surrealists and Artaud, as well as by both Beckett and Ionesco — might be described as a desperate bid for freedom.

AJ: I may be wrong, but I take it you are a Buddhist?

AK: Card carrying.

AJ: The reason I find it interesting is because it says so much about the tension between an inherited Calvinism and an adopted philosophy, which work in interestingly contrary ways. And I was wondering how you reconcile or work with both of these aspects. Are Calvinism and Buddhism mutually exclusive? And, if not, is this a tension one can work with?

AK: Well, I'm not completely sure why you're referring to an "inherited Calvinism". While I was growing up, my family were in the charismatic movement and always very experimental about religion, so that influenced me a lot more than the orthodox form of Christian doctrine to which you're alluding. When I mentioned "Germanic" influences earlier I was simply speaking of the fact my family ancestry is German and also that intellectually I've been influenced by the German philosophical method of progressive aphoristic inquiry; by which I'm referring to a style favoured by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, who are all a very long way away from Calvin. Schopenhauer, as you know, was very drawn to Buddhism and managed

to integrate the rigorous philosophical applications Buddhist philosophy demands with his logical "Germanic" approach; so I don't think that there was a tension for him in reconciling these approaches at all.

Speaking of Buddhism, there is actually a strong Buddhist strain in the book, although I never actually quote from any religious sources, since this didn't seem appropriate in the context of the publication. The very idea of letting go of one's identity is thoroughly grounded in Buddhist doctrine; the idea that the ego or self is the cause of all the trouble, that the idea of "this is who I am" and "this is who you are" is where suffering originated, as a primal cause for the state of the world. So I think that this idea of letting go of a strong sense of self is a thoroughly Buddhist idea.

AJ: That argument would suggest that the major problem in South Africa is egoic; our obsession with major constructs, overdetermination. We are afraid of our own fallibility. We want people to be constant, we don't want to see the cracks, we want to paint them up, so we're hiding from our best interests, in terms of *Experiments in freedom*, which entails that we have to reconceive our idea of nationhood and how we conceive ourselves as being South African. I think this is the reason why Bailey and Reza de Wet are so significant, because they are at the frontier of potentially new ways of experiencing being here. Not only because they're artists, but because they're able to tap into psychic transformation, which is necessary to restore health in this society.

To get back to your interest in Buddhism — given the importance of meditation to you, how does it impact on your writing and vision of the world? Are art and meditation mutually exclusive or do they, for you, work productively together?

AK: The classic definition of meditation (as I've learnt it from Rob Nairn) is to be aware of what's happening while it's happening. So it's a way of engaging fully with the world, with our minds, with what's going on in there. So I think it's really tapping into the source of our greatest creativity, to become mindful of our minds and how they are affecting and being affected by the world. So meditation is a way of watching what's happening of its own accord. Art, writing, are ways of thinking. Sometimes they're talked about as "meditative", and there are some cases where you don't know what you're doing until it's discovered on the page. But meditation isn't thinking. It's becoming aware of thinking, and not only thinking, but all sorts of processes — sensation, emotion, experience, feeling. It's not reactive or even reflective, it's engaging more fully with the world, certainly not withdrawing from it. I might go as far as to say that all true creation is meditative, if it's not merely mechanical or reactive.

AJ: In your closing chapter — "Accepting paradox: learning to let go" — you state: "To become free means not only being free to defend but also being free to explore." Please elaborate.

AK: Being free to experiment, to experience, to explore is very important. In the Latin, the root word for experiment and experience are the same — *experiri*. So to look for experiences means experimenting, it means trying something different, something out of the ordinary, something which might seem scary or which makes you vulnerable or puts you in a difficult situation. All of those things can be healthy, I think, towards developing a sense of your own being; a knowledge of experiences.

One thinks here of Sartre's "freedom to" and "freedom from": so "freedom from" involves an attack against something oppressing one, something one wishes to be liberated from. But the freedom to explore and to experience

is still quite limited. I think it's very important to experiment and to base one's understanding on one's own personal experiences: not to simply accept or believe.

AJ: You invoke the thought of French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, to get you through the impasse of the overcoding or segmentation of identity, which, as I understand it, infers that despite the will to freedom we remain classified, fixed, petrified in received and exhausted frames which we nevertheless fascistically perpetuate precisely because we don't have the tools or the wherewithal to shapeshift these overdetermining conditions. Is this what you mean by a paradox: that we are free, yet prefer entrapment? And is this why you ask us to firstly search out the reasoning behind this pervasive system of classification because, as you put it, only then "one can become aware of the terms in which they have been operating"?

To pick up on this issue then — it's not a critique of you, but more a critique of us, about this paradox of how we define ourselves as South Africans, because (I've implied this before) are you haunted by the ghost of your argument? I don't mean to sound spooky here: simply, I wish to understand whether, irrespective of the will to let go as it were, we, as South Africans, never quite seem to be able to. And, if this is so, does this perhaps explain your remark on the third to last page that: "Perhaps the most that one might expect is that no single identity be taken too seriously, and to acknowledge the multiplicity of identifications available"?

AK: It does sound like second prize, doesn't it? Maybe we can expect more... to get to some sort of understanding of which experiences we might inadvertently share. Look, I don't think identities are completely evil, or that they should be rejected. Deleuze says it somewhere as well: one can't simply detonate them without fear for one's life. Besides, that

sort of opposition creates another identity, one that's oppositional. Playfulness and openness are important and the idea that we can operate in terms of identities, while realizing that it's a sort of game we're playing, an illusion, not something in which we've invested what we consider to be our substance.

AJ: This conclusion is very strikingly played out in a highly readable — I don't know what to call it — biography, novella, ficto-critical work — it's hard to define, but what I've tried to do is to read that now in relationship to what we've discussed in *Experiments in freedom*, because I feel there's a main trope or drive or section which you can find in the schools of work in all the various forms in South Africa, and this also applies to you, Anton, in all the various art forms and cultural practices and intellectual mischief you undertake. *Sunnyside Sal* is released by Deep South, ostensibly about this figure called Sal, but it seems to be very much about a group of young men, and how they find their way through the changes in the country.

I must say that I found some strong resemblances between these books, particularly concerning identity or self as a cultural construct and your tug-of-war with this defining and infuriating notion. While the book seems to revolve around the mercurial, anarchic, and suicidal nature of Sal — perhaps here one could pick up on Antonin Artaud's notion that we are suicided by society — you nevertheless push for a more optimistic vision of self-and-social determination. Focusing for now on Sal — a fictive-if-real childhood friend — you have this to say: "For all his talk of authenticity, Sal never really took himself very seriously. Perhaps this was also what I enjoyed about him, that he was always confrontational, always oppositional; and yet, that he still kept his sense of humour, even to the extent of parodying his own convictions." In the light of *Experiments in freedom*, is this what attracts you about the idea of freedom;

that to truly be free one must be wary of being convicted by one's convictions?

AK: Sure, yes. The first essay I ever had published, in *scrutiny*² about ten years ago, was exactly on that, called "Imprisoned by conviction", and I think I'm still ruminating along that vein; and a sense of how conviction and certainty can lead to stasis, death.

AJ: But, while I concur with the argument, at the same time what's interesting is the paradox of an intellectual demise. There is a problem in the very mercurial nature of Sal, that Sal can attract chaos precisely by his experimentation. So you are not implying that experimentation is inherently good; rather, it has to do with the individual's access to each of these conditions and how they define themselves. And that's what the book ultimately brings. But, then again, a little later, you seem to do an about-face. Reflecting on group psychology you remark: "Peer pressure creates the assumption of normality within a certain circle. Isn't that the definition of normality [you ask]? The group, the country, the religion, the political party. Where would we be without our ability to repeat, and to find ourselves belonging to a system of repetitions? When people rail against 'peer pressure', they are also attacking the education and socialization of all human beings. They are attacking our essence." That word really bugged me. These are strong words and I am uncertain as to where you stand in relation to them: what do you mean by "our essence"?

AK: It's meant to be a sort of joke about individuality and peer pressure. It's like Deleuze and Guattari said — we are already multiple. An individual can be multiple and too many groups are maniacally individualistic. I didn't think of this as an argument for a particular view, rather it's pointing out that there's not much difference between the bogeyman of "peer pressure" and the ideals of education. It just struck me as odd that people

rail against peer pressure and addiction. This is simply saying — well, that's absolutely normal, that's who we are, we are habits; we are addicts, we're addicted to a particular sense of reality. We have we are completely caught up in the pressure of our peers and our group and the forces acting on us. It's saying how very limited our potential is for freedom. For most people — even people who are completely outrageous — one might say that they are still only maybe 5% free. They're still caught up in all the other stuff. So the idea of repetition as essence was the joke there. It was meant ironically.

AJ: This notion, perhaps, of social construction and identification, is also curiously mirrored in your perception of love. You note: "once the magic of breaking out of the bonds of your self-centeredness sours it's never completely recovered again. Sure, it frees one up to fool around, but there are never any tears quite as bitter, never any real heartbreak quite as sad, as that first time." Am I to presume from this observation that after that first love all else is tainted or compromised or somehow retreated?

AK: Yes, there's no purity.

AJ: You develop this notion pell-mell, stating that: "What we have here is a postlapsarian tale, of how we were after love had come and gone; after hope in completion and the total trust in one person had failed. This is the tale of easy sex and how playful experiments added glow and glitter to the dark days of love lost. These are the stories about the fourth and fifth and sixth loves." Could you unpack this remark, which, it seems to me at least, suggests a certain resignation, or frustration, or disappointment at a personal and a political level?

AK: The book is completely personal, and yet — or perhaps, for this very reason — there's an absence of any mention of love. There's talk of

girlfriends and sex and so on, but looking back I would have said that the one or two really important relationships at that time were given only a paragraph in the book, kind of just to hint at their absence, to note their loss. It's not that these relationships didn't exist and that my life at the time was completely loveless, only that I found it impossible to write about those feelings and interactions.

AJ: Returning to our earlier discussion of mysticism and paradox, you make the following observation regarding karma: that it is a "Sanskrit word [which] simply means 'action', and [you say] I would hazard a guess that it shares a link to the Greek word which became 'drama'. It has nothing to do with fate or punishment, but is simply an extension of the things we do, the definition of the consequences of each action which are inherent within the action itself. It's exactly the opposite of destiny. It seems to me that if we're to make any sense of this world, we have to believe that we have some power over the circumstances in which we find ourselves and in our reactions to the things we've brought upon ourselves."

AK: Yes, I think we have to accept the consequences. They are there and we must accept that our forefathers and ourselves have had a hand in where we are today. But where freedom lies, if it exists, is surely in the reaction to "inevitable" consequences. Yes, perhaps there is an inevitability about the consequences we've been dealt. What will be up to what is, and yet, the power lies in how we react, how we respond to the consequences,

that's what will determine if they will repeat themselves or not.

AJ: Measuring resignation against hope, you conclude with a striking Sufi saying about a man who has two goats fighting each other. "Which one is winning?" asks the disciple, and the master replies: "The one I feed." So giving up can become a passive activity." Could you elaborate on this curious last statement?

AK: To give up (which in this instance refers to drugs and addiction) might be seen as something easy, rather than something combative. Instead of trying to fight yourself, it's a case of relinquishing — to stop feeding. So giving up can be a victory. I was reading recently in a book by Paul Gilbert that one of the reasons for the high anxiety created by a Western education is that people aren't taught how to fail. Everything is focused on winning, on the ambition to get to the top. But successful people have apparently been shown to have a good relationship with failure. They know how to accept failure, so it doesn't destroy them. I mean remember what Beckett always said about his ongoing efforts, that he was every time trying to "fail better". So to "give up", to be a happy failure, may be more of a victory than to be a bitter winner.

Note

- 1 This public interview was held as part of the Thinkfest programme at the National Arts Festival, 2010. It was part of a series called "Conversations with Authors" and was held on Friday 25 June, 2010 in the Monument Restaurant, Grahamstown.