

Bessie Head's Writing As Autobiography

I write what I am living (22-23 February 1975 KMM BHP)

So you think what you have is your own? What is your own comes to you bit by bit (Camus, quoted in letter 11.10.1984, KMM BHP).

In this chapter I want to examine the concept of autobiography, its relevance to Bessie Head's creative output as a means of telling her own story and embedding her 'living life' in narrative, and some versions of her life and writings that threatened to impose upon it the stasis of 'living death'. I also want to look at some of the issues and difficulties which arise in the light of criticism which uses a biographical approach.

It was one of Bessie Head's earliest critics, Arthur Ravenscroft, who first pointed out that her novels were 'strange, ambiguous, deeply personal books' (1976, 175) with their basis in the 'vast caverns of interior personal experience' (183). Another critic who has acknowledged that 'all three of Head's novels have an autobiographical dimension' is Craig Mackenzie (1989, 14), who stated that these 'three novels form a kind of trilogy in their common focus on the life story and mental anguish of the author' (15). Bessie Head herself said that her three novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* were 'continuous autobiographical records' (20.6.1980 KMM BHP) in which she was 'usually the main lead character' (16.6.1983 KMM BHP). In them, she said, 'I worked mainly on my own problems' (6.5.1975 KMM BHP). Of Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* she wrote 'that passive shy girl was my own eyes watching the hideous nightmares which were afflicting me' (3.9.1982 ~ BH?), and she describes Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* as 'A combination of feminine sensitivity and borrowed maleness. I borrowed the outer male form but I lived inside that form' (9.2.1970 KMM BHP).

After the publication of Bessie Head's third published novel, *A Question of Power*, which is the work most widely acknowledged as autobiographical, her focus ostensibly shifted, first into the local community with the research and publication of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). Some of the pieces she researched for this, but did not include, made up the collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1988) which continued her autobiographical emphasis. For example, Bessie Head said of the short story which gives the collection its name, that 'the life of the woman Dikeledi is more or less my life. My husband was a man like Garasego Mokopi' (16.6.1977 KMM BHP). For the short story 'Looking for a Rain God' she draws on her own experience of being locked up at the Lobatse Hospital after her breakdown with two old women from the village of Kanye who had killed two little girls and cut up their body parts for medicine (28.1.1973 ~ BH?). Even in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1986), Bessie Head's strong personal presence is evident, as it is in her final work, *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984).

Of the central character in this fictionalised history of Southern Africa she said 'For **Sebina** read Bessie Head - one of the great B. Head male characters, tender, enchanting, flexible and delightful. For **Shoshong** read Serowe' (Undated letter KMM BHP). Her posthumously published collections *Tales of Tenderness and Power* and *The Cardinals* also transform her personal experiences into narrative, while the hundreds of copies of her personal letters housed in the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe communicate more directly her experiences to her many correspondents.

Although Bessie Head was clear about the autobiographical nature of her work, there are a number of reasons why others might disagree. Not least of these is that the autobiographical genre is held to be European in origin, and Bessie Head was a South African. She was also a woman, and the genre has traditionally been predominantly male-authored; for example, early central figures who have come to prominence through their use of the confessional form and the authoritative 'I' have included

Montaigne, St. Augustine, and Rousseau. However there have been, although frequently overlooked, autobiographies by women writers dating as far back as the 1160s as well as autobiographies that pre-date contact with the West, while others are 'connected to indigenous traditions which cannot be dismissed as being "transplanted"' (Friedman 1988, 5b). The European male tradition, then, would not appear to have had such an exclusive relationship with the autobiographical form as is commonly supposed. Nevertheless, those whose lives are considered noteworthy have achieved success according to conventional standards which is, as Stanley (1992) points out, a political issue. That a new canon is in the process of formation is also, as she says, a 'highly political process' (4).

There are, of course, broadly political reasons why Bessie Head did not attempt to tell her life story in a conventional, linear way, and why her work is rarely characterised by the first-person narrative form associated with the autobiography, although she uses the first person in some of her essays and, of course, in her letters. The first-person narrative convention, as Liz Stanley (1992) points out, tells us that to know who we are we must be part of an identifiable, historical lineage, be in possession of factual knowledge about its members, and present an objective, absolute 'truth' based upon individualistic models. Issues of 'truth' and 'fact' loom as large over biography and autobiography as they do over lived reality, although 'of course everyone now accepts that 'truth' about the totality of a life all depends on the viewpoint from which it is examined' (6).

Those who lack continuity or 'factual' knowledge about their lives, or have been placed in the margins of the dominant discourse, but who nevertheless want to assert their right to express their experiences, articulate their sense of themselves, and define their own place, may choose to use the conventional form as best they can, but they are also free to adapt existing forms. It is particularly significant in this context that there has been a recent proliferation of autobiographical writings in South Africa, and that this is described as part of the autobiographical impulse of an entire country engaged in a process of bringing the past into proper perspective in a 'drama of self-definition' ... a nation's textual creation of itself in the course of identifying itself ... (Jacobs 1991, i).

Some of the individuals engaged in this process, who have perhaps only recently been allowed to make themselves heard, are choosing to do so through the conventional first-person narrative. Bessie Head, however, asserted her right to express her experience in her own way, and invariably used the style and form characteristic of the novel to present aspects of her lived reality, a reality which has caused some contention among her critics.

One of the most problematic issues which arises when a writer is, as Bessie Head was, particularly open about their life, is the use critics make of the information available to them. She said, 'I am always forced to give biographical information so everything on me begins rather pathetically: Bessie Head was born the 6 July, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa ... One had to begin *somewhere*' (27.12.1983 KMM BHP). Here she locates herself by giving factual information in the form of her date and place of birth, and thus gives her readers information which is verifiable. Beyond this, she was reliant on information given to her by others, from whom she was made aware that she had been fostered shortly after her birth in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Institution where her mother was an in-patient. It was not until after Bessie Head's arrival in Botswana in 1964, when she was required to make information about her parents available to the authorities, that she contacted the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society who had taken care of her shortly after her birth. She was simply told:

You were born out of wedlock. Your father's particulars are unknown. Your mother was a European woman, Bessie Amelia Emery, who died on 13 September 1943. It is probable from the file that she was a South African citizen (13.5.1964 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head made another attempt to obtain information in 1984, two years before her death, this time for the autobiography she had been commissioned to write by Heinemann (6.6.1984 KMM BHP). Though this, once again, did not result in any new information, her own letter to the Child Welfare Society describes her beliefs about her background, and the strength and depth of her feelings surrounding them:

My mother was a white woman, Bessie Amelia Emery. She had been married and returned to the family home in Johannesburg after a broken marriage. Her family reared race-horses for the Durban July Handicap and my father, a black man, worked in the stables. My mother acquired me from this black man. When the family found this out, they removed my mother from the family home to the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital while she was pregnant and that is where she gave birth to me (25.6.1985 KMM BHP).

In this poignant letter, in which she refers to herself as an acquisition, a thing, rather than a human being, Bessie Head continued:

I am a very independent person, and it was quite acceptable to me that I should grow up with no relatives ... The family plan was to obliterate my mother even before she died. She had a grandmother who opposed this. When the family came down for the Durban July Handicap) she insisted on a stop over in Pietermaritzburg so that she could visit both my mother and I. My mother's brother used to shout in great anger at Nellie Heathcote: 'We want to forget this matter but the old lady won't let us!'. To him it was in order to pack a human being away forever in a mental hospital (25.6.1985 KMM BHP).

Here, Bessie Head locates her life first in absence, then in the threat of the obliteration of the woman who gave birth to her. The contradiction between her stated acceptance of her position and the strength of the term 'obliterate' is striking. In using such a powerful term to describe what she believed to be her white mother's fate, she also indicated her feelings about her own right to exist. She was the child of a sexual union perceived as unlawful under South Africa's 1927 Immorality Act forbidding intercourse between all whites and Africans, and although the children of such unions were not in themselves classed as illegal, she was aware that she was the result of an illegal liaison. The circumstances surrounding her conception and birth thus ensured that her original place in the world was infused with a sense of primary guilt at being alive, a sense of having no right to life. Elbaz (1987) argues that every biographer or autobiographer must start with the family, where the zero point of the life in question begins, which means that Bessie Head's initial positioning was a problematic starting point around which to structure any story of her life.

The biographical details that Bessie Head gave are repeated in some of the most recent criticism. For example, Lionnet reiterates that she was the 'mixed race daughter of a wealthy South African woman of Scottish descent and a black stable boy. Her mother had been committed to the asylum because of the interracial love affair' (1995, 122). That this information may not have been objective fact which could not be confirmed by official documents would ordinarily matter little, since its importance lay in Bessie Head's belief that it was true and the effect this had upon her sense of herself. Denzin paraphrases Sartre's belief that 'if an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects are real' (Denzin 1989, 25). Because autobiography is generally considered to be based on 'truth' and Bessie Head's story sounds almost like the stuff of fairy tales, it may be considered that to read her work as fictional is appropriate, particularly since it has been said that:

the generic task of the novel is to portray the history of individual lives, accounting for and sketching human subjectivity by relating it to origin, the genre itself may be considered a version of what is usually taken as a specific instance of the form: the family romance, which, Freud says, 'serves as the fulfilment of wishes and as a correction of actual life' (Van Boheeman 1987, 24).

In Freudian interpretations, fictional characters are seen as split-off fragments of their author's ego; in other views they appear as versions of identities or alienated parts of the writer's identity. Fiction can thus provide an alternative way of living through the imagination, and as such, could have perhaps comfortably accommodated Bessie Head's re-presentation of her personal experience.

The interpretation of Bessie Head's work to which I am about to turn leads her readers to an interpretation of her work as 'family romance' (Gardner 1986, 122) on the one hand, and total fabrication on the other. Susan Gardner's biographical memoir, 'Don't Ask for the True Story' was published in *Hecate* shortly after Bessie Head's death and highlights some of the dangers of biographical interpretations. Gardner was a member of *Hecate's* editorial board (Dovey 1989, 30), which gave her the power of academic authority to claim superior knowledge of her subject, and which enabled her to succeed, for a time at least, in raising doubts about Bessie Head's own version of her early life. Craig MacKenzie, for example, refers to the article by pointing out that 'some doubts about the truth about her life story have recently been voiced' (1989, 11). He attempts to distance himself from the debate by stating that it is not his task 'to offer the reader a definitive version of Bessie Head's origins, or to vouch for the absolute veracity of the version that she herself offers' (4). His acceptance that there might indeed be an 'absolute veracity', a 'definitive version' indicates, however, that a belief in the static nature of truth still pervades academic life and this inevitably influences any discussion on biography and autobiography.

Yet, whether it is possible to lay claim to the absolute truths of our pasts is questionable. For example, 'McCarthy suggests that only comparatively rarely are lives deliberately fictionalised' (Stanley 1992, 62) although this enlightened view did not stop her stating, with reference to the writings of Lillian Hellman, that 'Every word she writes is a lie, including "and" and "the"' (McCarthy quoted in Denzin 1989, 68). One reason for distortion may be, as Stanley points out, because memory withholds the key to the past and

Because memory inevitably has limits, the self we construct is necessarily partial; memory ties together events, persons and feelings actually linked only in such accounts and not in life as it was lived; it equally necessarily relies upon fictive devices in producing any and every account of the self it is concerned with (1992, 62).

When a life story is told by a third party in the course of a biographical construction, both subject and reader are dependent upon the biographer's willingness to accept that they are not the possessors of the total and unequivocal truth. Gardner's article is entitled 'Don't Ask for the True Story', which, on the one hand could indicate her acceptance that there can be no 'true' story of Bessie Head's life. But on the other, Gardner clearly states that her aim is to unpick 'a legend ... which almost everyone still believes' (1986, 111) and to replace 'the pathos of the life-story she would tell again and again, obsessively' (114) with a story 'more incredible than any Bessie had ever told' (122). While claiming that the story Bessie Head told about her own life 'seemed almost too "good", in its horrible way, to be true' (115), Gardner aims to replace what she called the 'ideal biographical legend' (115) with her own version at the heart of which, she claims, lies a secret which she can never reveal. As Dovey states:

While the existence of a secret is the source of the narrative, the gesture of withholding this secret 'knowledge' is the source of Gardner's power over Head. The secret of Head's identity is, in Felman's words, that knowledge of the Other which has to be appropriated, taken from the Other. It can be argued that claiming to possess the secret of the Other's identity constitutes the ultimate gesture of power over the Other (Dovey 1989, 34).

Gardner uses her own power to attempt to dismiss what Bessie Head saw as the most important and meaningful factors in her background as 'commonplaces about Bessie's life that she may herself have believed, but which were not true' (1986, 112) and she uses three distinct strategies in order to do so.

The first strategy is that she immediately establishes an intimate and also a superior relationship with Bessie Head which serves to reinforce her existing authorial power, and which begins with a description of herself and her subject, walking hand in hand in the Botswana heat. Her second strategy is to undercut any positive statement she makes about Bessie Head with a negative one, a pattern which she repeats throughout her article, as for example when she later claims that this intimate relationship was, in fact, 'disquieting' (112) to her, and had been 'immediately established' (112) by Bessie Head herself. Her third strategy is to remind the reader that Bessie Head's fame rested largely upon an autobiographical novel about her 'harrowing mental breakdown' (110). She points out that her own reason for wanting to meet the writer was because she did her Master's degree on "'mad" women writers' (111). It is within this derogatory and dismissive category that she then proceeds to embed Bessie Head by describing her as loudly proclaiming the cleanliness of her vagina in a hotel dining room and juxtaposing Bessie Head's 'ravenous' appetite and her heavy drinking of 'Long Tom beers from dawn to dusk' (110) with her own inability to eat, and to drink only Appletisers because of the intense heat. She also questions why, when at the time of her visit Bessie Head was a writer of international reputation, no one appeared to know where she lived. She asks why 'this woman, who has made this village so uniquely her own ... seems to be ostracised' (111).

The cumulative effect of these statements leads the reader to the assumption that the writer is indeed ostracized, and that this is because she establishes inappropriately intimate relationships with virtual strangers, is a public embarrassment, and eats and drinks too much. In short, Gardner carefully constructs a 'mad' personality for her subject before she begins her investigation into Bessie Head's version of her early circumstances, which she obtained without the latter's permission or knowledge. She justifies her intrusion into Bessie Head's background by saying 'In this article I have followed a methodology used by Bessie herself for, as she told us in Serowe, one of her interviewees once asked her not to reveal what he said, "and of course I wrote it"' (127).

Accusing Bessie Head of naiveté in having never tried to trace her mother, she points out that in South Africa everyone is 'eminently traceable' and goes on to claim that she had confidential information about the writer's background which proved that she belonged to 'a prominent South African family' (124). She then suggests that Bessie Head had 'no interest in documenting a truth which she may have known anyway' (122), that she 'was not born in the Fort Napier mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg, nor had her mother been a patient there' (122-3). Gardner continues 'Having given her infant daughter all that she could, Bessie Emery handed her over to foster care. And disappears from the scene' (124).

However, as Gardner has pointed out, everyone in South Africa is 'eminently traceable'. Because of this, verifiable information from the South African Archive Service exists which substantiates Bessie Head's own story that her mother was a patient in Fort Napier, that she herself was born there, and that her mother later died there.

I want to turn now to Bessie Head's version of events, and that of her closest living relatives. The following account is thus a combination of objective fact and subjective interpretation. Certain objective facts about Bessie Head's life history have been confirmed by publicly available and verifiable information which I gained from the South African Archive Service in the form of Birth, Marriage and Death certificates. In this context, the agreement between Bessie Head's statements and official documentation constitutes her own 'truth'.

My purpose in tracing this information was to attempt to corroborate what Bessie Head herself had said, since it was obviously so important to her, and because it had been dismissed as fabrication. The information I obtained was confirmed by Ronald Emery, the half-brother Bessie Head never knew she had. It has also subsequently been enlarged upon by Kenneth Birch, her mother's brother, who has since published his own memoir of events in the monograph *The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the late Bessie Amelia Head* (1995). All these sources make clear that Bessie Head's mother was indeed institutionalised in the Fort Napier Mental Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, that Bessie Head was born there and fostered shortly thereafter. It also makes clear that Mrs Emery had first been hospitalized some years prior to her daughter's birth there in 1937.

Bessie Amelia Emery's family originally came from Wimborne, Dorset, in England. Her mother, Alice Mary Besant, had married Walter Birch in Southampton in 1892 before the couple left for South Africa (Death Notice of Alice Mary Birch) where Walter Birch then worked as a painting contractor (personal correspondence to the author from Emmerentia van Rensburg 21.2.1993). The couple had three sons and four daughters including Bessie Amelia, who married an Australian, Ira Garfield Emery on 23 March 1915 (Marriage Certificate). Kenneth Birch states that the couple's first child, named Stanley, was born on 1 December 1915 and that in 1919, when their second child Ronald was ten months old, Stanley, now aged 4, was run over and killed by a taxi in front of his mother on the street where they lived (Birch 1995, 8). Kenneth Birch puts his own interpretation on his sister's subsequent behaviour thus: 'behind the apparently simple facade, a cauldron of rage, frustration and devastation was indubitably heating up' which gave rise to 'some very, very explosive displays' (9). The Emerys' marriage ended in divorce in 1929, and Ronald was initially placed in Mrs Emery's care, though a boarder at school (Document from Supreme Court of S. Witwatersrand Local Division). Kenneth Birch reports that by 1931 his sister, nicknamed 'Toby' had become difficult and at times violent. Her behaviour resulted in her being committed to the Pretoria Mental Hospital on 26 August 1933 (Notice of Admission, Mental Disorders Act 1916), where she was described as suffering from a condition described as 'Dementia Praecox', the old name for schizophrenia (Death Notice of Bessie Amelia Emery)

The personal tragedy of the death of her son must have had a tremendous impact on Mrs Emery's life, and intense, unresolved grief can result in extreme behaviours which psychiatrists are apt to label as pathological when they are often socially intelligible. However, Mrs Emery was considered sufficiently improved to be discharged in August 1934. Kenneth Birch is able to cast light on her movements between her discharge and her final admission to Fort Napier:

In 1935 and 1936 she went on holiday to Durban, under the aegis of her younger sister, then living there. In 1937 the same procedure was followed. About April 1937 the news came from the Durban daughter, Edith, that sister Toby was in an interesting condition. Mrs Birch was soon on her way to Natal to take charge. On the advice of the family doctor and solicitor (Wilfred Fearnhead) her mother placed Toby in the Fort Napier Mental hospital, Pietermaritzburg in May (Birch, 1995, 10).

According to Kenneth Birch, the news that Mrs Emery's child was 'coloured' came as a shock to the Birch family who had 'thought that the father would have been white' (11). Whether Mrs Emery remained institutionalized because of the birth of her 'mixed race' child, or because of the strength of feeling surrounding mental illness, or simply because her illness had become too much of a burden for her family to bear can only be matters of conjecture. Given the racial climate in South Africa at that time it is unsurprising that Bessie Head believed it was because of her mother's relationship with a black African that she remained in Fort Napier.

Correspondence states that by 1940 Mrs Emery was judged to be 'practically normal in most everyday matters' other than she was inclined to be rather extravagant ... as regards money matters' (Bond of Security No 50/40). She was able to receive visits from her son around this time, as well as from Mrs Birch, her mother, who sent the sum of £3 a month to the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society for the maintenance of her grandchild (Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society 14.12.1940).

Bessie Head remembered being visited by her grandmother (Stead Eilersen 1996) and Kenneth Birch confirms that his mother visited her daughter in Pietermaritzburg and, whilst there, would also call on Nellie Heathcote (1995). He goes on to say that from 1937 to about 1950 (up to her 80th year) Mrs Birch orchestrated decisions affecting the maintenance and education of her grandchild, the Child Welfare Society and the foster parents (11). She died in February 1964 at the Kensington Sanatorium, Johannesburg, at the age of 92 years 4 months (Death Notice). Her daughter died in Fort Napier on 13 September 1943 at the age of 47 where the cause of her death was given as a lung abscess (Notice of Death 14.9.1943 Mental Disorders Act 1916, Fort Napier Institution, Pietermaritzburg). Kenneth Birch confirms that 'in 1943 Toby developed a lung complaint and her physical health began to fail. Her sister Dorothy wrote 'Toby said to me "I feel I am finished, and this is what I have got in life for being good"' (11).

Bessie Head always believed, in accordance with what she had been told by Nellie Heathcote, that her mother had committed suicide (27.12.1983 KMM BHP).

My juxtaposition of these different versions of Bessie Head's life show the complexities and dangers of autobiography and of biographical approaches. Bessie Head's letters, however, show a different side to the relationship between herself and Gardner which has an important bearing on Gardner's attitude and Bessie Head's response to it. They reveal that she was initially amused by Gardner's interest, saying in a letter to Ezekiel Mphahlele that 'During six months of correspondence with Ms Gardner I got the feeling that I had suddenly and hilariously been promoted to the 'Bushman Curio Dept' of the University of Witwatersrand' (29.9.1983 KMM BHP). But it would appear that over time Gardner's interest in Bessie Head became very disturbing to the writer, and her letters show that she developed strong feelings of antipathy towards her: 'All that Bessie, Bessie eagerness was for what she was going to get out of me' (24.6.1983 KMM BHP).

In part, Bessie Head had come to feel ill-used by academics. She felt she had given freely of her time to them and initially she had been happy to do this, but gradually she came to feel that they despised her as a 'self-made writer' (18.6.1983 KMM BHP) whilst using her interviews as a means of advancing their own careers. She felt strongly that grants and allocations of funds were made available for people to come and study her, while she gave her time for nothing and was, compared to them, desperately poor. Her feelings towards Gardner went beyond this, however. She felt that 'The lady was sharp and rapacious but she frightens me too because her behaviour is wildly illogical ... I think the lady is mentally ill. She said some sick things to me in her letters to me' (21.6.1983 KMM BHP). She wrote that Gardner classified her as 'a mentally ill writer who wrote mentally ill books In the end I could stand it no more' (28.7.1983 KMM BHP).

Gillian Stead Eilersen states in her biography of Bessie Head that Gardner, 'With the well-trained academic's highly developed sense of propriety ... asked Bessie's permission before every move she made' (1996, 254) and suggests that it may have been Gardner's 'painstaking correctness' and 'startling efficiency' that was later to 'unnerve' Bessie Head (255). However, Bessie Head would have certainly been perceptive enough to be aware of Gardner's intentions towards her: that of turning her into an object of study as a 'mad' woman writer. She had a highly developed and vulnerable sensitivity to being treated as an object, whether by the state or by individuals, because of her status as a woman of mixed race, born in a mental institution, daughter of a woman designated mad, and carrying the burden of prophesy that she herself would one day become mad.

While many critics, including Gillian Stead Eilersen, frequently label the writer's behaviour as indicative of 'mental instability' and 'obsession' (256), Bessie Head herself explained in a personal letter that she had 'a horrid way of behaving when I am discomforted, so I just simply avoid people who discomfort me' (5.10.1973 KMM BHP). In June 1983 Bessie Head came to the point where she was so discomforted that she wanted no further contact from Gardner, and wrote to her saying 'Any further correspondence from you will be returned unopened. Should you make a mistake of trying in any way to contact me or approach me I will write a letter of complaint to the university administration' (18.6.1983 KMM BHP).

Gardner's article shows that there was considerable substance to Bessie Head's increasing discomfort and indeed fear of her. For example, she quotes a nameless friend, a 'Transkeian psychiatrist and well-known biographer' (1986, 122) to whom she has related the opening pages of *A Question of Power* and who says '*All my black psychotics* (my emphasis) claim they have a white parent. Even family romance and schizophrenia take a racial form in South Africa' (122). This psychiatrist knows 'psychotics' in the same way as the colonialists who said 'I know my natives', a claim which, as Achebe points out, implies two things at once:

(a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand -understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding (Achebe 1975, 5).

Gardner continued to undermine Bessie Head further by appropriating her relationship with the writer Ezekiel Mphahlele:

... with the thick file of correspondence between her and me (for I had kept copies of everything), I went to 'Zeke' Mphahlele who, as a fellow Black writer, had been initially suspicious (for Bessie Head had also written to him). He read the entire file and changed his mind ... Nobel prize nominee, 'story-teller, playwright, poet ... and myth-maker', decoloniser of the English-language, he is a cherished friend, and his impartial humanity throughout that dreadful time was a continual sustenance (1986, 127).

Gardner thus claims that her version of Bessie Head's life is based upon personal knowledge and authoritative research, backed up by a representative of the medical establishment, as well as by an internationally known writer who had also known Bessie Head. She also called her work a memoir, a record of events which, since it was made after Bessie Head's death, takes the form of an obituary, a document which makes a public statement at the close of a life. It can thus be seen as a closed text containing the last word on an individual's character and achievements. As Denzin points out, an obituary, whether that of a well-known person or of someone important only to their own immediate family and friends recognizes that each individual's life is itself a singular accomplishment which demands recognition. That achievement, summed up in the activities and experiences of the person, is all that the person is or ever was. This named entity, this person who is dead, is now brought before us in full biographical garb (1989, 80).

Whether this biographical garb diminishes the individual or attempts to show them in all their richness and complexity is ultimately the decision of the biographer or critic concerned, and it also reflects their own motives. Although an extreme example, Gardner's article is nevertheless paradigmatic of how conventional biographical approaches can be destructive of their subject's essential humanity, with all the complexities and contradictions that involves. Rather than approaching their subject's life and experiences from many directions, and seeking to see how their 'truth' is created or freed through the medium of writing, they seek instead to fix or negate their subject's reality, to impose a 'living death' upon it. If the biographer's subject is no longer alive, and thus unable to counter any perceived misinterpretation of their life and

experiences, then the biographer's interpretation can solidify into the definitive version. Once imprisoned within a framework constructed by their biographer, the subject's own construction of themselves is distorted, perhaps even destroyed. Gardner approached Bessie Head's life from a single perspective, and it was she who shaped the story she told about the writer by choosing and isolating certain incidents which then served as the basis of her reconstruction of Bessie Head's personality and personal history. As such, it is a striking example of an exercise in power and dominance.

A similar example of the power of the biographer to reconstruct their subject, and thereby to influence the reading public, is given by Liz Stanley in regard to the life of the South African writer Olive Schreiner, produced after her death by her husband, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner. Olive Schreiner was a feminist intellectual and activist who lived out many roles; however, Cronwright-Schreiner chose to erase her many positive qualities and achievements and to construct for her instead a static identity. He depicted her as a "'divine child'" (1924, 234) who, although she had a 'great side' (239) was 'unlike other people', (237) and was 'a perfectly helpless human being' (239). He justified his position by laying claim to a superior, intimate and thus implicitly unchallengeable knowledge of her. Since, as Stanley points out 'much of the evidence he used no longer exists' (1992, 183) his work became a major source of information for later researchers, including the biography by Ruth First and Ann Scott written in 1980. Cronwright-Schreiner had a powerful voice with which to not only influence other readers but further, to publicly erase a complex life story and, like Gardner, to replace it with his own fiction under the guise of truth, fact and authority. Like Gardner, he attempted to render his subject less important than his own monolithic viewpoint.

Bessie Head's openness undoubtedly left her vulnerable to the fixed interpretations of certain critics who chose to impose their own 'truth' upon her life and work. Such 'truth' is frequently polarized into extremes of unremitting misery or of optimism. For example, Cecil Abrahams speaks of the 'tragedy of Bessie Head's painful existence' (Abrahams 1990, 10) as if that was the totality of her experience. Yet positive and optimistic interpretations impose upon both Bessie Head and her characters as much of a static role as do negative interpretations. Arthur Ravenscroft saw Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* as 'worn down yet regenerated and incredibly alive still after her long ordeal' (1976, 175). He goes on to describe Makhaya as finding himself towards the end of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, while he sees Maru as finding rest in his 'deep love' (182) for Margaret at the close of the novel.

What critics often fail to appreciate is that a life, and the work which is a part of it, can be seen from more than one perspective and remains open-ended. As Denzin suggests 'A life, like the stories that can be told about it, never ends' (1989, 80). Certainly during the course of her life Bessie Head made the organic nature of her work clear, particularly in her reference to *A Question of Power* as 'rough notes for another book that could only grow with my life' (27.7.1983 KMM BHP). The continuing number of articles and studies on her work show that her death has not halted the process that her work itself began, although sadly they often counter her statement that 'once one is dead they will have nothing to tear to pieces any more' (3.6.1974 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's work is neither ultimately wholly optimistic and expressive of 'resilience, reconstruction, fulfilment' (Ravenscroft 1976, 179) nor of disintegration and victimisation. It asserts her engagement with 'a living life' and her struggle against the 'living death', and both are representations of her experience, with all its ambiguity and complexity. Writing on the horizon of 'living life' and 'living death' she could acknowledge fully what she called 'The Horror, the Horror' (she went on to say 'this latter favourite I picked up from Conrad!') (5.4.1983 KMM BHP) whilst also allowing herself sufficient latitude to exercise her impulse to free herself from imprisoning definitions imposed upon her by more powerful others. Her own version of her life shows that certain of her beliefs about her personal history were accurate, and although she was to remain in ignorance of the minutiae of circumstances surrounding her birth and her mother's life, the few facts she was able to acquire were central to her sense of

self. What little information she possessed informed her need to 'keep my own life central to everything else because I started off life with everything wrong' (27.3.1973 KMM BHP). She described poignantly how this both linked her to others but also placed her in an isolation that could be a strength as well as a source of pain:

There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity and disaster, the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet. The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history. I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity, or a sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or a great grandmother. I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself (undated ms for publication in *Drum* February 1982 KMM BHP).

The obliteration of Bessie Head's family history, her limited knowledge of her mother, her birth within the confines of a mental institution, her further imprisonment in the categories of others, her awareness of her mother's emotional injury, the prophecies concerning her own sanity, and the hardship of her life in foster care, were all elements of the 'truth' of her existence. Her orphanhood alone would have been critical to the sense of 'living death' which Makhaya refers to in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, since there is evidence that those who lose one or both parents early engage in a lifelong quest not only for love and affection, but for answers to questions about the

helplessness, lovelessness, despair and, especially, fear of their own early death that follow on their loss by embarking on the risky and dangerous search for truth that others would be too fearful, too anxious, to investigate (Simpson 1988, 172).

The melancholia that can attend such loss is described by Julia Kristeva's description of 'living death' echoes Bessie Head's own:

A life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows ... a devitalized existence that, although occasionally fired by the effort I make to prolong it, is ready at any moment for a plunge into death. An avenging death or a liberating death, it is henceforth the inner threshold of my despondency, the impossible meaning of a life whose burden constantly seems unbearable, save for those moments when I pull myself together and face up to the disaster. I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted. Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naive happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings (1989, 4).

Kristeva's description of 'living death' which echoes Bessie Head's own and recurs throughout her four novels, which read chronologically are a linked quartet in which she recasts her experience as one of the defining motifs of her life and work. *The Cardinals*, Bessie Head's posthumously published first novel, and the only one to be written in South Africa, has as its main character the silent, passive, orphaned journalist Mouse, left in a Cape Town slum by a mother who subsequently commits suicide. While Mouse seems to embody the 'living death', she also struggles to maintain a 'living life' not only against the circumstances in which she finds herself, but also against the almost overwhelming and ambiguous desires of Johnny, her would-be lover and, unbeknown to both of them, her biological father. Johnny, however, acknowledges Mouse's 'living death' and suggests that there is an alternative, saying 'You don't have to start living all at once. Bit by bit would be quite enough' (88 C).

In Bessie Head's next novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the first she wrote and published in Botswana, Mouse has evolved into Makhaya, who has chosen to escape from South Africa, crossing 'no man's land' (10 RC), a space familiar to Bessie Head as a woman of colour who felt she had no home. He aims to establish a 'living life' in Botswana, but although he successfully escapes the country of his birth, it is apparent throughout this novel that he cannot escape the 'living death' of his experience so easily. For example, he walks up to Matenge's house feeling as 'if he would just be swallowed up by a monster and would not mind' (188 RC).

The 'living death' is also expressed in the novel's ambiguous ending which emphasises Makhaya's insubstantiality, and it is present in the hollow feeling inside, of which both Makhaya and Mma-Millipede speak. It is repeated in the 'large hole' that Margaret Cadmore of *Maru* experiences at the centre of herself in Bessie Head's second published novel, *Maru* completed in 1969 and published in January 1971. Here, she once again documents her own life and death struggles against both internalised and external forces through the struggles of both Maru and Moleka for dominance over the orphaned 'Masarwa' Margaret Cadmore.

Bessie Head's characters are frequently interchangeable; their individual identities are not as significant as their embodiment of their creator's own experience and her use of them in her struggle to maintain a dynamic balance between the 'living life' and 'living death'. That some of her characters are based on real life counterparts is less important than her own presence as expressed in the contradictions of mood, relationships and other of their aspects. Her use of the third-person narrative form allowed her to move through her fictionalized characters, whether male or female, with a fluidity that more accurately expressed the complex truths of her life and experience than any other form would permit. Her need to remain true to her own experience and adequately convey her reality as she perceived it meant that she could not rewrite her life as family romance, or reinvent her experience in any wholly idealized way. Thus, whether her writings resemble what we generally interpret as the literal truth is almost beside the point. As Liz Stanley suggests:

Both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, yet both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape and produce a very unnatural product, for no life is lived so much under a single spotlight as the conventional form of written auto/biographies suggests (1992, 3-4).

A conventional autobiographical form was not a realistic medium to convey the range and depth of Bessie Head's experiences. Moreover, if, as has been suggested, autobiography is an attempt to recapture the self — 'in Hegel's claim, to know the self through "consciousness"' (Gusdorf quoted in Benstock, 1988, 11) then the implications of 'recapturing' a self would be to imprison herself further within a framework not of her own making. Autobiography is also described in Gusdorf's terms as 'the mirror in which the individual reflects their own image' (15). Reflections of Bessie Head's own image, inevitably containing the reflections of others' images of her, would further imprison her. On the other hand, however, autobiography can be described, according to psychoanalytic theories, as a transitional activity in which everything functions as extensions or recreations of the writer's self.

Bessie Head was a woman who was intensely concerned with her sense of self, and she constructed in her personal form of autobiography a series of transitional areas, for example borders, boundaries, crossroads, and horizons. In these liminal areas, primarily places of transformation, she struggled with and transformed her experiences of 'living life' and 'living death' into narratives intended not directly to recreate or reproduce her life, but to express and communicate aspects of a self and a reality constantly under threat not only from the dominant order but also from her own internalization of such threat. Through the act of writing she was able to maintain her position on the point of transition, a space which represented an area of 'living life' where she was free from the

definitions imposed upon her by the classification and categorization of others. Behind the characters who represent the 'living death', then, was a shadow behind which lived another personality of great vigour and vitality. She raised her hand to hide this second image from sight, but the two constantly tripped up each other.. You were never sure whether she was greater than you, or inferior, because of this constant flux and interchange between her two images (71 M).

Thus Bessie Head was not only the embodiment of the 'living death' of the shadow personality, she also possessed the shifting qualities which enabled her to transmute into the 'living life' of its vigorous counterpart. By using a fictive, often fabular, metaphorical approximation of reality, Bessie Head was able to examine areas of her experience that might have been too painful for her to approach more directly. She needed to allow herself distance, control, freedom of movement, and choice, upon which she placed great emphasis. While these elements in her life were often very limited, she could exercise them through characters who provide objective correlatives for different aspects of her own frequently conflicting states of mind and her different, changing perspectives upon her world.

Bessie Head's writing was thus a framing device within which she could locate and articulate a sense of herself in order to express the complexities of her reality. She needed to create the freedom to choose her own method of telling her story rather than impose upon herself the constraints of conventional autobiography, its chronological progression and linear form. By not centering herself in her work after the fashion of conventional autobiographies she avoided some of the difficulties of the genre autobiography, since it has been considered that

to write 'autobiography' is partially to enter into the contractual and discursive domain of universal 'Man', whom Rey Chow calls the 'dominating subject'. Entering the terrain of autobiography, the colonized subject can get stuck in '*his* meaning'. The processes of self-decolonization may get bogged down as the autobiographical subject reframes herself through neocolonizing metaphors (Smith & Watson 1992, xix).

Although Bessie Head used a form derived from the European tradition she did not 'mime traditional patterns' (xx). Thus, it might be argued that she offers up

an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center ... an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges but as primary and constitutive of a different world (Harstock quoted in Smith & Watson 1992, xx).

Bessie Head preferred to describe her position as on a horizon rather than marginal. This was a personal act of empowerment in which she, as a writer, could acquire a measure of power and control. Thus positioned, she could maintain movement away from both external constraints as well as from those constraints she had internalized.

Denzin points out that:

No reading or writing of a life is ever complete or final. *We must prevent words like autobiography, biography, and biographical method from assuming a force which gives a presence to a centred-life that it cannot have* (1989, 46).

However, by looking at writings in a biographical context it is possible to see them as part of the complex matrix in which a life is lived, and to examine the effects upon a life of social, economic, and historical forces. Denzin suggests that both biographies and autobiographies rest on stories, and that stories are fictions. He goes on to define fiction

as something 'made up or fashioned out of real and imagined events' (1989, 41). Through a 'fictionalised autobiography', Bessie Head could choose her method of examining her experience at a safe remove, thereby imposing a measure of artistic control. But if all stories, including those that are autobiographical or biographical, are fictions, then Bessie Head's creative output remains, despite its contradictions, ultimately the repository of her own truth. Finally, it is she who wields authorial power and this was the 'truth' of her existence, her sense of 'living life'.