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Chapter 4

The Möbius Strip as a Theory of Narrative? From Bessie Head's Early Journalism to *The Cardinals*

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Abstract

This paper repositions Jacques Lacan's model of the Möbius strip as a theory of literary narrative. I try to think about the literary reader's meaning-making endeavours in topological, spatial terms. I equate these endeavours with the formation of the psychopathological symptom. I rethink the idea of the metaphor's substitutability of terms as a foreshortening of the signifying chain. This foreshortening produces the symptom. Thus, the single surface of the Möbius strip allows me to challenge the usual understanding of metaphor as paradigmatically "deep." I rethink the metaphorical mechanism of the symptom in terms of a lateral, "editorial" resequencing of the signifying chain. This repositioning of metaphor allows me to think through a literary case study – Bessie Head's novella *The Cardinals*. I argue for *The Cardinals* as an accumulation of hyperinvested, initially banal signs first encountered in adjacent news features during Bessie Head's early journalism. Head's hyperinvestment of signs is part of a strategy of aesthetic amplification. The heroic, mythical destiny of gendered astrological protagonists (the Cardinals of the title) potentially outscales Apartheid's grubby racial engineering of the everyday. Head equates the meeting of two sexualized and cosmically important protagonists with liberation. The paradoxical effect of her hyperbolic method is that every ordinary sign is enmeshed with and is submitted to the imminent risks of large-scale, cosmic power. The result is an assault upon the personality in which signification is not metonymic sequencing but a surfeit of metaphorical *jouissance* (overwhelming psychic pleasure experienced to the extent of suffering). I argue that the reader's bid to make sense of the literary text amounts to a desire for depth or ulterior design across different expressive instances. Readerly desire for depth or ulterior design is, at root, an editorial foreshortening of the Möbian sequencing of the page. All reading, therefore, is symptomatic. Since readerly desire is intrusive and violent, since it restructures the signifying surface on a page, I equate reading with Lacanian perversion. I conclude that Head's unfinished ending, with its withheld resolution, is an interpretive therapeutic cut that unravels the reader's symptomatic meaning-making by confronting it with lack.

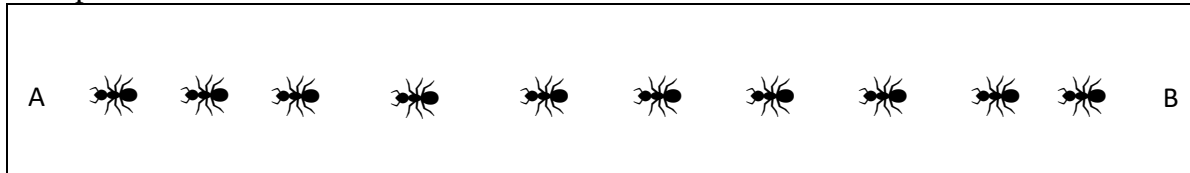
Keywords: Jacques Lacan, Möbius, Bessie Head, journalism, *Golden City Post*, *The Cardinals*, psychoanalysis, literary reading, Apartheid

We should begin with a Lacanian topology. The figure of the Möbius strip is well-known. A single strip of paper is given a twist and attached end to end. The result is a loop that has, paradoxically, only one surface. Since much of my argument rests on the spatial paradoxes of the Möbius loop, the

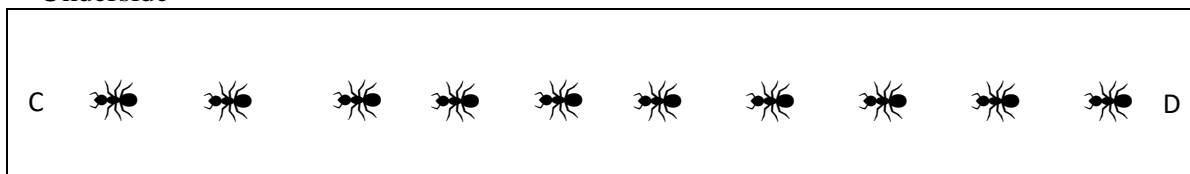
reader may wish to manufacture their own Möbius strip at this point.¹ Cut a long band of paper.

Label topside left A and topside right B. Directly overleaf under A, write C. Directly overleaf under B write D. Draw ants on each surface, walking in the directions indicated below.

Topside



Underside



Affix C under A and D under B with lengthwise glue or tape, so that ants walk on both sides of a surface (Alternately, draw ants on two surfaces of a single strip with A above C and B above D).

Now, half-twist A to the underside and attach the two ends to create a loop, so that A and B meet face to face and are no longer visible. Affix the join with glue or tape so that only a loop remains.

This is your Möbius loop, with its topological paradoxes. Follow the path of the ants on your loop – perhaps by tracing your finger over them – to witness the first paradoxical effect.

In *The Basic Topology of Jacques Lacan*, Jeanne Lafont describes this first paradoxical effect of the Möbius strip as follows:

After the sleight of hand we have just described [in attaching the twisted ends of paper], the topside and underside of this strip of paper are found to be continuous. The common usage of "head or tails" is subverted. The topside and the underside are continuous with one another. A little gentleman or an ant that walked along one of the sides of this surface would find himself upside down on the other side without even perceiving this incongruity. (Lafont, 1986, p. 15)

¹ I am grateful to Nick Ray for drawing my attention to the pre-existing precedent of John Barth's "Frame-Tale," from *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). The reader who cuts out the Möbius strip from Barth's book renders pagination and medium of expression obsolete, because print on the page (in fiction) is made "tape" (the Möbius loop) by recursive prose.

In this example, Lafont has in mind Maurits Escher's 1963 rendering of the Möbius strip in "Möbius Strip II (Red Ants)." Similarly to your loop, several ants pass along the strip's surface. They start at any original point, then pass that point on the "obverse" surface, only to re-pass that same point on the "original" surface. Since we are talking about a single surface, there is properly-speaking no "original" or "obverse." In my view, one way of thinking about these "ants" would be to imagine their ceaseless journey along a surface, and their momentary contiguity with one another, as approximate to the path of the signifier along the signifying chain. (The reader of Barth's "Frame Tale" (1968, pp. 1-2) will know that it begins "Once upon a time there was a story that began" and that it loops over the Möbian "overleaf" to continue "Once upon a time there was a story that began" and so on, *ad infinitum*).

By implication, we might consider the activity of literary reading as the straightforward spatial progression along an infinite signifying chain. Considered spatially, meaning-making or interpretation by the (active) reader would necessarily foreshorten or truncate the path of the signifier. This foreshortening would be one way to ensure that the obverse side of the Möbian journey is reached via a metaphorical leap to the ostensible under-surface. This metaphorical leap is equivalent to literary meaning-making "across" or beyond the page; or across the signifiers of a literary passage. Comprehended spatially, metaphor becomes a foreshortening of signs' spatial sites and their temporal moments. Within the ordinary grammatical and syntactical laws of English (or French, or Zulu), this foreshortening can only be achieved by disregarding the deferrals and delays emplotted along the metaphorically-substituted signifier's habitual path.

To illustrate the point I am making about spatialized metaphor, let us imagine a scenario:

A young boy's father makes him a kite. They spend time together flying this made thing in autumn during the boy's first year of school.

Years later, the boy, now a man, has an idea in a management meeting. "Let me fly a kite for a moment . . ." he begins.

It is clear from this example that, if associatively-invested in its childhood antecedents, the metaphor “to fly a kite” meaning to “moot a new or speculative idea” would rely upon the omission of the entire apparatus of psychic investments in the father, schooling in the formation of ideas, language acquisition, the subject’s developmental timeframes, other kites or ideas the boy has known and loved, along with a bit of clichéd managerial “blue skies thinking” in the mix. In psychic terms, there is no way of telling which kite has just (been) flown. The alert reader might even at this point contemplate the rising musical strains of *Mary Poppins*’ conclusion in the latter moment of the management meeting, for instance. Nevertheless, in whatever substitutable equivalence it claims, the metaphor instantly foreshortens a very extended signifying chain. For the metaphor to hold as psychic “truth” about the subject, it must stave off adjacent contingency (in this instance, the dancing chimney sweeps or the duck umbrella in *Mary Poppins*, perhaps).

To demonstrate the foreshortening mechanism of metaphor spatially – and its refusal of metonymic adjacency – the reader may wish to return to our ants. Pick any ant. Pick any corresponding ant on the “obverse” surface, or even on the “same” surface several ants along. Witness how many ant steps, how many signifying instances, would need to be disregarded along the Möbian path to achieve any immediate metaphorical substitution. This is the foreshortening of the signifying chain. This is the psychoanalytic symptom. This is also literary meaning-making – rearranging contingent signifiers into coherent effects, jumping overleaf across the signifying surface on the page, flicking backwards through past pages to regloss now resonant events along the signifying chain (“In which moment might my speculation fly?” our literary reader might ask in their moments of inquisitive resequencing).

The interest value of the Möbius strip is that it subverts our usual understandings and representations of space. It abolishes ideas of top and bottom, of surface and depth. The Möbius strip accomplishes this abolition not by resorting to three dimensional representation, but by introducing the crucial fourth dimension of time. Lafont explains:

Only a temporal event differentiates the topside and the bottom side, which are separated by the time it takes to make a supplementary turn. The dichotomy between the two notions, underside and topside, only reappears at the price of the intervention of a new dimension, that of time. Time, as continuity, makes the difference between the two faces. If there are no longer two measures for the surface, but only an edge, time imposes itself as accounting for the strip. (Lafont, 1986, p. 15)

Sustaining my previous suggestion that the ant's path around the strip would be approximate to the path of the signifier along the signifying chain, it is clear that what distinguishes signifiers from one another – especially if these signifiers are visibly the “same” – would be their differentiated placement from one another in space and time. In other words, a signifier that is visibly identical to another on the obverse surface (for instance, the signifier “ant”) would exhibit the key differences of spatial distance and temporal deferral. The “temporal event” in Lafont's phrasing might be thought of as delay or deferral. Contrariwise, it might be thought of as suspense or prolepsis. Deferral, delay, prolepsis and suspense are also habitual and constituent ingredients of (literary) narrative.

There is a second paradox that Lacan highlights in his thinking on the Möbius strip. If you cut along the length of the strip – cut along the path travelled by the ants, or by the signifier – you derive a loop with two twists and two surfaces (upper and lower) once again. In summary, the representational paradox of the Möbius band is the paradox of a single surface that flips into its apparently “obverse” corresponding surface. This paradox can be undone via an equally paradoxical interpretive cut along the band's entire length. At this point, the active reader may wish to pick up a pair of pointed scissors. Pierce a hole in the Möbian surface alongside any ant. Now cut alongside the path of the ants from head to tail all the way along the loop. Now trace how many surfaces have emerged in the remaining loop. The reader may notice an extended gap that has now emerged in the path of the ants. Let us, for the time being, call this gap “lack.” Let us, for the time being, call our new dual-sided loop the “resolved – and extended – Möbian topology.”

The interpretive cut we have just undertaken resolves the single-surfaced paradox of the Möbius loop into its dual-surfaced paradox. Once again, this is the “resolved – and extended –

Möbian topology.” In analysis, the analyst’s goal is the interpretive cut in which the analyst discovers the analysand’s desire. Once again, Lafont phrases it helpfully:

Let us note before concluding that it is on this paradox that Lacan bases one the central notions of the analytic cure: that of interpretation. The axiom "interpretation is the cut," allows us to discern how this type of intervention on the part of the analyst discovers the desire of the analysand, masked in his own *dire* ["saying," or in my preferred improvised translation, "statement"].

The fact that the cutting of a Moebius strip makes a strip with four half-twists appear, which is not Moebian this time, introduces a final characteristic of the Moebius strip. (Lafont, 1986, p. 19)

In one possible schema, psychoanalytic interpretation is a lengthwise cut along the signifying chain that “surfaces” the analysand’s unconscious signifying and “meaning-making” arrangements. In other words, interpretation surfaces the patient’s unconscious binding of prior enchainment – that is to say metonymic, contingently-placed, laterally arranged – signifiers into symptomatic and deceptively “deep,” metaphors. The interpretive cut resolves the originating Möbian paradox and with it the binding of symptom and subject. The interpretive cut resolves the illusorily double-sided Möbian surface into an actual double-sided surface containing an additional loop. Once cut along its length, the Möbian paradox resolves into an adjusted topology that once again contains two, unbound surfaces (and a much more extended signifying chain).

The successful interpretive cut makes non-functional, or unbinds, the subject’s symptomatic fantasy of sense-making. Put another way, analysis reveals to the subject his or her non-sensical constitutive statement. Analysis has an ultimate desubjectivizing consequence. The metaphorical substitution of the symptom cannot work, because the single surface required to make it function no longer exists. The interpretive cut of analysis meets the founding non-sensical statement [*dire*] of the subject, and its initial foreshortening of the signifying chain, with a topologically-achieved extension, including lack.

As we know from Lacan’s work, the neurotic subject’s desire pursues a lost object – which its paramour is presumed to possess – modelled in each case on a template derived from the infant’s

partial drives. The neurotic fantasy is of desire pursuing and securing the enigmatic and impossible lost object that will finally complete the barred, lacking subject. This enigmatic, impossible, lost object is *objet a*. The subject may pursue *objet a* through specular fantasies of confirmatory recognition, but *objet a* itself cannot be recognized in a specular encounter.² Ellie Ragland points out:

At the level of perceptual effect, the Moebius strip subtends the gaze, which subtends the other drives as that into which one is already born. One does not gaze. One is gazed at, unconsciously seeing oneself as being seen.

[. . .]

Lacan compares the twist in the Moebius form to the twist in thought that allows one to drop ideas or associations into the memory bank of the unconscious where knowledge remains hidden. (Ragland, 2004, pp. 19-20)

In this twist between thought and the unconscious, the “inner 8” or “interior eight” shape in the centre of the Möbius loop is equivalent to the operation of *objet a* in motivating thought and signification (see Lacan 2006, p. 731). The subject’s fantasy circulates around the specific configuration of the *object a* that structures the subject’s particular mode of lack. Desire addresses itself to the plenitude that the subject imagines may be discovered and retrieved in *objet a*. Strictly-speaking, the subject cannot name or imagine *objet a*. It is an enigma or cipher of lack that constitutes the subject in the first place. The subject cannot imagine what it is lacking, because what is lacking inaugurates the barred subject in the first place. What the subject imagines it has lost (*objet a*) determines how the subject directs its statement or *dire*. Through the subject’s statement, its desire (for the lost object) is both relayed toward, and perpetually-deflected from, its aim.

For this reason, *objet a* models the dimensions of the subject’s lack, the dimensions of absence around which the subject addresses its thought and desire through the signifying circuit. To be a subject is to circumlocute. The subject may state anything but its circumnavigation of its lack.

² The classical painting, Holbein’s “The Ambassadors” in the National Gallery, London, contains a memento mori which is close to what *objet a* might amount to in a specular encounter, a distorted skull in the foreground. To see the skull and recognize it, the viewer would need to tilt and angle the picture plane 45 degrees away from the viewer on the right, and 45 degrees upward on the left corner, thus distorting the two “Ambassadors” in the background who are the ostensible subjects of the painting.

Let us, through two passages in Lacan's seminar on *Anxiety*, return to our little signifying ant upon its circuit:

An ant walking along one of the apparent faces [of the Möbius strip] will pass over to the other face without needing to go over the edge. In other words, the Möbius strip is a surface that has just one face and a surface with just one face cannot be turned inside out. If you turn it over, it will still be identical to itself. *This is what I call not having a specular image.* (Lacan, 2004, p. 96).

The subject who does not have a specular image is the subject who does not lack, the unbarred subject already completed by *objet a*. For this reason, Lacan associates the ants tracing the Möbius strip's circumference with signifiers tracing the dimensions of the "inner 8." The inner 8 is the topological edge where *objet a* has been presumed to be removed from the subject. Showing his audience in *Seminar X* a Möbius strip, he states: "I've constructed it for you and I'll pass it around. It does hold a little interest because, let me tell you, this is the *a*. [. . .] The *a* is put together like that" (Lacan, 2004, p. 97).

Our Möbian subject's experience is structured by misrecognition of its circumstance. The thinking ant walking along the loop conducts itself through signifiers, while being driven around the missing "inner 8" that the ant – the signifying subject – circumnavigates as it follows its Möbian path. Lacan explains:

If the insect that wanders along the surface of the Möbius strip forms a representation of the fact that it is a surface, he can believe from one moment to the next that there is another face that he hasn't explored, the face that is always on the back of the face along which he is walking. He can believe in this other side, even though there isn't one, as you know. Without knowing it, he is exploring the only face there is, and yet, from one moment to the next, it does indeed have a back.

[The missing *objet a*] is what forms the reality of the world the insect is walking about in. The little interior eight is well and truly irreducible. In other words, it is a lack for which the symbol cannot compensate. This is not an absence that the symbol can counter. (Lacan, 2004, p. 136)

In Lacan's thought, therefore, the spatial circumference of the "inner 8" of the Möbius strip – its empty middle space – gives dimension to the specificity of the subject's psychic arrangements. In other words, the signifying chain, composed of an arrangement of insubstantial signifiers, has an

unconscious life that belatedly emerges as a latent meaning-effect via the transverse deferral of time. That temporal deferral contours the negative space of the “inner 8.” The inner eight gives dimension to the patient’s complex psychic life. Lafont explains this psychic life in terms of temporal movements:

Let us remark that beginning with this drawing of the interior eight a notion finds itself at once decomposed into diverse acceptations (regression and progression) and unified as a concept. The multiplicity of readings of a concept is accorded its true richness; it is not that a concept has several senses, it is that it is the unique representative of a complex material analyzable in several effects. (Lafont, “Topology,” 1986, p. 21)

The inner eight of the Möbius strip, then, is a complex of backward regression and forward progression in the signifying chain that constantly addresses its oblique loss, and iterates itself as a seeming conceptual unity – the subject that presumes to know and state itself. This conceptual unity orients and operates the subject, a subject that only “exists” to itself in its self-declaration through the signifier, and the metaphorical arrangements (progression and regression) that instate the subject’s originating and sustaining “presence.” Given such an arrangement of the subject, only the analyst’s interpretive cut holds the potential to adjust this space.

In short, in Lacan’s Möbian topology, the signifier is on a route to its illusory “obverse” signified. The signified, in turn, is another signifier achieved only in delay or development, whose psychic correlatives are regression or progression, and whose narrative correlatives are analepsis and prolepsis. Regression or progression, analepsis or prolepsis, as I hope I have shown, amount to the metaphorical mechanisms of the symptom.

We might illustrate progression and regression along the signifying chain by returning to Lafont, who gives the apposite example of the sentence, “A man is a man.” (1986, p. 21). In Lafont’s example, the two men are not one and the same. One man is an individual and the other man is a general class of (plural) men from which he is taken. “A man is a representative of mankind” might be one convenient paraphrase. The temporal deferral in the sentence means that the initial signifier (“A man”) does not subsequently signify itself (“a man”).

This statement obviously unconsciously comprehends the differentiating category of womankind, or further, gender fluidity and multiplicity, within itself. What the first man (“A man”) lands upon in the sentence is the symptom of his statement (“. . . is a man”), which is itself made expressively adequate by its implicit deferral. In other words, “men” are constitutively-defined by extraneous signifiers through which their lack as substantive signs is relayed – “women” or “transwomen,” or the differences between the individual instance (“man”) and the general category from which it is taken (“mankind”), or what have you. Moreover, the same signifier repeats with a key temporal difference (in the subsequent moments of the utterance), a key spatial difference (in the arrangements of syntax) and a key referential difference (in the respective implied signifieds). The subject of the grammatical sentence perpetually pursues the aim of its object. The object it alights upon is not the same object the subject of the sentence initially sought. Although language regulates the contextual conditions of our momentary self-positing, it also always refuses to put us in our place. The signifier only ever returns to itself in an asymmetrical relation.

The single surface of the Möbius strip means that what is conscious is differentiated from its selfsame unconscious surface only by temporal progression. The unconscious is “structured [. . .] like a language” in Lacan’s famous pronouncement (2006, p.737). Crucial to Lacan’s topology of the unconscious is the passing of time. If we imagine the Möbius strip’s surface as a signifying chain, as I have already suggested, then what differentiates unconscious signifiers from conscious ones – which the subject’s desire negotiates metonymically across the signifying chain – is simply the passage of signifier to signifier through time. The signifier’s idiomatic formation as a constellation of motivated and symptomatic metaphors amounts collectively to a subjective hypothesis – the founding hypothesis in fantasy of a subject that imagines itself into being.

The subject’s founding hypothesis is an unconscious wager in fantasy, designed to meet the unknowable demand of the Other. If the subject asks the primary question “What does the Other want of me?” the subject’s speculative answer may well approximate “Perhaps I should become something like this?”

Lacan's formulation makes this clear in Seminar X on *Anxiety*. Lacan imagines the original scenario of an (infantile) subject unknown to itself. In Lacan's obscure allusion, the subject wears the mask of the Sorcerer from the Cave of the Three Brothers. Lacan alludes here to a French pre-historic rock drawing of a human sorcerer in the bodily form of an antelope.³ Lacan's subject therefore wears a mask taken from a shape-shifting sorcerer in a cave drawing. In this imaginative and slightly florid scenario, Lacan's subject cannot see its own face, since it wears a mask. The face it wears is not its own, since it is a mask. The subject is therefore divided from itself. The place of the subject's articulation does not match the site of its representation (the mask). Moreover that mask of the subject's outer face does not belong to the subject. It belongs to a prior aesthetic figure in a pre-historic cave tableau, which itself was drawn by an unknown pre-historic hand. To complicate matters, this (masked) infantile subject encounters a terrifying, gigantic mantis which might consume the subject. The subject relays its own conundrum, its own anonymity to itself, through the terrifying mantis – the big Other – that confronts it. In Lacan's formulation, the subject asks of this big Other "*Que vuoi?, Que veux-tu?, What wouldst thou?* Push the functioning, the insertion of the key, a little further and you have "*Que me veut-Il? . . . What does He want concerning this place of the ego?*" (Lacan, 2004, p. 6).

Crucially, the subject does not know itself and cannot recognize the place of the ego in the proliferating images reflected in the mantis' compound eye. The ego may recognize itself as split in its multiple compound mantis-like instances, but the split it recognizes in the Other's demand of it is not the same as the split between the face and the mask. The subject is both masked, multi-sited, fragmented and proliferated in the moment of (mis)recognition with the mantis. The subject's look inhabits an asymmetry with the mantis' returned and fragmenting gaze. The subject's question of the Other is not only about what the Other wants. The subject's question is also about the Other's enigmatic insistence on the ego's imperilled and anxious self-placement. In Lacan's scenario, the

³ This rock art was first discovered in 1912 in the Tuc d'Audaulbert Cave by Count Begoué and his three sons; Max, Jacques and Louis (Anonymous, 1957, p. 12).

subject does not know that it is a momentary representation (the Sorcerer's therianthropic mask) facing an abomination (the mantis) who seemingly possesses the missing object that the subject lacks. The missing object would be the "What" in the Other's demand of the subject – "What wouldst thou?" The subject wears a mask that makes of the human an animal, and transacts with a mantis in an asymmetrical trans-species dialogue. The *objet a* that the mantis threatens to possess (the gaze returned to the subject's scopic drive seeking recognition – "What wouldst thou?") is the subject's loss, masked by the sorcery of the representational signifier.

The subject's acts of self-positing in language are always addressed to the demand of the Other. The Oedipus Complex involves the assumption (by the subject) of a desire that "originally is another's, and which, in its displacements, is perpetually other than 'itself'" (Mehlman, 1972, p. 45 n. 11). Desire is displaced into an unfulfillable, and utterly neutral, impersonal medium. That neutral medium is what I would call "perpetual writing." Perpetual writing is our displacement across the signifying chain through which we fulfil a lost quest for subjective plenitude. The other point to make is that while "writing" is "impersonal" (Barthes, 1977, p. 144) – while no one owns language – the iteration of narrative directs the subject's statement toward intersubjective designs. In other words, when we speak – there is always already a structurally-implicit addressee. We always speak to an elsewhere in someone else's language. The signifier is impersonal, but its trajectory is presumptively social.

I am drawn to Lacan's Möbius strip as a vehicle for thinking through the production, and analysis, of literary narrative. Literary narrative, quite obviously, relies upon a chain of signifiers placed spatially on a page. Literary narrative is, finally, the predicament of the narrator's and the reader's self-placement in a meaning-making design. In this sense, narration is a subject-effect, regardless of first person, second person, or third person narration. If narration is a subject effect, it is no less "real" than the Lacanian subject's own constitutive predicaments and iterative, self-positing moments. Literary narrative, in its reliance on repetition (say, a character's name) and

difference (say, the contextualizing or constellating restatement of that character's name) might be deemed "Möbian" in its meaning-making for the writing or reading subject.

I want to offer a case study from anti-Apartheid literature. My example is Bessie Head's *The Cardinals* (1995). This novella was written in South Africa, circa 1960-1962, and it was published posthumously in 1995. In the writing of *The Cardinals*, I would argue, key initial ingredients of narrative were occasioned by Head's everyday vocation as a journalist. She wrote the women's supplement, *Home Post*, of a weekly newspaper, *The Golden City Post*. Head's journalistic columns appear from approximately 31 May 1959 to 24 April 1960.⁴ As these everyday journalistic ingredients from *The Golden City Post* become arranged into narrative in *The Cardinals*, they take on a violent and perverse erotic charge. I want to track several signifying chains at work in *The Cardinals* to exemplify my Lacanian theory of literary narrative modelled on the Möbius strip.

It will be helpful if I initially offer a short synopsis of *The Cardinals* to readers unfamiliar with its detail. A wealthy single mother, called Ruby, gives up her baby girl, later called "Miriam," for adoption by a woman in a South African slum. An old man from the slum introduces Miriam to children's story books and he teaches Miriam to write. Miriam is almost sexually abused as a child in the poor woman's home, but she escapes instead and flees the slum. Miriam is then renamed "Charlotte" by the Apartheid state. As a young woman, "Charlotte" seeks out and finds employment as a rookie journalist. At the newspaper, *African Beat*, an older man, called Johnny, renames Charlotte "Mouse" on account of her timidity. Johnny decides to seduce Mouse by offering to teach her how to write.

⁴ I have derived these dates from Head's columns signed with "Bessie," sometimes accompanied by a photograph of the author, and from Susanne M. Klausen's afterword to Juby Mayet's autobiography, *Freedom Writer* (Klausen in Mayet, 2022, pp. 160-161). However, the run of both *The Golden City Post* and the *Home Post* supplement in the Cullen Library, University of Witwatersrand, is incomplete. Within the extant supplements, authorship of individual columns by female journalists (especially Juby Mayet and Bessie Emery [later Head]) is often not directly acknowledged. On occasion, Head transcribed content instead of writing it (Klausen in Mayet, 2022, 198 n. 51). For these reasons, Head's individual and collaborative contributions remain historically opaque.

Johnny gives Mouse his short story to edit and rewrite. The story is about his own youth in loose and approximate terms – elements of Johnny are identifiable in the central character called Sammy and the (false?) memories that the rewritten story of Sammy provoke in Johnny. In Mouse's re-writing of Johnny's short story, Sammy picks up a young woman in a fish shop, takes her to the cinema, indulges in foreplay with her, then is attacked by a gang who want him to join them. We last see him bleeding out on a pavement. Mouse's edited, rewritten story provokes in Johnny the memory of a lover, Ruby. Ruby, like Mouse's unnamed mother, puts a child up for adoption in a slum (1995, p. 52). Ruby cuts her own wrists in an act of suicide, and bleeds out in Johnny's memory (provoked by Mouse's rewriting), just as Sammy has bled out in Mouse's rewritten story (of Johnny).

It becomes clear from the story about Sammy and the memories that the story provokes in Johnny that he is possibly Mouse's own father, unknown to both of them. However, because Mouse has edited and rewritten Johnny's story, we cannot guarantee this (fiction of) origin for certain.⁵ Another possibility is that Mouse has written the inadvertently incestuous content into Johnny's story about Sammy. As Mouse resists Johnny's (incestuous?) sexual advances later in the novella, he becomes increasingly domestically abusive in their cohabiting arrangement. But the character of the father's abuse also reflects the kinds of violence that Apartheid inflicted on black South African citizens. Johnny's love exhibits autocratic tendencies. Johnny's idea of love contains a real or fantasized enforcement of Apartheid's worst political practices – authoritarian rule (1995, p. 89), segregation (1995, p. 21), insults (1995, p. 114), humiliation, beatings or batterings (1995, pp. 113, 15, 110), burnings (1995, p. 115), torture (1995, pp. 113, 115), killings (1995, p. 113), assassinations (1995, p. 111), killings made to look like suicides (1995, p. 111), bombings (1995, pp. 20, 115) and demanding that black South Africans make way for white South Africans on

⁵ As Frances Hemsley aptly puts it, "It is Mouse's creative re-envisioning of Johnny's copy— spliced through the narrative—that leads the reader to deduce Johnny's paternal relation to Mouse" and "she writes her destiny, which is incest" (2021, p. 160).

pavements/sidewalks.⁶ Politically, Johnny opposes Apartheid. But in his amorous life, he imaginatively re-enacts it.

The advantage of the Möbius strip as a way of reading narrative in *The Cardinals* is that it allows us to trace the circuit of some innocent, parochial and everyday signs that become psychically and hyperbolically invested in the fictional universe of *The Cardinals*. The Möbius strip allows us to track the flipping over of everyday signs into the symptoms of psychosis and incestuous perversion.⁷ The basic dynamic factor in this hyper-investment of signs is that Head equates sexuality with power.⁸ For that reason, white political violence is repurposed and discharged as Johnny's domestic gender-based violence.

I draw much of my research on the signs of the everyday from Head's profession as a journalist at the *Golden City Post*. With the notable exception of Colette Guldin (1997), the critical field has neglected Head's journalistic career as a source for her fictional career. Journalism traffics in the topical, in the everyday, in the ephemeral and the passing. The *Home Post* supplement offered any number of true romances, beauty columns, lonely hearts columns, fashion tips, homemaking tips, advice to teenagers, trivia quizzes, life and love advice, infant health information for new mothers, recipes, astrology columns, joke columns, and so on. Head was likely the author of some of these, some of the time. On occasion, Head merely transcribed features – and transcription is one of the most mundane, banal and quotidian of writerly tasks. Let us look at a few of the everyday signs in play in Head's contributions to the *Home Post* and in her lived environment

⁶ This petty, "informal" practice of segregation pre-dates the formal segregation legislated for by Apartheid (1948-1993). Its prominence within racist and anti-racist discourses dates to the 1930s, and is historically simultaneous with the decade containing Bessie Head's own birth (1937). A correspondent with *The Star* newspaper, writing under the pseudonym "Fairplay," complained that "[natives] will not make space for a white person to pass" (20 April 1933, p. 11). The Editor answers dismissively, "[All pedestrians must use the pavements, otherwise an already high accident rate would be a good deal higher.]" By 1947, Wulf Sachs' *Black Anger* (published under its original title as *Black Hamlet*) records a traditional healer's outrage at "a native woman thrown off the pavements because she did not give way quickly enough to a European" (p. 76).

⁷ In Lacan, the structures of personality are, strictly speaking, *either* neurotic, *or* perverse *or* psychotic. However, the possible meaning-making effects of literary narrative allow for mutable positioning within pre-existing, complementary structures: perverse *and* psychotic. In other words, our behaviours may instance any Lacanian "clinical structure," as part of our own, proper, clinical structure's placement within reading or writing relations.

⁸ Annie Gagliano argues incisively that "political force frights the intimate moments of individual encounters" (1996, p. 48).

and relations. These everyday signs become sources of hyperbolic unconscious return in *The Cardinals*.

The hyperbolic dimension of *The Cardinals* can be seen in the epigraph from which it takes its title: “The Cardinals, in the astrological sense, are those who serve as the base or foundation for change.” (Head, 1995, p. 3). The romance between Johnny and Mouse would, it is suggested, inaugurate pan-African political change – an epochal or cosmic shift.⁹ The guiding idea is that both protagonists are not merely human. They are also mythic. This idea, a different way of configuring mundane, human forms of power such as racial oppression, reframes Apartheid by diminishing its ultimate scale and the consequent degree of its application to the oppressed. Head’s method is what we might term “aesthetic amplification.” If one’s existence is mythic and epochal, mere Apartheid becomes a trivial matter, trafficking in comparatively petty and puny oppression once measured against our stellar potentials.

But the origins for *The Cardinals*’ mythic reframing of Apartheid can be found in everyday ephemera in the *Golden City Post* and in Head’s lived social environment. Head’s journalism for the *Home Post* supplement possibly included the astrology column, “What the Stars Say . . . by Kismet” (for a representative instance, see 2 August 1959, p. 4). Head herself also featured in before and after photographs in a beauty column in which she went by the pseudonym “Isabel Starr” in “And you, too, can add to your beauty” (26 July 1959, p. 4). The novella’s title, *The Cardinals*, is not only derived from the astrology column, nor just from Head’s beauty column. The title also comes from a specific road, called Cardinal Close, set just back from the beach on the Hout Bay side of Noordhoek, Cape Town. Noordhoek was, and remains, adjacent to the fishing port of Hout Bay (Johnny, in *The Cardinals* is a fisherman). Noordhoek was a holiday town that Head

⁹ Guldemann astutely observes that “Johnny, Mouse and Ruby seem, through a careful reading of the text, to be symbolically representative of a new universe” (1997, p. 67).

likely visited on a day trip¹⁰ just prior to the forced removals of “Cape Coloured”¹¹ communities in the 1960s. Those removals took place to make way for white land ownership in Noordhoek.

To summarize, *The Cardinals* is an astrological term for the new black leaders representing pan-African political change sweeping the continent in the 1960s and setting an archetype for South Africa of freedom in its future. *The Cardinals* is also, conversely, a charged allusion to the cardinal sins. Lust is a cardinal sin – and incest and bestiality are two of its manifestations in Head’s novella. The astrological Cardinals are implicitly at stake in pseudonym of the young journalist, Bessie Head, writing as “Isabel Starr.” The astrological Cardinals are at stake in the weekly column, “What the Stars Say” by “Kismet” (itself referencing a personified form of power driving a liberated social destiny after Apartheid) – a column possibly authored or transcribed or read by Bessie Head, who may have passed by a street sign on the corner of Cardinal Close on a weekend outing to Noordhoek.

From which everyday, banal, signs and passing acquaintances might the fatherly protagonist’s name, Johnny, come from? In one of Head’s columns, “Dear Gang,” she answers a correspondent who writes that Johnny Mathis “sends me out of this world.” In her response, “Bessie” admits to finding a picture of Johnny Mathis and observes that he is “mighty good-looking” (13 September 1959, p. 3). Johnny in *The Cardinals* is also based on Head’s true life romance published in the *Home Post*, “Mr Wonderful and the Mouse.” In this romance, “Mr Wonderful” is a popular man, Dick, who courts a shy female narrator, Charmaine Harris. Johnny Mathis released a 1957 studio album, *Wonderful, Wonderful*, which featured a song (“Too Close for Comfort”) from the musical *Mr Wonderful*. In “Wonderful, Wonderful” – the title track of the album – Johnny Mathis sings “Sometimes we walk hand in hand by the sea / And we breathe in the cool salty air.” This beachside romance parallels Johnny’s seaside romance with Ruby in *The*

¹⁰ Dennis Kiley, Head’s *Golden City Post* editor stated that Head “used to go places like Hout Bay for a day out on a Sunday” with an old lady she befriended in District Six (Eilersen, 1996, pp. 39-40).

¹¹ This term was an Apartheid designation for communities of mixed-race or multi-ethnic heritages. But the identity “Coloured” is also proudly claimed by some South African communities in the post-Apartheid era.

Cardinals – it is their oceanside liaison that produces baby Miriam. Johnny Mathis sending “Bessie’s” correspondent “out of this world” might be termed an astrological metaphor for sexual attraction, setting in place Johnny’s position as an astrological Cardinal.

Moreover, Head’s advice column, “Hiya Teenagers,” sits directly to the right of Head’s column, “Dear Gang,” in which Johnny Mathis has previously been described as “mighty good-looking.” “Hiya Teenagers” features a response to a previous query about how to talk to a shy girl one fancies. Both the Mouse, “Mr Wonderful’s” paramour in the true romance, and Mouse, Johnny’s paramour in *The Cardinals*, might be described as shy girls. But in the spatial arrangement of the *Home Post* page, a shy girl sits directly opposite the prepossessing Johnny (Mathis) too. In these columns that neighbour each other on the page of *Home Post*, Johnny (Mathis) sits alongside a “Shy Girl” (Mouse) but does not talk to her, while Bessie Head offers love (and ultimately, seduction) advice. Johnny’s personality in *The Cardinals* comes from a real life crush who Bessie Head was very taken with: the jazz musician Dollar Brand, and possibly from her similarly confident fellow reporter on *Drum Magazine*, Casey Motsisi. Johnny’s biography as Sammy in his short story and as a fisherman in memory is possibly drawn from a real life counterpart. Bessie Head befriended a fisherman, called Zoot (real name Amin Mohammed), in her District Six days (Eilersen, 1996, p. 52).

Where, then, do the names Miriam and Mouse in *The Cardinals* come from? On 19 July 1959, the *Golden City Post*’s middle pages contain the *Home Post* insert. The adjacent names Miriam and Mouse are accidentally discovered alongside one another in the movement of the reading eye as it scans two headlines in *Golden City Post* and the *Home Post* insert, respectively. The reader sees on the left hand side the partially obscured news feature “Sonny Pillay [. . .] Wood and Won His Miriam” (Anonymous, 19 July, 1959, p. 10) immediately alongside the true romance “Mr Wonderful and the Mouse” on the right hand side (Bessie Head (“Charmaine Harris”), 19 July 1959, p. 1). Both Head’s true romance story and its framing story (Sonny Pillay’s marriage to Miriam Makeba) turn on acts of accomplished seduction. And both stage, as a spatial

arrangement of words on a page, the movement from “Miriam” to “Mouse,” the central plotline for the thrice renamed protagonist of *The Cardinals*, who moves from being “Miriam” to “Mouse,” with “Charlotte” in between. As the eye moves across the page from newspaper centrepiece to supplement insert, we move from Miriam to Mouse, just as *The Cardinals* itself does. It is almost as if this accidental juxtaposition gives the surface of the newspaper as a Möbius strip, whose later metaphorical work is transacted as an incestuous symptom in *The Cardinals*, since after all, it is Johnny (“Mr Wonderful”) who symbolically renames Miriam “Mouse.”

Moreover, the signifier, “Mouse,” has a particular relation to Apartheid. The “mouse” is a cipher for the oppressed in Bessie Head’s imaginative universe. She writes in a letter that:

In the mind of any white, whether racist or liberal, a black man is not a whole man, with whole, horrific, satanic passions. A black man is a wee, sleekit, timorous, cowering beastie they mowed down with maxim guns a hundred years ago. A black man could not possibly be the characters in my books, so hugely vile, so hugely demonish. (Eilersen, 1996, p. 222)

A “wee, sleekit, timorous, cowering beastie” is, of course, an allusion to Robert Burns’ poem “To a Mouse, On Turning Her Up in Her Nest With the Plough, November 1785” (Burns, 1785, p. 748).

“Mouse” in Head’s literary, and Möbian, reference is how Apartheid imagines its victims. If “horribly impassioned” Johnny re-enacts Apartheid, then Mouse enacts those it oppresses.

Head asserts the equivalence of the races in this symptom. The black man lacks under Apartheid. But Head’s own male characters (Johnny in *The Cardinals*, Maru in *Maru*, Dan in *A Question of Power*) do not lack or cower. They are overbearing, coercive and unstoppable. Therefore, Head’s protagonists are (occasionally black) men who do not lack, who embody *objet a*. They have perverse Lacanian structures for that reason – the pervert is a subject who has undergone castration and entered language, but who assumes that they are the other’s object, cause of the other’s *jouissance* (enjoyment taken to the extreme of suffering). The pervert submits others to anxiety-causing intrusion, just as Johnny desires to seduce Mouse by making Mouse’s writing speak through his own editorial framing. The counterpoint offered by *The Cardinals* is that writing,

editing and reading are two-way, intersubjective traffic. Mouse edits Johnny too. By authoring her originator (Johnny) in the story of Sammy, Mouse part-authors her gender oppression, but she submits Johnny's embodiment of Apartheid racial oppression to a perverse erotic charge.

What is the logic of this charge? Apartheid makes men mice. Johnny makes Charlotte, a woman, Mouse. Apartheid bestialized – it made people live out the degraded conditions and dehumanized dispositions of the animal. Johnny's desire is at one level readable as bestiality (the perverse sexual desire for a Mouse). Inhabiting the structures and effects of Apartheid, Johnny, who is not necessarily black,¹² perverts it. But Johnny's unrequited encounter with a non-desiring Mouse – a subject who refuses her human harasser – also places him in the position of the Lacanian subject of anxiety, who, masked to himself, asks of an animal – in this instance, a Mouse instead of a mantis – “*What wouldst thou?*”

In his seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's “The Purloined Letter,” Lacan writes that “in determining the scope of what speech repeats, it prepares the question of what symptoms repeat” (1972, p. 48). The symptoms being repeated in *The Cardinals* are unconscious father-adult daughter incest, domestic violence, and a social environment of almost universal sexual perversity. The simple question is why a very young Bessie Head – aged 22 or 23 – has designed this story as symptom. Why imagine one's lover as a tyrant and as a lost father? One answer might be that *The Cardinals* follows the lead of Apartheid legislation, whose premises of power relied partly upon proscribing sexuality. Apartheid criminalized interracial love in its successive Immorality Acts. The first Immorality Act (1927) prohibited sexual intercourse between unmarried white and black citizens. Mentally-ill divorcee Toby Amelia Emery (née Birch) transgressed this legislation when she conceived Bessie Amelia Head (née Emery) with an unknown black man.

¹² As not all readers realize, Head takes great care not to racialize her protagonists. To have racialized them would have been to work within Apartheid's limiting logic. The positions held by Head's “Cardinals” are structural, not identitarian. Lacanian psychoanalysis, too, hinges on a structural idea of the psyche – one is either neurotic (which includes the obsessive and the hysteric), or perverse, or psychotic.

Head knew little about her mother and nothing at all about her father. Head was conceived in an act of love or rape, in Johannesburg or in Durban, South Africa, in late September or in early October 1936. Born on 6 July 1937, Bessie Head's own person remained the only verifiable record of this lost liaison. In short, Head herself was born into a complicated Symbolic Order, in which her own embryonic origins were both unknowable and officially unlawful, and in which her criminalized person remained the only body of evidence. The subsequent Immorality Amendment Act (1950) forbade all sexual intercourse between white and non-white South Africans, inhibiting the teenaged Head's own spectrum of future love-choices. The Immorality Act (1957), just two years before Head began working as a journalist, outlawed "immoral" or "indecent" acts between white and non-white South Africans. Even non-sexual relations, therefore, became considerably imperilled. Bessie Head was in her twenties (1960-1962) when she wrote *The Cardinals*. In her journalism, Head covered some of the court cases in which interracial couples were tried for "Immorality."¹³

Unconscious incest is a curious literary response to the criminalization of cross-racial love. But for Bessie Head, any black man above a certain age – were she to desire him – might possibly have been her biological father. In this way, Apartheid's racial criminalization of Head's own origins made incest an ever-present structural risk within Head's erotic life. If we go back to our Möbius strip, and my suggestion that the signifier is presumptively social, we can see that Head's own desiring-writing is beset by a vacancy of address. Desire – and writing – in her case always risk inadvertently or randomly discovering the story of the father. Moreover, Apartheid's narrowing of desire to intra-racial love choices tended toward intra-kin relationships and away from cross-racial exogamy in its own imaginative life. Apartheid's conjunction of black subjectivity with

¹³ In *The Cardinals*, one of the cases that Mouse covers as a court reporter for *African Beat* is of "a twenty year old Norwegian sailor on trial for contravening the Immorality Act" (1995, p. 60). In the Cullen Library at the University of Witwatersrand, the *Golden City Post* features three stories of sailors contravening the Immorality Act. A story on 5 April 1959 describes a Dutch "Sailor Who Thought Immorality Act Did Not Apply on Ship" (Anonymous, p. 9). On 26 April 1959, the newspaper featured a 20 year old Dutch seaman who pleaded ignorance of an Indian lover's racial classification (Anonymous, "Didn't Know Indians Are Non-Whites," p. 6). On 3 May 1959, three British seamen from a tanker feature in the story "Seamen Thought Jail for Immorality Act was 'A Big Joke'" (Anonymous, p. 16).

inhibited embodiment always already prefigured a challenge via disinhibition. The challenge via disinhibition is delivered in *The Cardinals*' incestuous plot, but the novella also enters into a violent erotics, due to the narrative's incapacity to separate the various attributes of the father as both loved and feared object. The violent erotics of *The Cardinals* demonstrates that freedom-seeking pleasure can never banish racial and sexual prohibition. I locate the origins of *The Cardinals*' violent erotics in Apartheid's racist assault upon the organism of the oppressed, and in its criminalization of interracial love. Apartheid's various Immorality Acts, as we have seen, retroactively criminalized Head's own mixed-race person, and haunted the pleasure-seeking impulses of the oppressed and their human improvisations of the social via interracial love.

What I have been suggesting is that the Möbius strip as a circuit of signifiers and signifieds helps us to think literary production and literary narrative through the signifying chain's repetitions with a difference. Narrative, like the subject, relies upon iteration. Narrative is constituted, like signification, via repetition with a difference. The chains of repeating, but different, signs in *The Cardinals* allow us to approximate the interpretive cut that Lafont describes. The dimensions of the "inner 8" of the Möbius strip emerge not only from implicit address and the various biological or adoptive family structures within the Symbolic Order. They also emerge from Apartheid's automatic, involuntary subject-production through a totalizing social structure, whose ultimate effect is to apportion white pleasure and black injury at all levels of life. In apportioning pleasure and pain – psychically indistinguishable states – the traffic of Apartheid's (excessive) *jouissance* invited unconscious response.

To sexualize power, as *The Cardinals* does, is to submit psychic life to the repeated and automatic intrusions of Apartheid's perverse environmental demand.¹⁴ However, to sexualize power is also to inhabit constant psychic attack through the impersonal signifier's ever-present metaphoric charge. Head's early novella tries to equal racist national politics with mythical romantic

¹⁴ Sisi Maquagi names Apartheid South Africa as "a society that seems to be devoid of normalcy, that is itself deviant" (2004, p. 169).

partnership. But astrological epochal change must be visible in “telling” everyday signs. The unintended result is the devastation of the psyche by incessant ordinary signs that are hyperinvested and whose cosmic consequence overwhelms a sense-making subject with the epochal amplification of every banal signifier. This is not simply an effect of a monstrously racist Apartheid system. To be sure, Apartheid’s criminalization of the everyday (petty Apartheid) submitted both experiential being and ordinary language to racist systems of intelligibility. Framed that way, both language and being became fraught with potential culpability in every expressive instance, in every social act. But, viewed another way, language itself always already contains its own logics of contingent inculcation.

As a socially communicative act, literary narrative becomes charged with Apartheid’s perverse authoring of the oppressed’s lifeworlds. Apartheid’s social perversity culminates in the central love relationship in *The Cardinals* becoming (unconsciously) incestuous. Moreover, for Head as a female writer, racial violence uncomfortably expresses itself as domestic (sexual) violence. While Head cannot avoid writing in the father’s language, and cannot avoid the structuring regime of Apartheid as a Symbolic Order regulating exogamy, she inaugurates a proto-feminist project by shuffling the syntagmatic, sequential progression of the father’s narrative. In other words, where male and white authorships of the name collude to produce gender violence, female editing amounts to a scrambling of their sequential logics. The changeability of Head’s own name in journalistic bylines (“Bessie,” “Isabel Starr,” “Kismet,” “Charmaine Harris”) itself introduces an editing function comparable to the renaming of Miriam (Makeba) and Mouse in (“Mr Wonderful and the Mouse”) to Miriam in *The Cardinals*, to Charlotte in *The Cardinals*, to Mouse (in *The Cardinals*). In fact, as Zoë Wicomb observes, Mouse, whether as Miriam or Charlotte, repeatedly “refuses to speak or to utter her name, a self-imposed tabu” (1995, p. 11). The changeability of women’s names in exogamy (Bessie Emery the unmarried journalist later becoming the married Bessie Head, for instance) mimics the editorial function in writing, in which the arrangement, substitutability, and erasure of signifiers are givens.

In one possible perspective on the Möbius strip, the Lacanian symptom is itself exercised by the subject's editorial function, foreshortening the syntagmatic, metonymic deferrals of the signifying chain to produce affectively charged and paradigmatic metaphor. To make this point, I want to demonstrate literary editing as an act of perversion in Head's true romance, "Mr Wonderful and the Mouse." Charmaine Harris, metonymically linked to Charlotte in *The Cardinals*, narrates the difficulties of her shyness in a romance with the popular Dick Richards:

Plain, unpopular Charmaine Harris, going out with the town's number one heart-throb, Dick Richards. Could any girl ask for more?

Dick had brains and brawn and looks.

[. . .]

A while ago, there had been quite a lot of speculation about a certain girl and Dick and more than once somebody hinted that a marriage was in the offing. But nothing came of it.

[. . .]

Dick came every day for a week. Sometimes he managed to get more than a dozen words out of me which was quite a feat. (Home Post, 19 July 1959, p. 1, italics in the original)

Dick insistently elicits speech from Mouse in a way that is similar to Johnny the editor coaxing Mouse to write in *The Cardinals* ("he managed to get more than a dozen words out of me which was quite a feat"). Further, in one possible logic of the symptom's editorial function, the renaming of the tautologous "Richard Richards" as "Dick" becomes a motivated and retroactively-necessary pseudonym. The poorly named "Richard Richards" is edited to avoid redundant repetition and becomes "Dick." The more the shy and self-effacing "Mouse" retreats from the scene of language, the more the father's phallic *jouissance* ("Dick") enters the scene. To demonstrate this in Head's passage, I offer illustrative editorial deletions to the signifying chain in the story. If, as I have claimed, editing is perversely anxiogenic (anxiety-causing), I shall simply let the following edited passage speak:

Dick [. . .]. Could any girl ask for more?

[. . .]

A while ago, there had been quite a lot of speculation about a certain girl and Dick [. . .] in the offing. But nothing came of it.

[. . .]

Dick came every day for a week [. . .] which was quite a feat. [Home Post, 19 July 1959, p. 1, italics in the original]

My point here is not to introduce crass sexual innuendo into Head's true romance prose, but instead, to better reveal its prior presence. The signs were always there to begin with. Editing perversely – simply foreshortening the sequential signifying chain – foregrounds their intrusion, notwithstanding how discomforting and anxiety-provoking their discovered statement may be. One theory, based on the unwanted sexual attentions to which Mouse is submitted in *The Cardinals*, is that “Mr Wonderful and the Mouse” regulates sexual harassment in Head's wider environment.¹⁵ True romance is a plot that circulates around delayed seduction. Charmaine Harris' eventual marriage to “Richard Richards” perhaps makes an honest man of “Dick” through a circuitous process of extended telling. However, in the editorial function of the symptom, signs that would ordinarily sit in contingent and *temporally deferred* relation become hyperbolically charged in their metaphoric and simultaneous unconscious equivalence. The basic steps of narration – “repetition with a difference” – are visible in “Richard Richards.” But narration, once editorially foreshortened, collapses into an intrusive language of suggestion and seduction charged with the father's *jouissance* (“Dick”) at every turn.

The paradoxical cost of Head's scrambling of the white and male authorships of the name is that the most banal conscious detail and the most mythic levels of violence cannot be distinguished, nor managed within a coherent narrative design. The ultimate, almost inescapable result of hyperbolically charged signs, I would argue, is the devastation of the personality. In schizophrenia's speculative designs, the most ordinary of signs return to assail the psyche because the subject is submitted to the ongoing and excessive demands of the Other's *jouissance*. To summarize, the editorial foreshortening of the signifying chain's metonymic contingency converts the smallest

¹⁵ As Susanne M. Klausen's “Afterword” notes, both Head and the journalist who preceded her on *Home Post* experienced their first sexual encounter as rape in the years 1960 and 1961 (Mayet, 2022, p. 160).

everyday signs – in arbitrary relation – into the violent intrusions of a putatively cohesive transcendental signifier. Signification is a speculative answer to a demand whose bearing we cannot fathom. In Head’s mythically-charged framework of political reference, editing lays open the always potentially non-signifying subject to phallic *jouissance*’s hyperbolic return in every ordinary turn of phrase. Head’s own dramaturgy of the editorial environment of *African Beat*, in which a shy Mouse is beset by constant sexual harassment, itself models perverse and violent editorial demand.¹⁶ When Mouse rewrites Johnny’s story, we observe, Sammy is set upon and bleeds out. Johnny, on the other hand, lives (for Mouse) to tell the tale.

I have tried to trace some circuits of ordinary signs (for example, Johnny Mathis, Miriam Makeba, and Cardinal Close, Noordhoek) as they become hyperbolically invested in the process of literary authorship. To summarize in table form, we can see the movement from the ordinary to the hyperbolic for both characters:

Johnny/Sammy/Dick	Miriam/Charlotte/Mouse
Johnny Mathis, who sings song from “Mr Wonderful”	Miriam Makeba
Johnny Mathis (fancied by “Bessie” in “Dear Gang”)	The “shy girl” alongside “Dear Gang” in “Hiya Teenagers”
“Dick” in “Mr Wonderful and the Mouse”	“Charmaine Harris” in “Mr Wonderful and the Mouse”
Johnny and “Sammy” in <i>The Cardinals</i>	Miriam, Charlotte and Mouse in <i>The Cardinals</i>
A fisherman like Head’s friend “Zoot”	
Ebullient like Dollar Brand, Head’s friend	
A journalist like Head’s friend, Casey Motsisi	A journalist like Bessie Head
Father? (incest as a “cardinal sin”)	Daughter? (incest as a “cardinal sin”)
An astrological “cardinal sign”	An astrological “cardinal sign”

In Head’s novella, the everyday amplifies into an epochal incestuous perversity – a true romance of cosmos-shaping proportions. Lacan’s Möbian surface dramatizes the endless circuitry of the signifying subject. I would argue further that the signifying subject in Lacan’s topological model is

¹⁶ Huma Ibrahim is too quick to personalize the dynamic, calling Mouse “a young journalist struggling to function with the discoveries and contradictions of her catatonic sexual-emotional self and as an artist coming into being” (1996, p. 48).

also equivalent to the literary writer or reader following marks on the surface of the page while dreaming of depth overleaf. Meaning-making, I have argued, is a metaphorical leap to an impossible underside or overleaf, a proleptic or analeptic moment, that neither the page, nor the Möbian loop, will ultimately yield or confirm. Instead, literary meaning-making is a symptom, comparable to the unconscious metaphorical move from the passing contingency of Miriam Makeba marrying Sonny Pillay to the construction of another Miriam – the infant subject intruded upon by unilateral paedophilic attentions in *The Cardinals*. The reader in search of meaning breaches the surface of the page or the boundaries of the book and foreshortens the signifying chain, in line with an intrusive and perverse editorial *jouissance*. This perverse *jouissance* – a potential in any meaning-making reader as I have intimated by resequencing Head's journalistic prose – is mitigated only by the sentimental assumption that literary characters are people. If our reading does violence to a book, we tell ourselves, it is always, after all, only a book.

The Cardinals' creative process is to out-narrate Apartheid using a cosmic fiction and thus establishing a different order of the legible. By contrast, the readerly process is intrusive and structurally violent. Reading – even in its most inattentive posture – restructures the metonymic relations the page. In its intrusive violence, the literary reader's bid to interpret, by supplying an object that the page lacks, approximates perversion. The contrast between the creative process and the readerly process is sharp. The creative process is based on a narrative bid to reconstruct worldly order with formal design (replacing an unassimilable Symbolic Order with a fiction). The readerly process is based on an interpretive bid (doing violence in accordance with an implicitly assumed Symbolic Order). The hinge between the two processes is the text – a neutral object-arrangement in and of itself. What Head brings to this arrangement, and to the creative and readerly processes it inspires, is a withheld ending. Just as Johnny seems about to force Mouse's seduction without consent, the novella abruptly ends.¹⁷

¹⁷ I disagree slightly with Jane Starfield's gendered assessment of the conclusion that "Johnny seizes the last platitudinous word about the state of the world, thereby stamping his maleness onto the blankness that has replaced

What happens next? The meaning-making reader confronts Head's interpretive and therapeutic cut. The therapeutic cut resolves the paradox of the Möbian loop by unravelling its desiring circuitry, and with it the "inner 8" (outlining *objet a*), the cause of readerly desire. Readers, masked to their own perverse meaning-making, anticipate Mouse's impending but untold violation by her own father. This unnarrated incestuous act can only be contemplated by making a perverse forward leap in the sequence of the signifying chain. We leap forward onto an empty page at the end of *The Cardinals* and read on where no sign has ever ventured. The Mouse-like or mantis-like blankness beyond the ending makes a demand of our perverse reader. Exasperated, our reader might even puzzle "What would'st thou?" The answer never arrives, but readerly perversion persists. Our reader attributes its object to the blankness that will make its other mean, according to a familiar logic: "Walk on, little ant, if only that final sense is fated in our stars! A cosmic design once promised must surely lie in wait. Read on! Every new, unimprinted step is freighted with consequence!"

Reading on, Johnny and Mouse may meet in mutually-desired incest. Reading on, Johnny and Mouse may meet in undesired rape.¹⁸ Reading on, Johnny and Mouse may not meet. Reading on, if one may fly a kite, there are any number of remaining narrative permutations in the blue skies of the cosmos.

In the absence of an ending, all permutations are equivalent. In the absence of an ending, all permutations are simultaneously present. Head's interpretive cut, at best, allows her readers to realise, perhaps, that the only possible destination is two-faced. The destination is two-faced like the original masked subject clueless to both its inner face and outer sign encountering the demand of the Other. The destination is two-faced, like the resolved – and extended – Möbian topology. Once

Mouse's identity" (1997, p. 662). Instead, I think that Lacan's clinical structures allow us to read proactively for unfulfillable demand in Johnny's and the reader's encounters with blankness.

¹⁸ Pucherova argues that "as the novel ends, Johnny is about to rape her" (2011, p. 115)

neared, the destination slides onward, and onward once again. Once again, and again, the destination extends the signifying chain onward, with luck, into lack.

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