

DISPLACED LIVES: AMBIGUITIES OF COMPASSION IN MICHEL HEYNS'S NOVEL *EACH MORTAL THING*

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Abstract: *Michiel Heyns' novel Each Mortal Thing (2023) is a meditation on the challenges of compassionate connectedness and solidarity in today's troubled world of displacement and alienation. Its author, an award-winning South African writer, probes into vexed issues of our times, such as identity and belonging, home and away. While in his earlier work, Heyns's main question was 'where is home?', in his latest novel, the emphasis has shifted to displacement as a global and, indeed, a universal human condition. Hence, the question now is: 'how to live in displacement?'. Each Mortal Thing is primarily a novel of ideas in which – along with preoccupations about displacement as a global condition – Heyns contemplates the related theme of 'innocence' versus 'experience', and pragmatism versus compassion. I argue that, through the choice of specific intertextual references to selected canonical figures of world literature, Heyns implicitly also touches on concepts relevant to religion and spirituality. In my analysis, I draw on current insights from postmodern theology and secular spirituality, e.g., on Daniel Boscaljon's (2013) model of faith that integrates contemporary scepticism into the structure of faith. This model of faith requires the 'vigilant groundwork' of cultivating presence of being, kindness and goodwill – qualities that resemble what Heyns's protagonist would comfortably associate with a sense of spirituality and belonging. A novel of religious and psychological exploration, Each Mortal Thing is a welcome reminder of our common humanity and connectedness at a time of deepening global divisions and uncertainties.*

Keywords: *ambiguities of compassion, crisis of belief, displacement and alienation, Each Mortal Thing (2023), Michiel Heyns, novel of ideas*

1. Introduction

The title of Michiel Heyns's latest novel (2023) is echoed in one of its epigraphs, a sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins, in which the poet exhorts the reader to participate in each individual life's mystery through enhanced attention to both the animate and inanimate world. *Each Mortal Thing* is a novel of contemplation about the challenges of compassionate connectedness in today's world of alienation and displacement.

A prolific and award-winning South African novelist, Heyns has always been interested in grappling with the complexities of identity and belonging, diaspora and displacement, and the moral dilemmas of immigration and dislocation in different countries. The setting of *Lost Ground* (2011), for example, is a South African small

town, to which an expatriate journalist returns on a professional assignment. The protagonist's pursuit morphs into a traumatic exploration of his own past relationships as he embarks on a soul-search that triggers a profound sense of having 'lost the ground' under his feet, aware that he has now "become a foreigner in two countries" (Heyns 2011: 237).

In *Invisible Furies* (2012), it is Paris – a culturally seductive, though deeply ambiguous, city for many a foreigner – that offers the stage for reflections on home and away. The reader becomes intimately involved with the protagonist's 'invisible furies' of heart and mind, as he tries to understand and accept a young man's decision to give up his homeland, South Africa, for the attractions, but also the delusions of "this old whore of a city" (Heyns 2012: 280). Here too, there is a sense of loss, the outsider's dramatic loss of an illusion: "a loss of what [Paris] seems to promise" (idem: 292).

While in Heyns's earlier novels, the central question was 'where is home?', in his latest novel, *Each Mortal Thing* (2023), the emphasis has shifted to displacement as global and, indeed, a universal human condition. Hence, the question now is: 'how to live in displacement?' This is primarily a novel of ideas in which Heyns contemplates the problem of innocence versus experience, and pragmatism versus compassion, all against the background of displacement as human condition. The novel abounds in subtle literary allusions to canonical figures of world literature: Hopkins, Eliot, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Henry James. I argue that – through the choice of specific intertexts – Heyns implicitly touches on themes and concepts from theology and spirituality.

2. London's world of strangers

The setting of the novel is London in 2019, as seen through the eyes of foreigners and expatriates. The opening scene sets the tone for the entire novel: an unprecedented heatwave accentuates outbursts of public hostility and xenophobia. The protagonist, one Terence Winshaw, is a South African expat who now lectures in English at a London college. We see him travelling to Heathrow airport to meet a co-national, Natasha de Villiers, a young novelist whom he had sponsored for a literary-prize nomination. Terence's experience of the crowded tube and the sweltering airport atmosphere metaphorically embodies his wider experience of London: "The train shuddered and clanked into the *Hadean penumbra* of Heathrow Central [...] where aspirant passengers had spent the night sleeping on the floor, awaiting departures indefinitely delayed: was this *Armagedon Lite*, scaled down to the puny measure of our times, the narrow limits of our imagination: *terminal stasis*?" (Heyns 2023: 15; emphasis added).

The emotionally unsettling opening of the novel functions as a powerful objective correlative for the entire book. Amidst "a mixture of petrol fumes, melting tar and human blood, sweat and tears" (idem: 23), there is aggravated human intolerance and hostility as, for example, when – upon attempting to lend a helping hand to a woman visibly struggling with a large suitcase – Terence is chased away for being a "pervert" and a "fucking foreigner" (idem: 16). Terence is taken aback

by this knee-jerk expression of xenophobia, but shortly afterwards, he is gratefully surprised by a random act of kindness from an airport official offering to guide him through the airport maze. These apparently minor, carefully juxtaposed incidents set the tone for the novel's main theme: "the search for goodwill in a merciless world" (Taljaard 2023, n.p.), in which goodwill will outweigh hateful alienation.

As an English scholar, Terence has always been particularly drawn to Hopkins's poetry and its insistence on the painful tension between faith in beauty and human goodness, and a tormenting crisis of belief. Like Hopkins himself, Terence aspires to endow life with transcendent meaning, while simultaneously being torn by doubt. The narrative, therefore, confronts tensions of good and evil, kindness and cruelty, integration and displacement. As he is waiting at the airport for his co-national to arrive, Terence reflects on his London quotidian: while a seductive place of beauty and culture, London – he feels – makes people (whether foreigners or locals, or homeless people) feel like strangers to one another. As a 'stranger' in the City, Terence is affected by the shallowness of social interaction: he ponders the effects of the internet with its world of "simulacra" (Heyns 2023: 48) and its impact on human behaviour, which has seen an aggravation of violation and displacement: "people sleeping in the streets, children murdering other children [...] in what is supposedly the most advanced country on earth" (44).

Terence is taken out of his rumination the moment he meets Natasha in the Arrivals section, and is immediately taken aback by her "infectious eagerness" to discover something new, the beauty of London (21). For – as compared with the other passengers, who look crushed and dishevelled after a long flight – she exhibits a refreshing presence, that "quality of anticipation, excitement and openness to experience" (49). Terence is fascinated by her "unpolluted exposure to the City he now called home" (26), as she seems to embody the innocence (or perhaps naivety?) of a visitor from one of Britain's ex-colonies.

3. Innocence meets experience

In the tradition of Henry James's novels ('naïve' Americans visiting 'cultured' Europe), Michiel Heyns draws on the time-honoured trope of 'innocence and experience', while adding his own distinct touch to it. Natasha's fresh take on life and experience, her confident yet unassuming writerly posture ("so undriven by high expectations and yet so unsullied by low expectations", (49)) prompts in Terence the need to protect her from the pettiness and jealousies of the London literary world that she has entered, in her innocence, as a potential nominee for a prestigious literary prize.

The description of Natasha's book launch (27-40) is a masterly representation of London's literary scene, depicted as a stage for aspiring literati to display their knowledge of the latest fads and trends, a place where reputations are made and unmade, or 'cancelled'. Natasha's book – an adaptation of *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner's classic novel (1975 [1883]) – casts a critical eye on 19th century colonial South Africa. In Schreiner, the central voice is granted to a white woman; Natasha's novel replaces the centrality of the white voice with a black

African voice. Although original and daring, the reception of her book provokes some of the attendants at its launch to question Natasha's moral right as a mixed-race person to represent the voice of a black character (28). Such concerns about agency echo familiar trends in current postcolonial cultural criticism, with race-based identity issues considered to be a key concern. Disconcerting as the question is for Natasha, she holds her own ground by stating that she sees her black African character, in the first place, "as a person" (29).

Another critic raises doubts as to the very validity of 'literary adaptation' as creative concept, with the implicitly malign accusation of appropriation. As a novelist himself, Heyns does not share such a position on rewriting/ intertextuality, as can be gleaned from the caustic presentation of this incident at the book launch. The accuser is described as having a "frightfully superior manner, hiding or attempting to hide, a painful fear of rejection and ridicule himself" (32); most likely a junior reviewer himself, he was "a lesser predator of the literary world [...] for whom anger is the default mode in the face of a successful debut" (35). Tensions escalate, leading to the withdrawal of Natasha's literary-prize nomination (57-72), triggered "almost entirely by either envy or ambition" (59).

Although focused on the internal politicking of the literary world – "Welcome to the London literary scene. It's mainly about scoring points and settling scores" (34) – this scene is offered as a microcosm of British society at large: a scene emblematic of power games between an insider's experience and an outsider's lack of "worldly-wise toughness" (60). Natasha clearly occupies the role of the inexperienced outsider to the London literary world, an easy prey for those tempted to parade their sophistry to the newcomer.

4. In search of meaning: "*A Stranger I Arrived here, A Stranger I Go Hence*"

The words 'kind' and 'kindness' are used numerous times throughout the novel, and particularly in relation to Natasha, who sees the English as unusually 'kind', while for Terence they are merely 'polite' (35-36). She extends warmth towards Terence, in whom she recognises a kindred 'gentleness' he had not been aware of before (40-41). Terence, who, after years of experiencing the London quotidian, had lost most of his lofty expectations of a metropole whose pulse is dictated by people hurriedly passing by one another, is – upon meeting Natasha – encouraged anew to recapture the "excitement and openness to experience [...] as if one is discovering the world for the first time, and finding it delightful" (49).

In spite of the devastating blow to her self-esteem in the aftermath of the nomination withdrawal, Natasha is still able to see beauty, goodwill and gentleness at the core of life. This is, symbolically, represented in the scene depicting Terence and Natasha attending a Schubert concert with its deeply melancholy lyrics of unrequited love as endured by a lonely wanderer in the depth of winter. The scene powerfully echoes Natasha's suffering because of having her debut novel withdrawn from the award nomination, while also foreshadowing the dramatic turn that her life would take. Here, we see her fully transported into the atmosphere of the heart-piercing musical piece with its oft-repeated lines, "*A stranger I arrived here, a stranger I go*

hence’” (74; emphasis in original). A daughter of a small town in the semi-desert of the Karoo – the setting of Schreiner’s novel – Natasha reassures Terence that “‘I’m from the Karoo. I know about bleak and beautiful’” (70). Although symbolically rejected by the big city of London, and made to feel like an alien, she is still able to see its cultural beauty and, at the same time, remain emotionally connected to the place of her birth. Terence is touched by her “near-breathless immersion in the music” (75), while she is also emotionally present for him.

To his chagrin, and in spite of his kind hospitality to Natasha in London, Terence is not able to protect her from the blow to her literary reputation. This rejection triggers a whole chain of mishaps that end in tragedy, with Natasha’s death, upon her return to South Africa, at the hands of her jealous fiancé. Terence is also not spared being judged harshly by his closest friends for having become too emotionally affected by Natasha’s predicament. While his actor friend, Simon, derides his “‘good Samaritan’” (100) hospitality as a misguided intention of “‘changing the world’s nappies’” (53), his girlfriend, Jenny, considers him to be “‘just a bleeding-heart bastard [...] with a misplaced nursemaid complex’” (93). As a hard-nosed lawyer, a pragmatist herself, Jenny does not understand Terence’s “looking for innocence in a fallen world” (50). In the economy of the novel as a whole, her position represents a wide-spread nihilistic stance on life’s complexity underneath the surface of things. It is this kind of “refusal to deal with indeterminacy and uncertainty, [her] impatience with less pragmatic souls” (128) that alienates Terence.

Terence’s existential crisis is aggravated by the unexpected arrival in London of slain Natasha’s translator-cum-confidante, Sonja, who accuses him of having (albeit unintentionally) caused her friend’s death by having “encouraged her to come to this overrated little island” (170) in pursuit of literary validation and the allure of cosmopolitan sophistication. Thus, according to Sonja, he may be guilty of having prompted Natasha to distance herself emotionally from the unpretentious life in her own country. At the same time, she insinuates that her friend may not have been the innocent small-town girl whom Terence may have imagined her to be, but someone who had exploited him as a naïve protector of “damsels in distress” (174). For, according to the old Greeks, as Sonja puts it, “‘you interfere in someone’s life at your peril [and] you are judged by the effect of your deeds, not by your intentions’” (169).

5. Yearning for ‘re-enchantment’

Despite Sonja’s hurtful intervention, Terence does not give up on his faith in goodwill. In an interview, Heyns tried to explain his protagonist’s (Terence’s) desperate search for a renewed foundation of faith and fellow feeling, which made him return – again and again – for solace and inspiration, to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetry. As Heyns said in the interview: “‘Hopkins, as a fervent Jesuit, was torn between his attraction to beauty [in poetry] and his dedication to what he saw as a religious ideal of purity [Although] Terence is not religious, he is drawn to the crisis of belief that he discerns in Hopkins’s work, because he is *looking for something to believe in, in a world that seems to be intent on a collapse of values*’” (Heyns, qtd. in Beaument 2023: n.p; emphasis added).

Terence is on a search for something in which to believe, and – as an emotionally ‘unhomed stranger’ in London – he is on a quest for meaning and re-enchantment amidst brokenness, eager to find a form of faith that can accommodate his existential angst. He strongly believes that it is possible to gain access to an alternative kind of faith which, without having to rely on conventional religion, can bring about a state of re-enchantment, wonderment and freshness, qualities that he had so admired in the young Natasha.

I argue that – by emphasising his protagonist’s yearning for a suspense of scepticism and uncertainty – Heyns points to the possibility of a spiritual rejuvenation able to integrate doubt into a new structure of certainty, a new wholeness. A postmodern theological critic, Daniel Boscaljon (2013: 15-16), refers to such a condition as “*pre-belief*”: a faith that does not rely on conventional religious symbols and doctrines, but on “*pre-symbolic* structures”. To put it differently, it is a faith in one’s own capacity to intuit value in something outside of self: a state *prior* to selecting any given (religious) symbol as true. Boscaljon’s (2013: 14) model of faith “positively sublates contemporary scepticism into the structure of faith, allowing us – in vigilance – to remain simultaneously faithful and sceptical”. It is a faith not in divine entities, but rather in one’s individual relationship to the divine as an affective experience that does not exclude a degree of doubt. Terence’s religious intimations are akin to Hopkins’s tortured aspiration for holiness in a broken world, where “*all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; and wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell*” (Hopkins, qtd. in Heyns 2023: 15; emphasis in original). And, like Hopkins, although fully aware of life’s pain and brokenness, Terence is able simultaneously to feel that “*the world is charged with the grandeur of God*” (ibid.).

According to Boscaljon (2013: 16), remoulding one’s faith requires “human (that is, not divine) groundwork/ intervention”. It requires the ‘vigilant’ work of cultivating goodwill, kindness and presence, qualities that resemble what Terence would comfortably associate with a sense of spirituality: “*kindness* is all that’s left us” – he says – “now that [traditional] faith, hope and charity have left us down so badly” (Heyns 2023: 36; emphasis added). The spiritually ‘vigilant groundwork’ alluded to above also includes the capacity to trust one’s intuition and/or (divine) inspiration without reliance on hard evidence. For Terence, such trust is based on one’s strong “*belief in the essential benignity of the world*” (idem: 49); for, to regain faith in human goodness, one has to open to “*soft evidence* [similar to] the impression a person makes on that part of you that negotiates your relations with new acquaintances, that part that necessarily has to form in ordinary life conclusions *without* hard evidence” (50; emphasis in original). Or, as theology critic, John Caputo (2006: 273; emphasis added) would put it succinctly, it is through cultivating a sense of “*religion without religion*” and undogmatic faith, “the way the day is opened up by the rising of the sun” (idem: 278), that one would access glimpses of the transcendent within the shards of the quotidian.

6. Life at street level: a “ragpicker’s” perspectives

In spite of his genuine intention of extending literary solidarity, Terence feels torn by a profound sense of “having failed” Natasha (Heyns 2023: 112). Her tragic death throws him back onto his own crisis of belief: he feels painfully responsible

for “having encouraged Natasha into a situation with a very uncertain outcome”, more exactly, for being oblivious, at the time, of the “unintended consequences” (122) of his ‘good Samaritan’ action in a broken world – as his friend, Simon, condescendingly puts it to him.

Accordingly, Heyns continues to test his core issues – the search for goodness, ‘innocence and experience’ in a world of displacement – by exposing his protagonist to another unexpected encounter. As he is loitering aimlessly, “wondering at life carrying on doggedly, mundanely [...] in spite of the abyss of Natasha’s death” (112-113), he literally stumbles against a homeless young man, Andy, whom he has an urge to invite into his home, into his life. An extreme provocation (is this even plausible?) meant to test the reader about the credibility of Terence’s quest for answers. A native Englishman (not an expatriate, that is), Andy is an innocent, discarded by society and reduced to life on the streets. At this point, an explicit intertextual reference is added to the mix: the homeless man reads Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, (2004 [1869]), thus prompting the reader to associate his psychology with Prince Lev Myshkin’s guileless simplicity of being, which became an easy target for abuse by corrupt souls. And just like Myshkin, Andy’s innocence will be abused by the crass society of which he is, inalienably, a part.

Although scarred by the unfortunate turn of events around Natasha, Terence once again ventures into putting his faith in acts of compassion and solidarity. He offers homeless Andy a meal and a bed for the night, in exchange for listening to his heartbreak tale. What surprises Terence most is Andy’s “unaffected candour” (117 - 120) and capacity to see in people more good than evil. Even though he occasionally gets assaulted on the streets, Andy still believes that “‘the regular blokes outnumber the gits, otherwise I’d get more kicks than quids [...] They’re just regular people, no better or worse than you’n me [...]. The world is what it is, and we have to live in it as best we can’” (119). This passage brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s (1973: 79) famous “ragpicker” metaphor, an image referring to one’s deeply spiritual capacity to respond to life’s hidden beauty and mystery amid the mundane, and regardless of circumstance.

The encounter with Andy gives Terence the opportunity partly to restore his faith, or, as Anthony Akerman (2023: n.p.) puts it, “it vindicates Terence’s default setting and his faith in humanity’s inherent goodness”. It also gives him the opportunity to experience life, literally, from the perspective of the street, as he sits on a piece of cardboard near Andy: a “spectator, not a participant [and] observing people from below, supremely in charge of the spectacle” (Heyns 2023: 153). Symbolically, this is what Terence needs at this juncture: to look at life from a radically different angle, to experience it upside down, and inside out.

Through his friendship with Andy, Terence is taken out of his own, self-enclosed world as an academic and is exposed to immediate human suffering. One day, he comes across Andy “bundled-up in the customary place” (129-139), having been severely beaten and urinated upon. Hence, reduced to “creatureliness”, as Eric Santner (2006: 12) would refer to that state of physical liminality in which “the human [finds itself] in the neighbourhood of zero” (Heyns 2023: 25). The marks of injury on Andy’s “ethereally slender body” are a provocation for Terence, and reveal

a sight now “lending him a touch of martyrdom” (idem: 137). However, although he feels extremely helpless for “falling short in the face of abject need” (idem: 134), Terence continues to keep his heart and home open to Andy.

In the aftermath of this event, the narrative becomes bolder in terms of its religious allusions, even as Heyns is careful to undercut grandiose statements in brief, ironic interventions. When ironised by his dandy actor friend, Simon, for persevering in being a ‘good Samaritan’, Terence responds briefly, by just quoting a verse from the New Testament: “*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*” (qtd. in Heyns 2023: 43; emphasis in original).

Although used sporadically and carefully circumscribed, the frequency of Heyns’s religious allusions tends to accumulate towards the end of the novel. Andy’s predicament is aggravated when he has an epileptic fit on the street, an episode during which his dog – his “guardian angel” (132), as he puts it – went missing. Andy’s “elemental grief” (181) galvanises Terence into action and he manages to locate the dog in an animal shelter, while Andy refers to his epileptic fits as visitations from beyond. He tells Terence: “‘I believe there’s someone or somethin’ looking out for me [...] they make me feel like I’ve been in touch with some other way of seeing, a better way [...] it’s a kind of warm feelin’ as if somebody’s holdin’ you close [...] this feeling takes hold of you, of your whole body’” (146-147). Andy’s effusion is undercut by Terence’s sceptical reflection on whether Andy is not in the grip of some delusion that “makes a poor bugger’s affliction seem like a blessing [...] as if the price for happiness was a kind of moral imbecility” (148).

7. Acts of omission

Terence’s intervention in Andy’s life has an unexpectedly ‘happy’ ending: unlike his well-intentioned intervention in Natasha’s life that ended in tragedy, his act of companionable solidarity with a social outcast manages to help the latter “find a foothold in society” (198) as a labourer in a dog shelter. As it happens, and in spite of the positive consequence of his act of kindness in Andy’s case, Terence is still unsure whether – “in the larger scheme of things” (222) – it is wise to intervene in the lives of strangers.

He continues his quest for answers to this tormenting question, which prompts him to visit his old alma mater, Cambridge University. For, it is here that he first confronted “the abyss of Unmeaning, the flirtation with despair” (199), albeit from the comfort of armchair debating societies. It is also here that an ex-colleague, one Gary, had succumbed to severe depression and suicide, a memory that makes Terence now feel torn by remorse for not having extended to Gary more emotional support as a friend; an act of omission that is given a fresh poignancy in the context of his recent encounters with both Natasha and Andy. Drawing on his experiences with these two people in whose lives he had intervened, Terence is now willing to expose himself (199-203) to the painful memory of his ex-colleague, who had, to his “then exasperation, sat night after night in Terence’s room nursing his cup of coffee, long since grown cold, desperately keeping a conversation going

so as not to have to return to whatever demons haunted him in his own room” (201). Oblivious, at the time, of Gary’s pain, Terence had not offered him another cup of coffee.

He is torn by remorse for not having been more involved with a fragile soul who had presumably been crushed by the way Cambridge made him feel: not only fatally out of place, but profoundly “unsure of his own identity” (202). Such thoughts throw Terence into deep despondency, during which, through “the strange alchemy of grief” (203), the image of Gary is uncannily merged with the image of Natasha: “two disparate memories sharing the common ground of loss” (203). Memories of two people in whose early deaths he was, paradoxically, involved-yet-not-involved. Waiting at the deserted Cambridge railway station swept by an icy wind – “a vast stretch of nothingness extending at either end into nothing” (203) – Terence feels the scene as an embodiment of his inner torment: “Was it nothing then, his love for Natasha and for Andy, just because their lives amounted to nothing, as the world reckons these things?” (203).

8. Conclusion

Heyns ends his novel by turning back full circle. As we recall, at the beginning, the reader was exposed to the protagonist’s doubting whether innocence and compassion can survive in the world, and as summarised in a few deliberately incongruous questions: “What gentleness can survive the Piccadilly Line on the hottest day in history” (15); and, “What kind of a match is that for Donald Trump or Kim-Jong-un?” (18). At the end of the novel, Heyns, still in doubt, has his protagonist strike a more sombre note: “But what then? Do we just harden our hearts to the misery of unhappy people?” (214).

Lessons have been learned. Terence’s heart as a ‘mortal thing’ is softened as he comes to accept that, while he was unable to save anybody from their own destiny, he is willing to “learn not to dwell on his *own* part in their fate” (221; emphasis added). Even though he may have been disillusioned by the ambiguous consequences of well-intentioned compassion, he finds that committing himself to its provocations is infinitely more meaningful than the acts of omission.

Having exposed his protagonist to three existential tests of compassionate fellow feeling (to Natasha, Andy, and Gary), Heyns ends his convoluted introspection by insisting on the most paradoxical relationship of all: Terence’s closeness to the homeless Andy, and his “untheoretical, inarticulate blessedness of being” (206). For Terence, a Hopkins scholar, Andy has become an embodiment of grace, that state of ‘blessedness’ beyond rational understanding that cannot be separated from – in the poet’s own words, as quoted by Terence – “‘*man’s smudge and man’s smell*’” (Hopkins, qtd in Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original). Terence has also learned to go beyond sanitised utopian projections of goodness, and accept that it cannot be separated from “man’s lived-in smell, a smell with a history, ‘*bleared, smeared with toil*’, in a manner of speaking” (Hopkins, qtd in Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original).

In compressing the crux of the novel – ambiguities of compassion, and ‘innocence versus experience’ in a world of displacement – Heyns concludes with brief references to Hopkins’s poetry, Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Thus, the novel points to the universal character of its topic, and its relevance in today’s world. Andy’s image – the image of an innocent man (an ‘idiot’) living in a tormented and tormenting world – may be an embodiment not of God’s grandeur, but a reminder of what it means to be “nothing but ‘*the thing itself, the unaccommodated man*’: the source of all doubt and the bedrock of all belief” (Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original).

Given that both Terence and Natasha have South African connections, one might ask: is *Each Mortal Thing* a ‘South African’ novel? No, it is fundamentally a novel of philosophical, religious and psychological exploration; and, although it does not have a clear-cut or happy ending, Heyns’s novel “shows how tragedies and small joys, which [...] seem unimportant, are precisely what makes life worth living” (Liebenberg 2024, n.p.). Last, but not least, it is a welcome reminder of our common humanity and connectedness, at a time of deepening international divisions and uncertainties.

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