

## Sign and Symbol in Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone*

**M**ost reviewers of Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* embrace the novel's apparatus, accepting implicitly the author's claim that she was writing something other than a prolonged beast fable. Catherine Bush, reviewing for *The Globe and Mail*, offers a representative perspective on this tale told from the point of view of elephants: "*The White Bone* is a quest story, and a novel that takes its readers into an alternate world seen through the eyes of an alien intelligence . . . Gowdy has created her own elephant lore, hymns, cosmology" (1). Similarly favourable reviews by Bill Richardson in *Quill and Quire* and Margaret Walters in the *Times Literary Supplement* also identify a quest pattern, and echo Bush's defense of Gowdy's representation of elephants: "We recognize in [the elephants] traits and peccadilloes that are our own, but they are mercifully innocent of anything that smacks of cutesy, Disney-like anthropomorphizing" (Richardson 35). Walters even goes so far as to suggest that the weaknesses of *The White Bone* lie in its occasional attempts at fable, such as when "the matriarchs' squabbles occasionally dwindle into obvious satire on humans behaving badly" (22). Such non-allegorical readings stress Gowdy's zoological scrutiny, contending that the detailing of elephant habits of eating, excreting, travelling, and mating protects the characters from signifying as human. And, as a glance at the novel's acknowledgments shows, Gowdy has indeed done her research, supplementing her extensive reading with a trip to "the Masai Mara so that [she] might see the African elephant in its natural home" (330). Reviewers of *The White Bone* who foreground its description of physical behaviour comprehend the animal characters as animals: even if "the elephants do offer us

a mirror of ourselves, [it is] not a straightforward reflection but the chance to imagine ourselves as elephants rather than elephants as us” (Bush 1).

Another camp of reviewers is unwilling to disregard the novel’s allegorical properties: while Judy Edmond of *The Winnipeg Free Press* notes that “Gowdy has said she did not intend this book to be a parody or social satire along the lines of *Animal Farm* or *Watership Down*,” she argues that “Gowdy’s prose [is] so weighty with metaphor that one wonders whether *The White Bone* is meant to be understood on another level” (3). Sara Boxer of *The New York Times* is more explicit:

*The White Bone* is a big religious put-on, an elephantine *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The white elephant bone at the center of the book is a relic that everyone believes will point to the “Safe Place.” The elephants, fearful that uttering the name of the bone will weaken it, call it “the that-way bone” (sounds like “the Jahweh bone”). The elephants’ trek is a test of their faith in the face of drought and bounty hunters. When Date Bed, a Christ figure, picks up a rearview mirror, it is a lesson in vanity. And those monstrous female names are not so different from Prudence, Piety, Chastity and Discretion. (7)

The issue for Boxer is not that Gowdy’s characters are animals; Boxer is most absorbed by those sections of *The White Bone* that describe the finer points of the elephants’ material/corporeal existence. She is annoyed by Gowdy’s apparent references to “another level” of interpretation. That Gowdy’s elephants act like elephants is, for Boxer, not enough to counteract their role in an allegorical story.

The uncertainty regarding *The White Bone*’s standing as allegory (or otherwise) is only partially a matter of Gowdy’s declarations on the subject. According to medieval narrative tradition, the four levels of interpretation associated with allegory are: the literal level of interpretation, which operates as a textual “veil”; the moral or tropological level, a didactic level that may be read for lessons about individual behaviour; the allegorical level, whose lessons are lessons of belief rather than behaviour and that apply more generally; and, finally, the anagogical level, which points to the universal sign of God. Despite its engagement with metaphysics, the novel’s literal level of interpretation does not appear to function as a textual veil for either a moral or an allegorical level of interpretation. Gowdy is certainly not providing the didactic lessons for individual behaviour that are in keeping with the moral allegory, and even the ecological grounding of *The White Bone*, which is surely engaged with ethics, cannot be read as a coherent doctrine. In other words, while the depiction of the slaughter of animals is ethically and environmentally charged, Gowdy’s literal story does not mandate

for a particular code of human conduct or order of beliefs. Her zoological emphasis praised by reviewers precludes such mandating, since the behaviour of the elephants cannot serve as a code for the behaviour of humans.

Still, *The White Bone's* concern with names and naming, the reading of signs, and the processes of mourning are all associated with the concerns of the allegorical text, in particular the contemporary or postmodern allegorical text. The elephants' naming procedure, which entails the marking of and "surrender to" (21) personality traits, together with the species' reliance on an elaborate system of "links," recalls Deborah Madsen's assertion that "Interpretation is represented as the subject of allegorical narratives" (135). Further, the portrayal of Tall Time's increasing disbelief in the veracity of the "links," his alarm at "the sickening prospect that everything exists for the purpose of pointing to something else" (135), is associated with the so-called "revival" (Smith 105) of allegory initiated by critics of modernism and postmodernism. Paul Smith argues that critical insistence on "the nature of allegory to stress discontinuity and to remark the irremediable distance between representation and idea" (106) has led to the recovery of "allegory as a privileged form of discourse in postmodern artistic practice and theory" (106). Finally, *The White Bone's* ironic genealogy, which describes a family's diminishment instead of growth, seems related to Walter Benjamin's conception of the allegory as ruin, as "in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay" (178).

Even without engaging the moral or allegorical levels of interpretation, *The White Bone* does appear to point to the presence of an anagogue. The thematizing of the spiritual and the metaphysical, which occurs as a supplement to the zoological scrutiny, indicates a level of fixed meaning onto which literal referents may be translated. Thus, the legend of "the Descent," which tells of "a starving bull and cow [that] killed and ate a gazelle and in doing so broke the first and most sacred law 'You shall eat no creature, living or dead'" (7), signals that Gowdy is working explicitly within (and against) a Judeo-Christian framework.<sup>1</sup> In her conception of the elephant visionary, defined in the novel's glossary as "A cow or cow calf who is capable of seeing both the future and the distant present" (xvi), Gowdy presupposes an interpretive activity both transparent and fixed. Mud's role as her family's visionary forces her to come to terms with Torrent's conviction that "nothing want[s] substance until it is envisioned—'Once envisioned,' he said, 'it is obliged to transpire'" (82). And, as Boxer registers, Gowdy's ele-

phant mythology includes figures that represent the universal sign. Boxer notes “Date Bed, a Christ figure,” although for a discussion of the anagogic level of interpretation, it is more fruitful to consider how the figure of “the She” operates as a sign for God’s persona. The tension between the narrative function of “the She” and that of Date Bed marks *The White Bone* as an imperfect or possibly postmodern allegory, in that the force of the symbol undermines the anagogic sign.

In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man rehearses the historical distinction between symbol and allegory: “[the romantic] valorization of symbol at the expense of allegory . . . appeal[s] to the infinity of a totality [that] constitutes the main attraction of the symbol as opposed to allegory, a sign that refers to one specific meaning and thus exhausts its suggestive potentials once it has been deciphered” (188). For Gowdy, a distrust of the reciprocal relationship between sign and meaning associated with traditional allegory initiates a postmodern adjustment. Madsen explains that true allegory should be thought of “as the quest for a transcendental center or origin of meaning—an absolute—in terms of which narrative truth will become legible” (135). The first clue that the sign of “the She” is not such “an absolute” is that its apparent function as such is never veiled: as the narrator asserts, “Ask the big cows to account for any mystery and they will answer, ‘Thus spake the She’” (23). Much of the novel is concerned with contesting blind faith in the ways of “the She” and, by extension, the Judeo-Christian framework. In postmodern fashion, the thematic exploration of how absolute reliance on a rigid faith system is a potential danger to the elephant psyche is also a lesson for the reader about how to interpret the text. Just as the elephants, in particular Mud, must learn to develop a faith that operates outside a religious system, so too must the reader accept the somewhat paradoxical narrative mandate that, although some of the elephant mythology resembles or inverts human myths, to read the novel only in terms of a one-to-one relationship between animals and humans is to succumb to the lure of uncomplicated, though overly static, reading system. Gowdy rejects reading practices associated with traditional allegory and with fixed systems by valorizing a Christ figure not as part of an allegorical pre-text but as part of a symbolic order in which other uncontrolled levels of meaning are suggested.

Date Bed’s symbolic, as opposed to signifying, status comes into focus when her role is compared to that of the white bone itself. As Hail Stones recounts, the legend of the white bone emerged after a period known as “the darkness,” during which, in the face of drought and slaughter, all

seemed lost for the elephant species. The white bone, a newborn elephant's rib bleached by the sun, "radiated toward all living creatures a quality of forgiveness and hope," (43) and could reveal a Safe Place to any elephant who found it and "believe[d] in its power" (44). The white bone belongs to the same diegetical system of myth as "the She," and is vulnerable to the same skeptical understanding. The hackneyed construction of the elephant mythology, with its various inversions and parodies, might suggest *The White Bone* is an allegory for the failure of religion altogether. However, the symbolic value of Date Bed as a Christ figure has a dual function. Gowdy's development of a symbol undermines the authority of a fixed anagogue in the true allegory while the symbol of the sacred defuses the reader's sense of an unqualified attack on faith.

Gowdy's characterization of Tall Time reflects the ruptured allegory, especially as postmodernists have taken up this imperfect form. Smith differentiates between the allegory with which Madsen is concerned and the contemporary allegory in which "a shared referential, metasemantic system such as was available to mediaeval allegorists and their audience is not commonly held by readers . . . so [that] one has to be constructed or invented in the act of reading itself" (107). Craig Owens also focuses on this aspect of the contemporary allegory, arguing that "the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading" (223). Thematizing reading an indeterminate system, or, as de Man would assert, thematizing the failure of such readings (*Allegories* 205), designates the postmodern allegory. Tall Time marks these interests in *The White Bone*, as he is often portrayed in the process of obsessive allegorizing. The narrator explains, "It was a comfort for [Tall Time] to discover that his birth mother had died as a result of a specific circumstance—that, with vigilance, such deaths could be avoided. He became a student of signs, omens and superstitions, or "links," as all three are often referred to" (49). Tall Time's comfort level is greatly disturbed not only by the idea that the links might be infinite (135), but even more so by his increasing sense that the links are meaningless (157). Tall Time eventually cures himself of his allegoresis<sup>2</sup>, his tendency towards excessive interpretation, and decides to follow the directions of Torrent rather than those suggested by the links: "Not once, in thirty years of being guided by the speechless messages of his surroundings did he ever feel this certain. There is a membrane of moonlight on the ground, bats flare up, terrible omens he strides through as if in defiance of a natural law" (299). Although Tall Time's catharsis is a postmodern

deterrent to reading the novel as simply a series of links defining the human world via an allegorical system, Gowdy does not allow the dilemma of interpretation to be easily resolved. In the paragraph following the portrait of Tall Time's newly unencumbered sense of his place in his world, Gowdy describes his ironic death by gunshot, suggesting that the real dread of abandoning an interpretive system founded on omnipotent permanence is that, without one, tragedy may appear meaningless.

Though *The White Bone* is not using Christianity as an unproblematic analogic pre-text, Gowdy is absorbed by Christian symbols of sacredness and salvation, and by such myths as that of the Fall, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Apocalypse. In distinguishing between signs of Christianity and the symbol of Christ, Gowdy's work recalls feminist theologians reformulating the symbol of Christ. In *To Change the World*, Rosemary Ruether notes that, although "Christology has been the doctrine of the Christian tradition that has been most frequently used against women" (45), it is precisely by considering "alternative models of christology" (47) that feminists can reconcile themselves with the Christian church. As Maryanne Stevens points out in her preface to *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*, the essays contained in the volume all discuss such "alternative models," figuring Christ as a symbol for "universality and inclusivity," (3) for "radical stubbornness," (3) in his status as a "stranger; outcast, hungry, weak, and poor," (4) and as a "trickster who dismantles our categories and peels us open to new depths of humanity" (5).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Gowdy's corpus detects the sacred in non-traditional realms, such as those of worldly/bodily experience as opposed to those of myth, and on the margins of "normal" behaviour. Her fashioning of the sacred symbol is part of a trend in Canadian literature and culture surveyed by William Closson James in *Locations of the Sacred*. In his preface, James states that, "even as fiction relocates the sacred from its older abode beyond the earth to some place or other within ordinary experience, so the broader cultural scene provides evidence that the sacred may be found at the boundaries and margins rather than at the centre, at points of crisis and limit rather than in the continuities of the conventional" (ix). James goes on to argue that "The religious meaning of fiction cannot be determined or measured by the degree to which its subject is overtly religious, nor by the extent to which it espouses a view of life congenial to some religious outlook or other" (33). By James' definition of "religiousness," which he asserts is "derive[d] from [a novel's] concern with ultimate questions of meaning, truth and value" (33), Gowdy's work

may be considered religious and, I would argue, Christological<sup>4</sup> as opposed to Christian in that she explores how faith might proceed outside the limits of particular religious practice.

To determine the features of Gowdy's Christology, the way the sign of the white bone differs from the symbolic value attached to Date Bed must be considered. As noted, the first mention of the white bone is made by Hail Stones, who recounts what he knows of it to the She-S family "using the formal diction" (42). Hail Stones frames this almost ceremonial narrative by citing Rancid as his own family's source for the story (41), and concludes by conceding that "We [the She-Ds] never did learn how Rancid came by the legend . . . He died before we could ask. But we did not doubt him" (44). The She-Ss also decide to believe to this version of "the legend" and to take up the quest for the white bone. However, Rancid's counsel that the white bone will "always [surface] within a circle of boulders or termite mounds to the west of whatever hills are in the region" (44) is not the only account circulating around The Domain. Tall Time, who has been told by Torrent to "go to the most barren places and the hills and to look for an extremely large standing feast tree" (142), is "taken aback" by She-Boom's profession that "THE SHE-L'S' AND 'L'S SAID IT WILL BE FOUND NEAR A WINDING RIVERBED NORTHEAST OF A RANGE OF HILLS" (142). The conflicting accounts of the white bone's whereabouts reflect Gowdy's interrogation of blind faith's reliance on an ever-receding truth-source. Torrent explains to Tall Time that "Faith is not trust in the known" (157), and even Torrent's version of the white bone story is marked as third-hand (142).<sup>5</sup>

Early on in *The White Bone*, Gowdy discusses the importance of cultural transmission amongst the elephant community:

the Long Rains Massive Gathering . . . is the great annual celebration to which upwards of forty families journey to feast together and hear the news and sing the endless songs (those exceeding five hundred verses) . . . So much is bound to happen, in fact, that cows arriving at a gathering customarily greet each other by declaring their chief intention (next to eating, of course): "I come to seduce." "I come to gossip." "I come to enlighten" (8).

The transmission of culture through song most powerfully connects the elephant families to one another when they are dispersed throughout The Domain; the songs take up such activity as birthing, "delirium" or oestrus, thanksgiving, and, especially, mourning. In keeping with the superstitious nature of many of the elephants, some songs have developed as "link" songs, which function as mnemonic warnings. After the slaughter at Blood

Swamp, Mud finds comfort in one of Tall Time's link songs: "Except in the cases of berries and specks / Blue blesses calves and the peak-headed sex / Eat a blue stone and for two days and nights/ Those who would harm you are thwarted by rights" (94). The link songs differ from songs of birthing or mourning, and are like the various accounts of the white bone, in that their circulation defers spiritual energy on to material objects. The dubiousness of this deferral is brought into focus in the chapter that describes Date Bed's death, and in which both her attempts to make use of a mnemonic guide to find the She-S-and-S family, and to mobilize the power of the white bone fail. In panic, the elephants mistakenly depend on the value of external, arbitrary, and metonymic signs, for as Tall Time must admit, "the white bone is itself a link" (156). In her characterization of Date Bed, however, Gowdy suggests an alternative, more metaphoric, manner of conceiving the sacred.

Although the white bone makes even Date Bed susceptible to the hazards of superstition<sup>6</sup>, she is initially distinguishable by her interest in logic. Mud thinks that, when the time comes, Date Bed should be given the cow name "She-Studies" (24). The narrator describes Date Bed's unusual curiosity about cow remedies:

Before she learned not to, [Date Bed] would ask the cows why one treatment was chosen over another, why the ingredients deviated from the standard mixture, and the answer was always a variation of "That's what works," which even as a small calf Date Bed heard as a variation of "Thus spake the She." To her frustration nobody, not even the eminent She-Purges, was interested in the logic behind the remedy. (107)

Date Bed's "supreme" interest in logic (107) is identified as troubling for the nurse cows, who feel that to inquire into finer points of a remedy is "to tamper with their power and offend the She" (108). For Date Bed, however, healing is more a matter of resourcefulness and reason than blind faith: she reasons that she can use a fire to cauterize her bullet wound in the absence of the standard warthog urine or hyena dung (108). Date Bed is also the only elephant character in the novel depicted as having an explicit "idea," that of attracting eagle scouts with the Thing (179), as opposed to functioning only according to habit, duty or distress. Date Bed's logic, however, does not keep her from expressing her faith in spiritual energy; directly after healing herself she "murmurs a song of thanksgiving" directed towards the loving-kindness of the She (109–10). Gowdy privileges a belief system whose energy is primarily situated in the individual mind; Date Bed's acknowledgment of the She is an acknowledgment of her own ingenuity.



The scene's literal representation of malady and healing emphasizes an important aspect of the sacred symbol, which will manifest itself as a process of psychic healing in the surviving members of the She-S family. The depiction of Date Bed's logic and her will to heal is associated with another aspect of her character crucial to Gowdy's Christology: Date Bed's facility with unusual forms of communication. Date Bed is a remarkably adept mind talker, able not only to hear the thoughts of other creatures but to converse with them; she is even able to gain information from a cluster of flies, despite the norm that "Mind talkers and insects don't communicate, so there is no point in asking [them for help]" (110). Date Bed's skills are set in relief against the strained discourse that takes place among the rest of her family, whose infighting and petty silences add bitterness to their grief, and against the difficulty Tall Time has communicating with the brusque We-Fs. During their trek toward the Second Safe Place (as it is called by the We-Fs), Tall Time realizes that "it is no use asking Sink Hole where they are going, or even when they will be stopping for the day, such questions invariably being met with an odour of disapproval so powerful it burns the inside of [his] trunk" (289). The two bulls' failure to make contact, culminating in Sink Hole's taking literally Tall Time's petulant order that Sink Hole leave him alone (291), results in their permanent separation and, metaphorically, in Tall Time's death. The capacity for communication is thus granted sacred value as it provides a possible avenue for literal and figurative salvation.

When Mud becomes the family's mind talker, a transformation that conclusively signals Date Bed's death, her initial response is to disregard the sacred value of communication that typified Date Bed's handling of the gift. Mud is not interested in conversing with other species: "What [the giraffes, impalas and oryxes] call themselves [she] doesn't know, she never bothered to ask Date Bed, and not knowing, she can't conceive of addressing them. Besides, why should she?" (309) Mud similarly dismisses her own family's grief, having become freshly obsessed with the search for the white bone and oddly resentful of the time wasted on the search for Date Bed (307). Mud shows her terrible single-mindedness when she promises her newborn to Me-Me, and only after She-Snorts has saved Bolt by killing Me-Me is Mud shaken from this dangerous fixation. Mud's newborn metaphorically resurrects Date Bed, having been born exactly where Date Bed died, and at a moment marked by a bolt of lightning (322). Mud's catharsis allows her finally to grieve Date Bed, "this beloved name a requiem for every loss of her life, from her birth mother to her birth name to Date Bed to the brief, dream-

like loss of herself”(324). The catharsis also reveals to Mud the difference between the Safe Place, which is merely an allegorical sign, and symbolic salvation, which for Mud is love. Once Mud has become “herself” again she is finally able to cultivate her new gift; Mud’s first success at mind talking with another species is the dialogue she has with Date Bed’s beloved mon-gooses, who point out the direction indicated by Date Bed’s throwing of the “that way” bone (326). Mud, however, is no longer consumed with the idea of the Safe Place; rather she “is weak with love”(327) for her daughter.

In contrast to the allegorical sign of the white bone, the sacred symbol does not guide; at most Date Bed offers others a catalyst for self-recognition. The issue of identity is raised in Chapter One, during Mud’s renaming ceremony. As is to be expected, Date Bed ruminates most extensively on how the process of naming is bound up with the issue of identity. With reference to the renaming ceremony, Date Bed states:

“it seems to me that unless they regard you as a future nurse cow, they choose a name that will antagonize you . . . They hope that by provoking you, you’ll eventually prove them wrong. A misguided strategy, in my opinion. More often than not, cows surrender to their names.”(21)

Certainly, the cow names that give reviewer Sara Boxer so much trouble are useful shorthands for the superficial behaviour of such characters as She-Screams or I-Flirt. However, far from confirming a traditional allegory, such overly suggestive names reveal Gowdy’s rejection of allegory’s mandates; the portrayal of She-Screams as domineering, intrusive and very, very loud makes plain the problem of acting according to a static sense of identity, of being controlled by a sign of one’s self. Date Bed’s later reflections about names suggest that this sort of “surrender” serves only to mask one’s true and sacred identity.

As Date Bed approaches her death, her thoughts about identity become more insistent and profound. After realizing that her memory is growing dimmer, she fastidiously works at retrieving the details from out of her shadow memories, believing that each retrieval represents an extension of her life (270). Date Bed’s earlier notion that identity is related to the external sign of a name, whereby in the end “you are the measure of what your cow name has come to signify”(271), is replaced by her “hunch that you are the sum of those incidents only you can testify to, whose existence, without you, would have no earthly acknowledgment”(271). This realization is another crucial feature of Gowdy’s Christology; perhaps more than a healer, the sacred figure is witness to the crises of annihilation that threaten herself and/or those who love her.

In their introduction to *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub specify one of the central features of “eye-witness” accounts:

Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, non-interchangeable and solitary burden . . . To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude. (3)

The assertion that, in the face of trauma, the subject is forced back in on his or herself, is similar to the idea suggested by Date Bed’s “hunch.” The witness is necessarily singular, and his or her identity is specified by that which only he or she has seen. While Date Bed’s role in *The White Bone* is that of the sacred witness, all the surviving characters in the novel are forced to take up the “burden of the witness,” a burden that not only transforms each individual, but also produces an epistemological chasm between them. In response to She-Soothe’s claim that she “knows” Date Bed, She-Snorts states, “You don’t. You can’t, not any longer. None of us are who we were” (306).

She-Snorts’ words reflect the paradox of Gowdy’s concern with individual identity. Gowdy’s plot tracks the regenerating processes of self-recognition. Her work is preoccupied with the celebration of peculiarity, especially the particularity of experience that produces the subject, and unique expressions of love. But her work also investigates such negative aspects of individualism as vanity and the inability to communicate. In *The White Bone*, many of the negative features of individualism are aggravated by those traumatic incidents that isolate the witness. Date Bed’s role is to solve this paradox; as a Christ figure, she assumes the solitary burden of the witness and provides a catalyst for renewal by acknowledging the uniqueness of love. The circumstances of her dying days, however, make it difficult for Date Bed to “transgress” her isolation. Although she bequeaths her ability to mind talk to Mud, as well as many of her species’ songs to the mongooses, Date Bed’s role as a sacred witness to “outrage” (Felman 4) is jeopardized because her dying entails draining her perfect memory and thus a potential rupture of identity.

The preface to *The White Bone* is taken up with the issue of elephant memory and its complex relationship to identity. The narrator points out that “Some [elephants] go so far as to claim that under that thunderhead of flesh and those huge rolling bones they *are* memory” (1) and, later in the narrative, the matriarch of the She-Ds further explicates this claim. She-Demand’s position, however, that elephants *are* memory in so far as they are the “living” memories of the She (83), is displayed as another problem-

atic manifestation of blind faith. After the slaughter at Blood Swamp, Date Bed considers the fate of her species, wondering whether its ordeals might be either a test or a punishment from the She: "And then, recalling She-Demands' final sermon, she thinks, 'We are being remembered,' and this strikes her as a more terrible prospect than the other two because it is unassailable"(104). Date Bed's associations of memory and the force of doom is further complicated by the narrator's assertion that the species is actually "doomed without [memory]. When their memories begin to drain, their bodies go into decline, as if from a slow leakage of blood"(1). This two-sided nature of elephant memory is another complicating feature of Gowdy's representation of the sacred witness. The species is doomed without memory. Like other persecuted groups, who "must *survive* in order to bear witness, and . . . must bear witness in order to affirm . . . survival"(Felman 117), the elephants depend on preserving and regenerating individual and collective memory. For this reason, the species is committed to activities such as mourning their dead, singing the Endless songs, reiterating their lore, and the scrupulous "noticing" of the world around them (1-2).

However, the phenomenon of being remembered, or witnessed, is a "terrible prospect"(104), both because it exposes the persona of the She as entirely and terribly separate, and because it seems to presuppose doom. Throughout the novel, being witnessed is often equated with death. As a visionary, Mud is saddled with various images of slaughter and death, including her vision of the massacre of the She-D family, which precedes the She-S's encounter with the survivors. Equally disturbingly, Mud witnesses the dead body of She-Screams several days before She-Screams falls over the rock ledge; Mud is struck by the "cruelly pathetic" fact that she must now comprehend all of She-Screams' ludicrous behaviour in light of a memory of her death (183). This aspect of memory, for many elephants, makes the act of bearing witness taboo: as She-Snorts scolds Mud, "A death vision is the burden of the visionary alone"(239). Various questions then arise: how is spiritual regeneration possible without the sharing of memory? How is the apocalyptic moment salvaged from the crisis of annihilation? How much of Date Bed's sacredness, her identity, has survived in Mud without the act of bearing witness?

Gowdy's response to these questions entails a return to ruptured allegory, in which all interpretive signs are revealed as necessarily indeterminate. As Date Bed's health worsens, her memories begin to be replaced by what she calls "hallucinations," visions of things she has never witnessed. Date Bed's hallucinations include her sense of "walking in an immense cavern where it

is somehow as bright as midday, and on each side of her, in phenomenally straight rows, stacks of strange fruits . . . glide by”(160); of a “wall, twice as high as she is and three times her width” on which “life unfolds . . . in jerks and flashes as if it were the shifting scene of someone else’s memory”(179); and of “A conical green tree bristling with short thorns and laden in what appear to be sparkling fruits or flowers”(279). Date Bed’s witnessing of the supermarket, the movie screen, and the Christmas tree reflect Gowdy’s brief foray into the explicitly tropological or moral level of interpretation, as human reality is directly juxtaposed with elephant reality. Date Bed considers that, just as such visions may be the “lost memories of a creature from a place unknown,” her own draining memory might “have entered the body of some strange, doomed creature who, like her, is enthralled by the scenes unfolding in its mind”(274). In other words, humanity is facing the same crisis of annihilation as the elephant species and the only way to transform such a crisis is to compare and embrace different realities. Clearly, however, such transformation depends upon a fairly precarious set of circumstances, as even the elephants themselves have difficulties understanding one another. According to Gowdy’s construction of the pitfalls of self-recognition and the generally destructive relationships between species, the salvaging of the apocalyptic moment seems rather unlikely.

Still, beyond Gowdy’s pessimistic view of social behaviour is the sacred symbol that represents love. That the sacred is a compound of suggestions rather than a controlled sign signals Gowdy’s postmodern approach to allegory. Further, the indeterminacy and variousness with which Gowdy imagines love dulls the intensity of her social pessimism and makes room for a renewed faith. In the final scene of *The White Bone*, Mud has developed enough self-awareness to shed her anxiety about belonging to a family compact and, “out of contrition,” to acknowledge the numerous guises of love (327). And while Mud has had a vision of the Safe Place, “in which she recognized nobody,” she chooses not to “speculate”(327) about this falsely remembered sign. Such visions belong to a system of dubious links, blind faith, and the bitterness of fear. Rather, Mud regularly looks behind her to notice the trace of where her family has been, “the dust raised by their passage rolling out as far as the horizon”(327). This witnessing “of passage” is threatened by the apocalyptic crisis, and is recovered by the sacred confirmation of love.

During an interview with Jana Siciliano, Gowdy asserted that she “didn’t want to write a novel . . . designed to shed light on human folly through animal behaviour. Rather than being a social satire, *The White Bone* is an

attempt, however presumptuous, to make a huge imaginative leap” (Interview). The novel elaborates a thematic rejection of a fixed faith system, one in which unique expressions of fear or grief or love are subsumed within a codified and “unassailable”(104) creed. Thus, the sacred renewal of the elephant families may appear to lose its force if considered as a mere sign for a lesson on human behaviour within the similarly fixed scheme of traditional allegory. In ecocritical terms, Gowdy’s avowed and thematized refutation of allegory communicates her frustration with unthinking anthropomorphism, the human practice of viewing everything in terms of itself; she questions human reluctance to place the animal at the centre of the story. Gowdy, however, does not avoid social satire as completely as she hopes to. In the scene describing Date Bed’s “hallucinations” of elements of the human world, Gowdy envisions an ill-fated elephant making the same sort of “imaginative leap” that she is attempting, representing reciprocally Gowdy’s despair for the “strange, doomed creature”(274) of her human self. In such scenes, the novel’s complex explorations of faith, memory, grief and love emerge explicitly as human concerns. *The White Bone*’s attempt at animal-centred literature is its crucial and overriding aim. While such an ecocritical novel is possible, the form seems quite limiting, Gowdy’s own declarations notwithstanding. As an instance of postmodern allegory, which inevitably and ultimately gestures towards the human, *The White Bone* enlarges its aims. The novel explicitly and convincingly solicits the reader to allow the elephants to bear witness, to regard suffering humbly as no less horrific for being alien. More implicit, and to my mind more significant, is the challenge to cultivate reciprocal awareness. Mud’s witnessing of “the dust raised by [her family’s] passage” (327), described in the last scene of the novel, models for Gowdy’s reader the human imperative to examine similarly the consequences of earthly passage, to acknowledge, for example, that “grief” and “faith” and “love” are human terms describing the often violent collisions among consciousness, body, and world. Though a postmodern rupture between human and animal persists, that rupture does not excuse a relativist setting aside of the unintelligible. Rather, attention to mutual unintelligibility, as rendered in *The White Bone*, becomes a site of reciprocity; that we can only know Mud’s “love” as “like-human love” compounds the term as symbolic, unfixed, and still imminent.

#### NOTES

- 1 Gowdy’s manipulation of Judeo-Christian myth chiefly includes her inversion of the stories of Genesis. For example, humans are represented, not as the acme of the natural

- order, but as diminutions of higher creatures (7); the world is almost destroyed, not by a flood, but by drought (43).
- 2 The term “allegoresis” is most commonly associated with medieval literature, referring to the process of interpreting texts allegorically. As J. Stephen Russell notes, “In the Middle Ages, allegory was not a mode of writing; it was the self-conscious recognition of the way we perceive see the world, replace any thing with words or other signs” (xi). Here, I am using the term to specify Tall Time’s propensity to impose meaning onto the objects in his world, to transform everything into a sign.
  - 3 Stevens is here referring to essays by Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, Jacquelyn Grant, and Eleanor McLaughlin.
  - 4 Gerald O’Collins states that the “branch of theology called Christology reflects systematically on the person, being, and doings of Jesus of Nazareth” (1). I am interested in Christology’s focus on identifying the features of the Christ symbol, especially as those features are associated with a particular ideological framework.
  - 5 Torrent explains to Tall Time that even the We-Fs have not seen the white bone directly, but that rather their “ancestors” have (70).
  - 6 Such is the case when Date Bed comes to depend unreasonably on the Thing (a car’s side-mirror that is a fragment of one of the instruments of her species’ destruction).

## WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Orborne. London: NLB, 1977.
- Boxer, Sarah. “Her Name is Mud.” Rev. of *The White Bone*, by Barbara Gowdy. *New York Times Book Review* 16 May 1999: 7–8.
- Bush, Catherine. “Pachyderms’ Progress.” Rev. of *The White Bone*, by Barbara Gowdy. *The Globe & Mail* 5 Sep. 1998: D1.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- . *Blindness and Insight*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Edmond, Judy. Rev. of *The White Bone*, by Barbara Gowdy. *Winnipeg Free Press* 27 Sep. 1998: D3.
- Felman, Shoshana & Dori Laub. *Testimony*. New York: Routledge UP, 1992.
- Gowdy, Barbara. *The White Bone*. Toronto: Harper, 1998.
- James, William Closson. *Locations of the Sacred*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1998.
- Madsen, Deborah. *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1994.
- O’Collins, Gerald. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Owens, Craig. “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism.” *Art After Modernism*. Ed. Brian Wallis. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. 203–35.
- Richardson, Bill. Rev. of *The White Bone*, by Barbara Gowdy. *Quill & Quire* Oct. 1998: 35.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *To Change the World*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981.
- Russel, J. Stephens, ed. *Allegoresis: The Craft of Allegory in Medieval Literature*. New York: Garland, 1988.
- Smith, Paul. “The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism.” *Dalhousie Review* 62 (1982) 105–22.
- Stevens, Maryanne, ed. *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*. New York: Paulist P, 1993.
- Walters, Margaret. “Hiding from the Hindleggers.” Rev. of *The White Bone*, by Barbara Gowdy. *Times Literary Supplement* 14 May 1999: 22.