

Mining Allegory and Past in Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

Michael Stone – April 23, 2007¹

Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* shows us a world whose characters live under a mountain of the past which they move through by following existing tunnels, by carving new passages, and by collapsing old shafts. By means of this extended metaphor, which informs every part of the book from its title and main passages to the most anecdotal descriptions coloring the Mexican landscape, the book allegorically invites us to consider our own path back to "where we come from". Ultimately, Desai's imagery, use of paradox, metaphor, and foreshadowing combine to lead the reader on his or her own series of zigzags toward the ultimate conclusion that preserving communal access to the past is a moral imperative that, when violated, fills the community with shadowed souls and haunted minds. However, all this lies beneath us, waiting to be unearthed. Let us return to the present issue of understanding Desai's writing.

First, why is the most important image in the book that of the "past" as a mine, as layers of sediment to be tunnelled through, or more abstractly, as a darkened stilled space to be "descended" into? One reason is that it is the focus of many² of the most prominent passages in the book. More important than the metaphor's appearance in these passages, however, is the transformation that it undergoes in them. More specifically, these passages progressively amplify the importance of the past's sedimentary nature to the point where it attains both instrumental and moral significance for the characters themselves, specifically Eric and Doña Vera. To appreciate this transition, let us begin by examining the first appearance of interaction with the past, which occurs in the abstract and ironic epigraph with which Desai begins the book's first chapter:

The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past.

Time is a Ladder (1)

On first reading, this paradoxical proverb's abstraction and lack of context combine with the formal artistic elements of its presentation on the page to relegate it to the role of "the thing one must flip through to get to the story". However, to stop with this snap judgement, even given how carefully Desai has led the reader to it, would be to fail to recognize the line's true *framing* effect, by which it sets the tone for all the material that follows it.

Hidden inside this reaction is a carefully crafted irony that demonstrates how important both this line and its message are. Desai has begun a book about descending into the past with a masterfully placed line that constructs exactly this image in a way that causes the image to immediately slip from the reader's consciousness as the page is turned to begin reading the story. Furthermore, this construction is only

¹ Thanks to Peter Schmidt, Mark Skinner, and Serena Le for many fruitful conversations on the subject of this paper.

² For easy reference, I have termed these passages *Time is a Ladder* (1), *Raw Materials* (27–29), *Discovering the Zigzag Way* (68), *Comprehending Purpose* (83–84), *The Cathedral Scene* (95–27), and *The Creation Story of the Huichol* (137).

apparent in *hindsight*, i.e. when reflecting on the past after finishing the book. Thus we see that Desai has, from the very start, engineered the reading experience to support and reward such reflection.

After examining the book's first mention of motion into the past, the next logical scene to explore is Eric's first sudden descent into the past, which occurs in a passage that I dub *Raw Materials* and which begins on page 27. In this passage, Eric's attention is snagged in the midst of Doña Vera's otherwise incomprehensible lecture (recall that Eric speaks no Spanish) by the names of the mines in which his grandfather Davey worked (28) and which were "buried" in his mind like "flake[s] of golden nonsense" (137) waiting to be unearthed. Describing the experience as being like that of "stumbling into a rabbit hole" (27), the narrator relates how Eric is forced to plumb the depths of his memories to understand his connection to the mines. Eventually, he decides to act on his new-found recognition of the names of the mines by looking them up on a map so that he may "try to unearth the connections, burrow through a tunnel back into the old country to the old man..." (29), thus creating a tentative plan to look further back into the past by means of established historical documentation.

While there are many important and puzzling features of this passage that I am not going to discuss presently, there are three features that do need to be recognized now. First, there is the apparently coincidental nature of the string of events that led Eric to this moment of recognition. The remainder of the book will severely test the notion of "coincidence" as "chance occurrence" and will ultimately replace it with a more primitive geometric notion of "coincidence" derived from the adjective "co-incident" as it is used to describe two lines or rays which are mutually incident and which form one corner of a zigzag. Second, there is the offhand thought that occurs to Eric to the effect that "perhaps memories and nostalgia had to be abandoned, like excess baggage, if one was to complete the experience his father had had of emigration and a new beginning in a New World" (29). This remark will figure heavily in my interpretation of the "ore" that our characters might be mining. Finally, to return to our development of the image of motion into the past, we should notice the connotations applied to that image by the passage; more specifically, the way that Eric formulates the description of his plan to explore his family's past in terms of tunnelling as an afterthought to the more natural description of this activity in terms of his professional skills as a historian and anthropologist.

With that introduction to the idea of motion into the past, let us examine the next prominent usage of the image. Intriguingly, this usage occurs in the passage containing the book's first usage of the key word "zigzag". Desai writes:

...[the tenateros] walk in a zigzag direction because they have found from long experience that their respiration is less impeded when they traverse obliquely the current of air which enters the pits from without.

At this point he laid the book across his chest to face unimpeded that same current of air as had met the miners, forcing them to adopt the lurching, zigzag motion that he felt he had been, throughout his journey, imitating. Was this the world his grandfather had found when he crossed the ocean and sought out new territory where he might stake his claim? The effort to enter that past, as if it were a mine that no light pierced and where no air circulated, exhausted Eric and he gave himself up to sleep, gratefully.

Discovering the Zigzag Way (68)

As we can see, this passage brings the issue of motion into the past squarely into the book's focus. Though it begins with a recapitulation of Eric's sensations and thoughts as he lies in the Hacienda de la Soledad struggling for sleep, the passage rapidly evolves as Eric is spurred to reflect on the parallels between his motion on his journey and that of the weighed-down Indian silver miners.

Consider the paradoxical resonance that Eric notices between the miners' physical step-by-step "zigzag motion" and his own meandering attempts "to enter that past, as if it were a mine". The simile is peculiar because it ambiguously crosses the literal/figurative boundary to link the miner's physical zigzag motion in the mines with two different kinds of Eric's motion. This peculiarity inspires a key question: **what connection is there between carrying ore out of a silver mine and either Eric's physical travels through Mexico or his metaphorical "motion" into the past and into his ancestors' lives?** Answering this fundamental question will occupy me for much of the rest of this paper. However, we can begin to address it by analyzing the shared imagery and motifs of darkness and light, air and suffocation, bearing heavy loads, and entering mines that connect this passage with the rest of the book.

Let's start with the binary of light and darkness, which is prominent in many of Desai's descriptions, including here in *Discovering the Zigzag Way*, in the *Cathedral Scene*, and in Doña Vera's descriptions of the countryside surrounding the Cathedral.

In the *Cathedral Scene*, we see sinister language which describes a "coffin"-like darkness (95) inside the Cathedral which, Eric observes in passing, possesses a "gelid solidity" and a "thickness as of blood, or drugged sleep" (95). This darkness is strongly contrasted with both the "bright, bleak chapels of the north" (96) and the "blinding" Mexican light (59, 139) which "struck more whitely, electrically, than he had ever seen" (21) and which sears the landscape and the Cathedral's facade.

This comparison of language vividly demonstrates two different dialectically related visions Desai has of which parts of the world are solid, tangible, and real and which parts are illusionary, mirage-like, or unreal. Basically, Desai is saying that outside, in the vast bright landscape, the uninterrupted extents of the sky, land, and light are the solid forms upon which the mirages of human scenes "fossilize", "ripple", and "stream" (36-37, 157). Inside, however, it is the interruptions of the darkness – the scintillating bursts of accumulated human expression (96) layered on top of and sometimes mixing with one another across space

and time (96) which are the most tangible reality.

In terms of Desai's mine metaphor, Eric is leaving behind a bright, open, exterior space that is devoid of human potential (that seems to support only solitude) in order to enter a dark, interior space in which a human past can be seen and touched, where human concerns overwhelm nature, and where he has some hope of retracing the "old passage" (83) containing the "tracks" (80) that piqued his curiosity.

We might wonder, however, if this this interpretation of the connotations of light and darkness only works for Eric or if it can be successfully applied throughout the book. To answer this question, let's examine Doña Vera's experience of the solitude of the "sun-drenched" mesa and its nearby mines. First, as Eric roughly perceives (82–83), Doña Vera is actively seeking out solitude (57) and freedom from her past life. Hence she is overjoyed and exhilarated to find the Hacienda de la Soledad as a "graveyard of history" (58) surrounded by "parched land with the wind roaring like an unimpeded flood through its emptiness" (59). Since Doña Vera herself comments on how she has found her "refuge" (54) from history in the bright extremes of the landscape and since her nightmares (which so far constitute her main interaction with the past) take place most powerfully when the sun is no longer around to hold her memories as bay, we have an initial confirmation of this analysis' applicability to Desai's general usage of the imagery of light and darkness.

Even more convincing (though equally more complicated) evidence which further illustrates the connotations that Doña Vera associates with light and darkness arises in her exploration of the "abandoned excavations" and "ruined entrances to shafts and tunnels" that are the remains of Roderigo's mining estate (59). Specifically, it is while exploring these *closed-off tunnels*, while searching for abandoned traces of the area's mining past, that Doña Vera encounters the most powerfully described darkness in the book. Desai writes:

The silence was so intense that she could hear the wings of the *zopilotes* circling watchfully above on currents of air; she had to imagine the sounds the mountain must once have contained... She felt certain their echoes must still resound, and seeing the dark eye of a cave in the mountainside, entered it in the desire to hear that pounding and beating for herself. Perhaps even the hoofs of Zapata's horses, carrying the message of the Revolution: "*Tierra y Libertad!*" Taking a few steps into that darkness, she was brought to a standstill by the total absence of light. Not a chink, not a shaft, and not the possibility of one: it could only grow darker, blacker, more totally. Still, she stood waiting to see if something would materialize — an eye that watched, a movement...

Sounds of the Revolution (59)

The purest darkness in the book thus signifies to Doña Vera the place to go to directly experience history (in this instance, represented as "echoes" of the sounds of long-ago events); furthermore, this darkness is the literally closed-off mouth of a cave or mine. (Recall how, for Eric, the linkage between past and mines was only metaphorical.)

The dual half of this moment plays itself out when Doña Vera, having returned to the Hacienda after being called out of the beckoning darkness by a distraught attendant and upon “look[ing] out over a shallow lake on fire with afternoon light, and the mesa beyond” (60), responds to her experience by shouting out “*Tierra y Libertad!*” into the emptiness of the view before her. To simplify, this anecdote contrasts Doña Vera’s interpretation of closed-off tunnels as leading to intense experiences of the past with her vision of open, bright mesas as exemplars the freedom of “space; of movement” that Eric later attributes to her as he ponders her seeming ability to escape the past (82).

The significance of this contrast is that it resolves the initial ambiguity in Desai’s past-mine simile between physical travels and metaphorical motion by giving us a linkage constructed out of transitions between regions of light and darkness between the two kinds of motion. Put differently, the abrupt transitions of light and darkness correlate the equally abrupt changes in the direction of the character’s paths with motion into and out of the past, thus resolving the ambiguity.

Unfortunately, Desai’s usage of the light/dark binary provides insufficient information to interpret other features of the connection between the miner’s motion and Eric’s motion like the meanings of carrying ore, of suffocation, and the presence of a community of miners in the mine. Therefore, let us delve deeper as we seek out these images alongside the remaining occurrences of the metaphor. We may begin again in the passage I dub *Comprehending Purpose*, where Desai extends the metaphor in two crucial ways. She writes:

But now that he was following the trail of his own history, tunneling his way back into his ancestry, and the history of his ancestors, he felt for the first time the urgency — and the terror — of knowing.

Comprehending Purpose (83–84)

This line is significant because it reveals a new power of the metaphor itself – its ability to motivate Eric (who until now has been quite the dilettante). Put another way, Desai is suggesting that it’s now important to Eric that he learn about his family history *because* of the psychic mechanics of the past-mine metaphor. In contrast to the *Raw Materials* passage, where Eric coincidentally decides to do all of the things that he narrativizes in *Discovering the Zigzag Way*, this passage shows us the moment when Eric recognizes the effect that this adoption of a story has had on him - namely, that it motivates him. Said differently, it is the first time that he understands himself to be participating in his own story.

If the passage sheds new light on the nature and significance of Eric’s motion “into the past”, then it also raises dramatic questions about what the past (and the present that Eric is leaving behind) contains. For example, what is the “terror” of knowing and how does it relate to mines or to mining the past?

The key to answering this complex of questions lies in Eric’s and Doña Vera’s separate parcels of “baggage” from the past. I will develop the meaning of this “baggage” by first considering the sources of

Eric's and Doña Vera's discomfort with the past, then by analyzing the text's usages of the word, and then by synthesizing the relationship with the past-mine metaphor.

First, let's analyze what kinds of fear, doubt, and guilt have haunted the characters so far. Eric gets off lightly with some trepidation at passing through the tunnel under the mountain leading from the mesa to the "ghost town" (84) that stems from his perception of himself as an "explorer on the brink of discovery" (84). He fears and desires a change that he feels building in his relationship with his girlfriend Emily (84) and he also fears what he may discover about his grandfather's actions and motives as a foreign miner in Mexico (74). Doña Vera's case, however, is much more complicated, both by the complexity of her terrors and her motives. Eric even cites this fact when he comments that he is unable to perceive what object of her past Doña Vera is fleeing from (82–83).

What I think really happened is that Doña Vera initially saw Roderigo as offering "an opening to a foreign world" (58) through which she could escape from poverty, the cramped conditions in which she lived, and from politics which threatened to engulf her (58). Unfortunately, she found herself to be just as out of place among Mexico's social elite as she had been in Austria (53). She responded to this discomfort by escaping to the Hacienda de la Soledad, where she met and tried to ingratiate herself to the Huichol, whom she admired for their "aloofness and self-containment" (62).

Early in her tenure at the Hacienda, Doña Vera fell in love with a young Huichol man named Ramón who she cared for until he tragically died a decade after their friendship began. The loss of Ramón is one of the things that weighs most heavily on Doña Vera, who calls it the "black coyote" that "[hunts] her down at night" (71). This loss in turn figures prominently in the nightmares which cause her to doubt the "freedom" and "solitude" she has supposedly attained by escaping to the mesa:

...If she would not get into the cage, they would enclose her within stone walls instead, because the truth was this was no magical mountaintop refuge: she had tricked herself into it and was a prisoner here, there was no escape. She was being slowly suffocated to death — screaming, struggling, and suffocating. Her hands tore at the stones, and she panted — let me breathe, let me breathe, let me breathe — while heaving for breath.

Doña Vera's Nightmare (71–72)

Notice the imagery of being entombed and the way that her "refuge" can be ambiguously interpreted as either the Hacienda de la Soledad or as Roderigo himself. Either way, these nightmares are so powerful that they sometimes escape the night to "[rise] up, surrounding and nearly suffocating her again" (81) whereupon she deals with her anxiety by displacing it onto her pets. However, as she does so, she makes another Freudian slip by exclaiming, perhaps to both the dogs and to the past that is haunting her: "You are not to fol-low, hear? Go back! Now! At once!" (81).

Doña Vera is thus convincingly terrified of some event from her past that relates to both the loss of

Ramón and to the frightening military overtones of the vultures in her dream who, after marching toward her in perfect “military” (72) formation, attempt to bury her alive. However, what do we really know about this event? What connection might it have to mining and to her hatred of the *mineros* who she feels brought “de-struc-tion” (76) to “her” (64) Huichol’s way of life?

My hypothesis is that the connection I suggested above stems from guilt that Doña Vera feels towards the Huichol due to some unfulfilled obligation she bears to them. One small example of the nature of this obligation shows through when she feels guilty for refusing to market the Huichol’s wares in the city (81) because doing so would require her to assume a role from her past that she despises. The true nature of her guilt, we shall see, arises from her active suppression of her past and more specifically from her attempts to “crush” the “tracks” leading to it (80) in contrast with her more rewarding but intermittent attempts to find ways for her past to “fuse with the present” (64).

With this hypothesis in mind, it is comparatively simple to explain the connection to mining and the past-mine metaphor. In particular, Eric and André nail the connection the morning after they meet when they discuss the “many chapters” of Doña Vera’s life and of her “leaving behind one chapter, [and] starting another” (88). In their conversation, André comments on the idea of leaving behind chapters that “it is what we do... Peoples, countries. If we think about our sins, our guilt, it is a heavy baggage we carry.” (88) and they finish the thought together that as a result, “everywhere in this country one saw the stains of sacrifice; blood was inextricable from history” (89).

This view of sins and guilt as a “heavy baggage” that is “inextricable from history” brings us full circle because it connects all the passages in which the past-mine metaphor figures prominently. In *Raw Materials*, when Eric considered the relationship between abandoning “excess baggage” and finding “a new beginning in a New World” (28), he dismissed the problem when the “baggage” consisted of “memories and nostalgia” (28). In *Discovering the Zigzag Way*, Desai implicitly asked us to ponder what “weight” Eric might be loaded with. In *Doña Vera’s Nightmare*, we saw a pernicious mixture of historical weight under which Doña Vera is suffocating. What, however, is the connection with the remaining appearances of the metaphor and the end of the book?

Desai gives us a key intimation of her intent when, in the *Cathedral Scene* she writes that:

The past was alive here — crepuscular and underground, but also palpable.

Cathedral Scene (96)

This line, like the past it refers to, is *alive* with a potential that practically sparkles in the “crepuscular” light that separates (in denotation) the time near dusk or dawn between full dark and full light that in turn joins (in connotation) our characters’ physical motion and motion into the past. Notice the sheer variety of

things that “past” refers to in this passage, including saint’s lives, the ailments of parishioners, the motion of the parishioners themselves through the church, certain native traditions upon which Christianity has been layered, and the historical sins of leaders and peoples like the Nazis and the silver barons who were discussed earlier that morning. Notice that these pasts are “underground”, referring back to the mining metaphor and finally, that they are “palpable”, which suggests that Eric has reached the wall of the “tunnel” he was carving or the corner of the zigzag he was making. We might say that he has run up against the “gnomon” (or shadow-casting pillar of a sun dial) that marks the separation between “night and day, life and death” the proximity of which chilled him that morning as he learned about el Día de los Muertos(92).

Amidst this richness of opportunity for interpretation, what does Desai actually mean by claiming that the past is *alive*? The answer to this question lies in the final moments of the book that occur after Eric exits the Cathedral and after Desai finishes her detour through Betty and Davey’s lives in Mexico where she recommences with a final epigraph that I term *The Creation Story of the Huichol*.

The important idea of this epigraph is unfortunately not contained in a single line but is instead distributed over the entire page. It consists of the claim that the peyote cactus, which is sacred to the Huichol, is sacred *because* its taproots are the living “tracks” that Kauyumari (the deer spirit) had left so that “others could follow and also experience the time of their ancestors and understand where they came from and who they were.” (137).

This idea is an incredible one on which to base a book because it simultaneously locks in place a claim that exploring the past is a *morally* significant activity that is both divinely promoted and the maintenance of which is a communal responsibility. In this context, we can also make perfect sense of exactly what obligation to the Huichol Doña Vera has failed to fulfill: namely, her obligation to preserve access to the past from whence she came. From this perspective, we can also see how Desai’s characters really do “live under a mountain of the past which they move through by following existing tunnels, by carving new passages, and by collapsing old shafts” as I suggested in the paper’s introduction. We see that this metaphor actually goes to the heart of the logic of Desai’s world. All that remains is to try to understand the meaning of the “Zigzag Way” itself and of our relationship as readers to it.

Fortunately, the passage with which Desai ends the book suggests one interpretation of this relationship:

Below, in the town, the church bells began to ring. They rang and rang insistently, calling the dead back to their graves. The light grew brighter, the sun appeared, and everyone went streaming back to where they had come from.

Streaming Back (157).

Just who is “everyone” who goes “streaming” back and from whence did they come? These are unresolvable ambiguities. In their inscrutability, however, they suggest the possibility that Desai purposefully

introduced them to lead the reader through a series of zigzags back out of the mine she has constructed in the preceding pages much as a painter³ might lead a viewer's eye into the illusory depths of a landscape with a zigzagging line or the alternating lights and darks of a *répoussoir*. However, regardless of what we make of the meaning of the final line, it clearly serves to pull the book inside out and allows Desai to engulf her reader in a story of her and her reader's mutual making that commands future reflection on pain of haunting. Thus this magnificent ending directly offers the reader the opportunity to reunderstand the premise of the book by following their own "Zigzag Way" back into the mysterious place "where we come from."

Works Cited

Desai, Anita. The Zigzag Way. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004.

³ This metaphor was suggested to me by a line of praise from the San Jose Mercury News' review which suggested that "Reading Anita Desai is in a way like journeying into the heart of a painting." I lack the space to explain how well this metaphor captures the experience of reading the book.