

Thea Astley's *An Item from the Late News*: A Fictional Fifth Gospel

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THEA Astley published *An Item from the Late News* in 1982, near the middle of her seventeen-book fiction-writing career. She composed the novel, which is set in and around a dry inland town, while living in the Kuranda rainforest, one of the 'lush coast nirvanas' (3) that *Item*'s narrator Gabby Jerrold repudiates as 'green tedium' and 'the very heart of boredom' (7). The novel's critical reception has been diverse. In an early review, Greg Houghton remarked on 'the extraordinary and on the whole easily handled mythic and symbolic resonances and structures at work in the novel' (226). Dorothy Jones later analysed it as a challenge to 'the Australian male myth' (73), while Roslynn Haynes explicated the 'plethora of religious and universal imagery' centred on the protagonist Wafer as a Christ-figure (140). Indignant, however, at what he saw as 'this profanation of things sacred,' Robert Ross characterised *Item* as 'a narrative malformed, twisted and dense' (262). More recently Susan Sheridan has examined the linking in the novel of 'aggressive masculinity, nationalism, militarism, and misogyny' (81), expounded sexual and Biblical symbolism associated with Wafer and his adversary Moon, and applied René Girard's version of the scapegoat myth to Wafer's suffering and death.

My intention here is to complement considerations of 'symbolic resonances' in these studies by unravelling the descriptive and narrative abundance of *An Item from the Late News* in the light of Astley's reply to Ross's critique: 'I'm not dismissing the Christian ideals – but longing for them – and use the imagery for ironic comment' (qtd. in Ross 263). It is precisely the conflict between Wafer-as-Christ and the moribund village of Allbut, a microcosm of national

and global exploitation, sexism and violence, that imparts to *Item* the most tragic edge to be found in Astley's *œuvre*. Parallels and antitheses between the four Gospels and Wafer's story are ubiquitous in imagery, characterisation, character hierarchies, events and outcomes. I agree with Laurie Clancy and Elaine Lindsay (qtd. in Genoni 'Failed Eden' 154), that *Item*'s feminism is to be distinguished from that approximated by Gabby. In what follows, I argue that such feminism as is present is infused like the whole text with Christian symbolism and tradition, and that the ethics and spiritual hopes that Astley imbibed in her Catholic childhood are the dynamo that drives her novel. Gabby's *cri de cœur* – 'where are the te deums of my youth, the high voice at the peak of ecstasy?' (65) – articulates the longing that Astley's reply to Ross insists is her own.

Support for this claim is evident in *Item*'s opening paragraph where the oxymoron 'barbaric Christmas' establishes the gap, widening throughout the narrative, between Gabby and Gabriel, the angel of the annunciation (Luke 1:19–38). By tradition Gabriel is also the angel who proclaims Christ's birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:8–2). Gabby proceeds to reveal the incongruity – the 'grossness' – of Christmas celebrations in sweaty towns like Allbut: 'the beer-gut belchings and the rattle of schooner glasses that always discover the Christmas crib and soothe the infant with whack yoicks seem to me to have a muckworm style' (1). Two weeks in advance, Gabby begins a countdown which ends 'in the morning dark of Christmas Day' when Wafer's homicidal antagonist Moon finds him cradling the thirteen-year-old Emmie Colley in his bed 'as he might a baby' (101–02). Later at the 'Wowser' – a pub ironically named – Moon responds to barkeeper Freddie Stobo's request for 'some Christmas tunes' by singing *La muerte/ entra y sale/ de la taberna*: 'Death goes in and out of the tavern'. This extract from Federico Garcia Lorca's haunting *Poema del Cante Jondo* reminds Moon of his convalescence from drugs and yellow fever 'in a rundown brothel on the fringes of Belem' (110). These reversals, of death for birth, of the 'Wowser' for the inn of the nativity, of Wafer's body and bed for the manger, and of the Brazilian for the Judaeian Bethlehem, foreshadow the replacement of the Church festival of redemption and new life by the symbolic crucifixion of Wafer/Christ in the mock 'bullfight' with Moon that climaxes *Item*'s Christmas night.

Enriched by poetry, ritual and theology, Astley's upbringing enabled her to differentiate with Augustine between 'the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending' and the infinity of the Word, 'who abides in himself for ever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things' (*Confessions* IX. 10, trans. Pine-Coffin 197–98). It is this contrast, between the word as a sign with multiple but finite meanings, and the Word as mystery,

signifying (for Augustine) all or (for non-believers) nothing, that *Item* installs as a technique and invites readers to contemplate. Systematised and applied to the Bible as the four levels of discernment – literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical – the contrast profoundly influenced Christian ethics and the Western pre-scientific world view. *Item*'s recurrent images of circles, fire, light and darkness, moon, the communal wafer, and sapphire exploit all four levels. Expanding and deepening in step with the narrative, these figures swing back and forth between concrete vehicle – the word – and ineffable tenor – the Word – before they reach a consummation, which still is not a resolution, in the last chapter. In what follows I trace this oscillation through *Item*'s narration, image clusters and characterisations.

Circles in place and time

As artist-narrator, Gabby both visualises and verbalises characters and events. Her story's obsession with circles embodies her merging of pictures (circles as geometrical figures) with words (the narrating of circular journeys by all the characters). Circles are a fitting image for Augustine's distinction between words and the Word: as figures circles exist physically in place and time but metaphysically they denote infinity. The frequent circling in *An Item from the Late News* incorporates some of this wide-ranging significance, which, I argue, stems from Astley's early formation as a Catholic.

The journeys that circle back to Allbut without achieving any purpose reiterate the futility of physical questing. *Item*'s first chapter retraces the young Gabby's confinement to widening circles of futility as she roams Australia and the world, discarding a husband whose name she has forgotten and a chorus of lovers. Yet in a repeated board game metaphor, she has always circled back to 'Go', her parental home in Allbut. Similarly, after 'the natural arc' of the murderous Moon's global wanderings has brought him to Allbut (38), he searches for gemstone wealth 'in wide quarter-circle sweeps' (87). The carloads of prospectors who persecute Wafer likewise follow a route that ends fruitlessly at its starting point in Allbut. For most of its inhabitants Allbut is, as its name implies, 'the arse-hole of the state' (115), a desert to escape to, at best a starting point for material quests that are never to be redeemed by material gain.

Though an imperfect imitation of Christ, Wafer is the antithesis mandated by other characters' futile circles. His questing, like that of the desert fathers, is interior – the 'return to the caves' that *Item*'s epigraph from Simone Weil identifies as mankind's only hope. Despite its godless corruption and violence, and in parallel with Christ's birth into a fallen world, Wafer embraces Allbut as the perfecting of his life's circle, simultaneously the beginning and end of his

spiritual journey. His insight harmonises with the paradoxes, inspired in their turn by the ending of John Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning', that open and close T.S. Eliot's 'East Coker': 'In my beginning is my end . . . In my end is my beginning' (*Four Quartets* 196, 204). Here Eliot's influence on Astley's poetry (see *Selected Poems* 103) extends into her prose writing.

As Wafer points out, *time* is what makes physical journeying a circling useless for fulfilment. The centre of *Item*'s opening chapter is the liberation from the 'war against clocks' (7) that he demonstrates to Gabby when he heaves his watch 'in a glimmering arc smack into the lake where it made a circle bigger than itself. See? Wafer said' (2). His point, intuited from boyhood, is that humanity's struggle to control time by tabulation has caused it to make 'a circle bigger than itself' when truly '[w]e are the only movers' (148). The watch's vanishing watery circle denotes the futility of desire-driven circuits through time, which are further mirrored by the circling hands of a clock: 'Sixty seconds to the minute equals nothing' (2). Humans have no option but to look for answers outside the circles. As Eliot again puts it in 'Ash Wednesday':

Because I know that time is always time
 And place is always and only place
 And what is actual is actual only for one time
 And only for one place . . .
 Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
 Upon which to rejoice. (Canto I: 95)

A similar project has brought Wafer to Allbut.

Later in *Item* Astley improvises an Aristotelian strand of time philosophy popularised in the twentieth century by Paul Tillich, namely the notion that particular times are never lost, but exist for ever in a transcendent and eternal 'now'. Buddhist and Yogic scriptures, such as the *Dhammapada* (2) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (2. 56–57), give this insight a practical bent by insisting that the regrets and desires of the conscious self dominate when the mind follows its compulsion to dwell in the past or future, but that mindfulness, or presence in the now, is freedom. Accordingly, Wafer applies the paradoxical language of poetry and mysticism to time through assertions that collapse sequence into oneness:

For there was no flux in time, he was convinced . . . so that the
 radiance of any blossomed morning on a Thursday, say, was the same
 when his body marked Friday. (25)

‘The more I slow down,’ Wafer murmured, to Emmie more than to me, ‘the more I feel I move faster . . . Daybreak and sundown are moving so close together,’ Wafer was saying, ‘they might be one. Soon I won’t be able, not able at all, to fit myself in between.’ (77)

Midway in *Item*, when Wafer, Gabby and their young companion Emmie consider a photo that has frozen his forebears in an instant of their time, Gabby extends the idea of each moment’s perpetuity to everyone, and thereby arrives at a belief in Soul, cognate in Yogic philosophy with the *atman*, or Self:

Looking, I can’t believe that that moment is gone, stopped, finished for ever. I believe, believed, long before Wafer confirmed my wild theories for me, that the psychic energies of the Monets, the Mozarts, the Rodins are forces that keep on exploding through our world. Soul, I call it. Now I believe it’s the same for those who aren’t Mozarts or Rodins or Monets. I say as much.

No one smiles. (94)

Interviewed three years after *Item*’s publication, Astley repeated this insight in similar words as a personal belief (Interview with Jennifer Ellison 66–67; qtd. in Lindsay 96).

Item’s structure itself is circular, in that the first and last chapters consist of Gabby’s thoughts and actions when she revisits Allbut ten years after Wafer’s death. These chapters confirm her commitment to Wafer’s view of time, stated enigmatically in chapter one – ‘My watch has stopped’ (2), and clearly at the beginning of the last chapter – ‘Move on to the last square. To Now’ (199). By reporting past events in the present tense, that is as continuing to exist in the *now*, these two chapters embody the theological view of time as synchronous rather than progressive. The same play on chronology occurs in Gabby’s present-tense asides in *Item*’s internal chapters. In chapter one, references to linear time as advancing, and to personal time – or Gabby’s experience – as static, dominate her chronicle of past events: ‘Returned to Allbut, I find my parents seated over the same lunch I exploded five years before’ (6). Only the past tense of this chapter’s last sentence, ‘I was ripe for Wafer’ (8), begins to subordinate the narration to the tramlines of linear time, as Gabby recreates her journey of self-discovery.

Outer and inner circles: Moon and Wafer

The planetary and sacramental circles conjured by the antagonists’ symbolic names extend *Item*’s reimagining of Christian philosophy, art and narrative. In

the Ptolemaic cosmography that flourished in English poetry as late as *Paradise Lost*, the moon, ruler of the innermost spheres of nature, humanity and the four elements, is the planet of mutability, suffering and death. Accordingly, Moon determines much of what happens in *Item*. He makes music, and others dance to his tune (110). Venting in bursts of implacable rage, his volatile and conflicted self – Gabby compares him to a panther, tiger, wolf and serpent – reflects the randomness of the sublunary realm. Moon’s ‘lifetime of unrelenting guilt’ (102) culminates in the madness associated with the full moon: ‘the way his mad eyes pause, loon in on me’ (172).

Moon’s sphere is at the full in the ‘bullfight’ in which he wounds Wafer (120–27). The circular setting and his circling movements remind Gabby of the Roman arena, while the audience, which regards this fifty-year-old Allbut tradition as a joke (120), evokes Bosch’s paintings of the rabid, close-pressing crucifixion crowd. This is Gabby’s – and Astley’s – most savage evocation of humanity.

That the circles of Moon and Wafer form an evil-*versus*-good opposition is underlined by their actions in the Vietnam War (see Jones 76). Moon ‘wrecked three-stripe carnage that even sickened his C.O.’ (33); but stretcher-bearer Wafer saved patients who persisted in holding him in contempt (108). In Wafer’s nightmare the antagonists’ merged renditions of Lorca’s *Poema del Cante Jondo: Cerco tiene la luna/ mi amor ha muerto* (‘A circle [halo] rings the moon; my love has died’) compound his loss of Emmie with Moon’s loss of the sapphire (152–53). Applied to both, *Item*’s pervasive circles mirror the conflict between their deepest desires: Moon: ‘I want wonders for me’ (90); Wafer: ‘I do simply want to be. Just to be’ (31, 107).

Indeed, the circular associations of ‘Wafer’ are as abundant as those of ‘Moon’. Wafer’s name bespeaks both his status as an avatar of Christ and his sacramental view of the world, ‘his need to examine the quality of smallness where every spider’s web, gecko dropping, patterned an exquisite communion bread’ (29). Together, the wafer’s destiny of being broken and eaten, and Gabby’s reference to the harvest bread-breaking celebration, degraded in Allbut to the ‘oily Lammas dark’ of the ‘bullfight’ (126), point to Wafer’s vulnerability. The wafer’s whiteness connotes his relatively untroubled purity. When the distraught Emmie joins him in his bed he practices a restraint reminiscent of the chastity tests of the desert saints (for example, St Anthony) with whom he is elsewhere compared (3, 86, 190). Yet Wafer’s purity chiefly indicates that he has a more absorbing interest than sex, as both his former lover Ruth and would-be lover Gabby discover. Moon is Wafer’s opposite also in this, since his longed-for but unachieved purity and thwarted rape of Emmie motivate

his violence as much as his greed for money in a world that has ignored him. Moon's self-hatred is clearest in his near castration of Wafer at the end of the 'bullfight', which invites reading as a transfer of his rage to Wafer as his own mirror image. The message, that sexual abstinence as a failed ideal leads to disaster for the individual and for others, takes various forms across Astley's *œuvre*. An example is Sister Matthew's compromising of Bernard Levenson in *The Slow Natives* (146).

By contrast, Wafer's Christ-like transcendence defends him against the other deadly sins: pride and envy (he doesn't care about his appearance or status and enjoys jokes against himself); avarice and greed (indifferent to wealth, he is a teetotaler who prefers simple food); sloth (he combines the contemplative and active lives); and anger (normally he radiates tranquillity). The communion host's circularity mirrors Wafer's simplicity and completeness: 'that he was here, that he was. What other need could he have?' (83); 'He needed nothing but himself' (108); 'the mildness of a human who truly wished for singleness' (173).

The Christ-like detachment that enables Wafer, in further extensions of the circle imagery, to make 'slow and measured comments on our spinning globe' (56) and to avoid '[reaching] down even further, trying to beat the swing of the wheel' (97) drives Gabby's frustration and Allbut's hatred. Visualised as a pure white circle, his wholeness protects him from the vortex of greed and desperation that motivates the townspeople. Like the desert fathers 'a fossicker for the gold of God', he defines solitude, stability of abode and poverty, not as deprivation or victimhood, but as an opportunity for fulfilment. Indeed, before Moon learns of his sapphire, Wafer differs from Allbut's inhabitants, and probably from most humans, because he is happy.

Yet despite the lived symbolism of his name, the brilliance of Astley's characterisation lies ultimately in the imperfections that maintain Wafer as a person. His statue of St Francis, which maps his carving of his moral being, is never finished (81, 142). Joined with the discontinuities that distinguish his story from Christ's, Wafer's lapses into fear, lies, lust, and anger, as well as his humour, negate any threat that his virtues pose to his humanity (Haynes 149). In combination with Moon as his mirror opposite, Wafer's virtues and shortcomings sculpt him as Astley's vehicle for a unique lateral recreation of Christ's story, as told in the New Testament by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Fire, darkness and light

Item intertwines this complex play on circle metaphors with a reworking of fire, darkness and light imagery. Imbibed during Astley's Catholic childhood,

such imagery flourishes in the Bible and in English poetry from *The Dream of the Rood* to Milton and Henry Vaughan. The latter's vision of Eternity 'like a great Ring of pure and endless light', beneath which Time moves 'like a vast shadow', is especially pertinent ('The World', lines 1–7). This cluster of figures infuses the stories of Moon and Wafer with archetype and myth.

Moon retains the associations of horned devils and hell fire familiar from medieval morality plays: '[Moon's] absurd horn-crowned head swept arcs across the night sky' (128). These feature too in the fire and darkness images of campfire plotting by Moon, Freddie, and Gabby's brother: 'The fire blazed like flower and behind its dancing black calyx Stobo and Jam squatted while Moon rolled himself a smoke . . .'; 'In flame flicker the stubble glinted red and his eyes, heavy and dark, said nothing' (89). The '*auto da fé*' that Moon makes of Wafer's shelter and the shack lived in by Emmie and her father Smiler (157–58) justifies Gabby's vision of a devil and satyr: 'Moon, head springing horns and bounding light-footed to create two terrible bursts of summer' (160). The cluster reaches its apotheosis when Wafer is at last encircled by the forces of jealousy and revenge: 'Charon [ferryman of Hades, here Sergeant Cropper the Allbut cop] drives a truck these days'; 'Moon's darkness underlined the whole night world we were entering, adding the darkness, I knew, of a certain river clearing, of fire, of a black man without hands on the other side of the globe' (195).

Read at the conclusion of every Tridentine Mass, standard ritual until 1969, the opening of St John's Gospel (1.1–14) identifies the Word, that is, Christ, with light. Gabby's images of Wafer are likewise suffused with light – 'Wafer moves in his bone cage like a torch of shuttered light' (9). Light, the circle's perfection and the body of Christ merge again in the moments before Allbut's violence drives Wafer from his home:

See him. I paint him in the shaking circle of kerosene light which on those yellowing pages [of Wafer's history] is the only communion bread. But perhaps across the slope of the lake's hip Colley and his daughter sit below other pools of light like communion breads and think about him. (144)

Finally, the two sentences of Wafer's oracular farewell to Emmie – 'There is a pool of light on my table, a golden circle. I am turning it out' (145) – are a turning point in the plot and a high point in the circle and light imagery that Gabby in her 'jealous rage' (173) repeatedly revisits (160, 168, 178–79, 188–89). Reapplied with bitter irony, these sentences precipitate her final extinguishing of Wafer's light: 'A golden circle, my mind raged. A circle I could never

comprehend. I am turning it out. Over. Over' (190).

Sapphire

Like *Item*'s pervasive circles, Wafer's sapphire moves fluidly across the four levels of Biblical meaning. Gabby's description plays off future tragedy – 'one shadowy lump of gemstone' – against Wafer's jokey paradox: 'The sign said "divest." The gemstone mocked the sign' (29). Later Gabby glimpses Augustine's infinity of the Word beyond words at the stone's heart: 'I discovered that once each day the sun struck the stone to muezzin life and something blazed inside for a moment, speaking its name' (29). Later descriptions broaden these associations, so that, especially in the chapter in which Stobo confirms the sapphire's value (78-93), Wafer's 'talisman' functions as both a touchstone for character and a vehicle for *Item*'s embedded spirituality.

Chatoyancy, from *oeil de chat*, is the internal iridescence that distinguishes tiger's eye gemstones. The 'fiery chatoyancy in the lumpy blue' (79) perceived by Moon therefore transfers to the sapphire his signature associations of fire and tiger. Converted, he 'drowns in blue' (80); pressing the stone against his forehead sets 'the purple lights racing into his mind like blood' (81). By contrast, Wafer's attitude to his stone is 'maddeningly indifferent . . . "I saw it as my luck"' (80). Without meaning to, Gabby captures Wafer's and Emmie's shared vision by incorporating the sapphire into her painting of Emmie, 'with its hazy blues, a stilled light within its centre' (55). Later, Wafer's nightmare of struggling in the stone's 'crystalline chamber' while Emmie and her father dance away to the music of Moon's guitar, distils his fears (152-53). Yet his waking self concedes the stone's deeper significance when he bequeaths it to Emmie with the counsel to '[i]nfuse new *virtue*', a word replete with Latinate Catholic connotations that Astley would have recognised (185).

Other interpretations of Wafer's sapphire are equally revealing of character. Pub-owner Doss Campion defines it pragmatically as 'trouble' (83). She is sceptical of her partner Stobo's hope of becoming 'stinking rich' (84). Unconvinced by Wafer's argument that wealth is not worth seeking because it is as transitory as those who seek it, Freddie continues to yearn for 'something I can grip in my hand, like so' (85). Gabby's objection, that the destitute too are destined to pass inexorably through time, is a reminder, typical of Astley, that philosophy – or literature for that matter – is no substitute for action against the world's injustices. The realities of suffering therefore expose the limitations in Wafer's truths. Yet those blind for example to 'the pointlessness of avarice' (82) – Jam, Allbut's Councillor Brim and Cropper – are doomed to join Moon and Stobo in the pit of what *Item* and Catholic tradition categorise as a capital sin: 'Their avarice is like a lewd golden rose' (186).

Wafer and Christ

Astley's poem 'Altar Piece', where Christ presides both as a carving and in 'the uplifted bread' (*Selected Poems* 62), contains the essentials for her characterisation forty years later of Wafer, who has a human form and a name that evokes the Mass. Most of *Item's* commentators acknowledge this connection. Haynes for instance observes the frequent substituting or juxtaposing of the names 'Christ' and 'Jesus' with 'Wafer' (148). Wafer, who was victimised at school as 'a rotten little poof' (196–97), belongs, like Christ, to the class of victims peopled throughout history by women and by gay, transgender and bisexual men, rather than by 'masculine' men. In terms of Augustine's levels of discernment, *Item* replaces the literal level – Christ's human story – with the life of an outsider that begins in modern Europe and ends in remote Australia. Christ's conception, birth, retreat to the wilderness, ministry, betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion are retold in random order, as if in the shards of a mirror. If Wafer's life and death humanise the Gospels as an outback story about 'a mad saint' (179, 190), it is just as true that Christ's story is the key to understanding Wafer's.

In discussing Wafer and Astley's other solitary characters, Lindsay argues that Astley 'rejects as selfish the solitary pilgrimage for individual enlightenment, and suggests that the better way is to remain in the world and work in harmony with nature and other people' (138). Yet Wafer, who according to Moon is 'the great big gasping humanitarian' (90) and in Gabby's terms a 'Samaritan' (112), undertakes all three – solitary contemplation; the nurturing of nature; and kindness, the Pauline *caritas* (I Corinthians 13:13) that Astley's talks and interviews advocate as the virtue that humanity most lacks and most needs (see Interview with Jennifer Ellison 61). Naked like a second Adam to which the New Testament compares Christ (Romans 5: 12–21; I Corinthians 15:45), Wafer cares for nature by creating a green 'Eden' (27, 92) beside Allbut's barren lake – a recurrent Astley allusion, which Paul Genoni ('Failed Eden' 154–57) sees as expressing her longing for the Catholic certainties of her childhood as a lost paradise. Moreover, Wafer fulfils literally the works of mercy enjoined in Mathew 25: 35–36: he clothes the outcast Rosie and her son (20, 24); welcomes and cares for the stranger – the circus people and their animals (62); and drives the injured Smiler to hospital and visits him (69). He performs these acts bravely or fatalistically, knowing that they antagonise Allbut's powers-that-be. His 'ragged ginger toga' (9), bare feet, unashamed nakedness, and framed oxymoron, 'divest' live out Christ's counsel to the rich young ruler: 'sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor' (Mark 10: 21). The similarity to a parable of Wafer's anecdote about the 'grotesque cripple', who, unlike his schoolboy mocker, 'got where he was going' (84–85), defends moral progress,

however slow and painful, against the attraction of fast money that the sapphire holds for Moon, Stobo, Jam, Brim and Cropper.

Furthermore, Gabby-as-Gabriel reveals facts about Wafer's origin that are hidden from Allbut's citizens. Like the seaside imagery pervading such Astley poems as 'At the Seaside' and 'Child by the Shore' (*Selected Poems* 10, 33), Wafer's conception at Skagen connotes innocence: 'And the light, the purity of tone that hints at the naïve intentions of all those Sunday painters' (13). Like Christ, he passes his infancy in a world beset by danger. His father's annihilation in the Blitz and reports of the bombing of Hiroshima shape his boyhood. Like Christ (Matthew 4: 1–11), he retreats to the desert. He ministers to Allbut's inhabitants until a town tradition subjects him to an analogy of the crucifixion.

Lionel Wafer's Crossing, which was Astley's working title for *Item*¹, invites readers to understand Wafer's arrest, trial and torturous enforced journeys culminating in his betrayal by Gabby-as-Judas as a prolonged *via crucis* (Stations of the Cross). Afterwards Gabby watches through her open door 'the green bits of Judas tree' – alluding probably to a *cercis siliquastrum*, which is identified in legend with the tree on which Judas hanged himself (Matthew 27.5). Earlier, the novel's visualisations of Wafer's ordeal draw on countless medieval paintings of Christ on Calvary – Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece is an example – and possibly on the 'bone' references in Psalm 22: 14 and 17, understood to prophesy the crucifixion: 'His face was like print on bone, ashen and hollowed, his mouth closed tight against the obscenity about him' (121); '[A] rosy bande-rolle blossomed above his beating heart' (126); 'There was blood now, running steadily and despairingly, down Wafer's chest and ribs making an ever-widening lattice' (127); 'Wafer whose now thinner face, the bony frame explicit' (137); 'Wafer lying there grey and bone-thin' (172); 'There was his face streaked with mucous and blood' (197). At the culmination of the torture that precedes his murder, Wafer's blood- and mucus-streaked face recalls such preliminaries to the crucifixion as the spitting and the crowning with thorns (190; Matthew 27: 29–30; Mark 15. 17–19). Overall, Wafer's agony is similar enough to Christ's for Gabby to recognise the paradox inherent in both – the 'size of Wafer's *victory*' which has 'strangled' Moon, as it has herself (195):

I knew he had reached the place he had been racing towards.

He knew. (198)

Lacking a predicate, the last sentence affirms the ambiguity of everyone's

¹'Exercise book with an early [probably the first] handwritten draft of *An Item from the Late News*, including character notes and rough chapter outline', Thea Astley Papers, Box 19, Folder 126.

death, especially, after centuries of passionate debate, that of Christ.

Nothing

The missing predicate may be ‘nothing’. If so, it constitutes a descent from the summit of Wafer’s suffering and Astley’s novel. Yet throughout *Item* ‘nothing’ functions as a riddle, not an answer. Gabby raises it in her opening description of Allbut:

There was nothing outside that town.

Is nothing.

Can nothing be walled by nothing? (1)

Like a modern Everywoman, Gabby wavers between the treasure-seekers’ and Wafer’s contrary definitions. Stobo laments: ‘There’s nothing on my patch. Nothing’ (86). Moon too defines ‘nothing’ as a failure to possess: when the sapphire’s finding place proves untraceable, his chanting of Rafael Alberti’s ‘El Pescador Sin Dinero’: *No me queda nada nada* – ‘I’ve nothing left, nothing at all’ (195, 196) – epitomises the prospecting party’s rage. By contrast, left to himself Wafer finds joy and an abundance of being in ‘nothing’: ‘the nothingness of [Allbut’s] landscape became delight’ (15); and ‘I’m gardening. Growing a few vegetables, that is. I’m reading. I’m being. I’m doing nothing’ (74–75).

During his last journey, truly a dark night of the soul, Wafer admits to himself that ‘nothing’ may after all be the final reality:

How could all that hugger-mugger living be nothing now?

As this now was to be nothing.

Moving from nothing to nothing *as far as the world counts*

(166; my italics)

The qualifier is worth noting, but even so Wafer questions if the oneness of place and time that he experienced during his Allbut retreat was in fact nothing. Gabby invites her readers to join him in his despair by describing his flight from Cropper’s shots as ‘racing into the nothingness he knew was ahead’ (197). Accordingly, Houghton claims that, despite or perhaps because of, its ‘deliberate and Christ-like parallels’ Wafer’s death ‘in this insane world’ is ‘meaningless and without any redemptive possibilities’ (223). Similarly, in a discussion contextualised by explorers’ responses to Australian space, Genoni sums up single-word ‘nothing’ sentences in Astley’s fiction as ‘investing the moment with the disappointment of various forms of failure or loss or hopelessness

that permeate characters' lives' ('Something out of Nothing' 38). But just as *Item* embodies its core conundrum in a missing predicate and 'nothing' puns – 'Nothing comes that way' (86) and 'nothing matters' (200) – so it renounces prophecy at the moment of Wafer's death.

Discipleship

Interwoven with Wafer's story are those of the 'disciples' (187–88) Emmie and Gabby, who, like Wafer and Moon, are each other's opposites in important respects. Each is judged by their adherence to Christian ethics and their openness to *gnosis*, or transcendent knowledge. *Item* assumes that though a faulty version of Christ, Wafer is Emmie's and Gabby's rightful mentor, a view of him with which, sooner and later, they both concur.

'Subtle Emmie' (77) understands Wafer best because she functions on the same analogical level, which she expresses not in the solid medium of paint but in the fluid medium of poetry. Gabby acknowledges that Emmie is a 'writer of words that touch unknowns' (72), and Wafer explains 'the runic quality she had for him, a symbol of things young and past' (179). Emmie's prose poem:

I hold the lake up to my face
I see nothing
I switch it to catch the light (54–55)

encapsulates her discernment of Wafer as a corridor through the worldly 'nothing' to a deeper awareness. Their shared circle and light imagery confirms her unique understanding of his vision, including aspects discussed above, such as the costs and rewards of spiritual progress (85), the corrupting power of fantasy (86–87), time (95), the 'magic' hidden in 'not knowing' (96), and the futility of an obsession with worldly success like Smiler Colley's (97–98).

Unlike other teenage girls in Astley's *œuvre*, including Gabby when younger and Wafer's Aunt Clancy whom she resembles (95), Emmie preserves her virginity, though not her innocence, in a world ruled by male desire. Her swim in 'the perfect circle of creek-fed water' (64), where she fends off rapist Moon, and her defiance when Moon finds her in Wafer's bed, affirms the power that many traditions – Hindu and Graeco-Roman as well as Catholic – attribute to virginity:

And then while they stared back, mockingly she dragged her night-gown over her head, stood there in her still forming body, small girl adult, and ridiculed them both with her nudity.

Emmeline, how could anyone cope with a child like you? (104–05)

This episode is the culmination of *Item*'s nakedness motif: Cropper's stripping of Rosie and her son uses nakedness as a weapon of racial humiliation; Wafer's nakedness suggests Edenic purity and freedom; but Emmie's flaunting of herself turns the nakedness that Moon sought to abuse into an assertion of female strength.

A mixture, as Wafer points out (175), of jealous passion and spoiled artistic talent, Gabby is a female protagonist-narrator who rebels early against the sexual and gender restrictions imposed on women. However *Item* focuses on Gabby's late twenties, when her drive for freedom has collapsed into inertia and, according to Jones, 'faith in herself has been totally eroded by her dismal love-life and her existence in a milieu where she is marginal and unvalued' (78). Whatever the cause, Gabby's feminism manifests wholly as talk, a fact that accords with her 'gabby' nature. She assigns blame for the 'bullfight' to patriarchy – to the 'masculine' passion for sport and winning, to global upheavals that expel women from their homes, and to the emotionally distant fathers in her family: 'If only the men would go away' (132–35). But she imparts these insights only to her readers.

In practice, Gabby's small victories over Allbut's male rulers come not by confrontation, as Emmie's do, but by manipulation: when her father expels her from Allbut's 'sick Star Chamber' (164) she spies on Wafer's 'trial' from hiding. She cajoles Jam into allowing her to drive with the prospectors who preside over his last journey. Her graduated confessions to Wafer end not with 'shriving' but with shunning (178, 181, 189). Sheridan states that 'it is highly likely that the men would have gone ahead and destroyed Wafer anyway' (86), but Gabby's revelation that Wafer has misled the gem-hunters is merely the last in her series of 'personal failures'. Unquestionably it is the action that *precipitates* their revenge. When Gabby finally identifies herself with the 'rancorous circle' (193) of Wafer's murderers, she has achieved full self-knowledge:

The world whirled.

I am Moon.

I am Cropper.

I am my father's daughter, the old man doing a Pontius Pilate as he watched the trucks pull out.

I am all of them. (195)

Interwoven from the beginning, Gabby's *confessio peccatoris* here supplants her *confessio amantis* (152) in a progression that justifies interpreting *Item* as an exercise in purgation. Midway, Gabby's search for absolution from Emmie

as Wafer's true disciple collapses into yet another futile circling. Yet in the last chapter she figuratively joins the three Maries (Mark 16.1, Luke 24.10) at the tomb of Wafer's burnt-out house, hoping, if not for a resurrection – a moving of the stone under which she has placed her transcription of Wafer's farewell note – at least for a sign of forgiveness. Gabby has circled back to Allbut for the last time, and in future will visit distant places only by atlas (133–34). She now understands the wisdom of staying put: 'I sit down and wait' (200). Once again, a predicate is missing.

Conclusion

Three years after Astley published *Item*, she affirmed her belief in God at interviews in Cairns and Canberra:

I'm not a practising Catholic now. I miss it very much, but I do believe in God. (Interview with Jennifer Ellison 66–67)

I believe in God. I want there to be a God because otherwise it would seem to me to be completely pointless. A French entomologist, Fabre, said in the last century, 'You could take my skin from me more easily than my belief in God'. People say how can we prove there is one, but no one has proved there isn't, and I prefer to believe – to trust – in God. (Interview with Candida Baker 47–48)

Relevant to the author's intention, these statements, like the textual evidence considered above, support my contention that Astley's bedrock, and, it should be stressed, *anti-institutional* Catholicism is what primarily determines *Item's* imagery, characterisation, character hierarchies, events and outcomes. Characters discernible as analogies for Christ, young and old, male and female, gay and straight, black and white, pervade her *oeuvre*. Examples are Chookie Mumberson in *The Slow Natives*, Kitty Trumper in *A Boatload of Home Folk*, Fred Bathgate in *The Acolyte*, Will Laffey in *It's Raining in Mango*, and Normie Cooktown in *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. Indeed, analogies with Christ's passion tend to surface whenever an innocent Astley character suffers. Yet, more consistently than most, Wafer is 'the Word made flesh' (John 1:14). As well as fictional flesh, his name connotes the 'miracle' of the Magnetic Island Mass revered in Astley's first novel, *Girl with a Monkey* (116). Moreover, the finite but multi-layered figures and characterisations featured in *Item* and charted above – the reversals associated with Christmas, circles in place and time and within and without, the antagonists' names and associations, fire and light, Wafer's sapphire and female disciples – repeatedly evoke the Gospel narratives. Ultimately they accord with Augustine's distinguishing of the multiplex but finite word from the life-giving and eternal Word.

Beyond the examples analysed above, allusions on almost every page support a reading of *An Item from the Late News*, Astley's recreation of people and events in an isolated Queensland town, as a fictional fifth Gospel.

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