

The Sound of South Africa: Johan Vlok Louw's *Karoo Dusk*

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Abstract

This article examines the choices some South African authors have made as regards the setting and style of their writing, and the implications of these choices. It looks in some detail at Johan Vlok Louw's *Karoo Dusk* (2014), and concludes with a brief look at Steven Boykey Sidley's latest novel, *Free Association* (2017). The article was written with the current calls for decolonising the university curriculum in mind. It speculates about what a decolonised South African literature would be like and whether or not this is even possible. It argues that the global marketplace and increasingly borderless nature of modern culture are likely to be forces that the decolonisers will be unable to resist.

Keywords

Johan Vlok Louw, *Karoo Dusk*, Steven Boykey Sidley, *Free Association*, Lauren Beukes, Zakes Mda, decolonisation, language and literature, Karoo

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The heated debates currently raging about decolonising the South African university curriculum raise the related issue of what would happen to South African literature should the avid decolonisers manage to bend it to their will. What would a decolonised South African literature look, sound and feel like? And the question that immediately follows is whether such a decolonised literature is even possible, if 'decolonised' is taken here to mean that all non-African influences are stripped away from local literature.

The overwhelming bulk of South African literature is presently still written in English and Afrikaans (often with a smattering of indigenous languages for flavour), while very little is written purely in African languages. Isn't continuing with English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of literary production merely to persist with advancing the colonial legacy? What are the alternatives?

This article examines the choices some South African writers are making as regards the language(s), settings and themes of their fiction and the consequences of these choices. It focuses in particular on Johan Vlok Louw, as his writing can be seen to represent an important strand of local literature.

Down the years South African writers who made their mark both in the country and abroad all achieved recognition for providing local insights into the country and its people, but did so in a way that garnered them an international readership at the same time. One thinks here of Schreiner's *African Farm*, Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Gordimer's novels and short stories, Fugard's plays, some of Coetzee's novels. All are steeped in a South African culture and idiom, are indeed deeply redolent of the country, but also manage to connect with an international audience.

More recent writing by South Africans shows that individual authors make very different decisions about their settings and the languages they use, and these decisions have profound consequences for the reception of their work. Lauren Beukes, for example, after two noteworthy novels with local settings, turned to an international setting and style with *The Shining Girls* (2013) and *Broken Monsters* (2014), in the process gaining much more media attention and a wider readership.¹ It is not coincidental that this process was triggered by her winning the 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award: the unexpected win brought massive media attention on Beukes, and this in turn led to her being signed by a major international publishing house.²

Other writers traverse the local and the international with ease. One thinks here of Sarah Lotz, Penny Busetto, Roger Smith, Carel van der Merwe, Amanda Coetzee (the list grows daily), who give their novels – in whole or in part – a non-South African setting, and who are clearly therefore seeking a wider readership.

An interesting case is Zakes Mda, who made a name for himself by writing satirical plays and novels about South Africa, but recently turned to another setting entirely. The award-winning *Rachel's Blue* (2014), which deals with the highly contentious issue of the granting of parental rights to rapists in certain states of the

US, is set in Athens, Ohio. The characters, setting and linguistic style used in the dialogue are all distinctly mid-Western in nature, showing that Mda has used his extensive stints in the US to good effect.

These are merely some examples; there are many more. Increasingly, South African writers are looking further afield for settings and for an audience for their work.

A recent novel that runs strikingly counter to this tendency is Johan Vlok Louw's resolutely local *Karoo Dusk* (2014). It deserves more attention than it has so far attracted, but is unlikely to do so.³ It warrants more notice because it is compelling in a dark, Cormac McCarthy-esque way, with a tight plot and characters that immediately take hold of the reader and don't relinquish their terrifying grasp. These are considerable novelistic achievements. However, and this is the key point, the novel requires intimate local knowledge in order to yield up its rich (albeit disturbing) qualities.

Part of the reason for this is its terse, often elliptical, style. These are the novel's opening lines:

I wake up, flinch, sun. We're in Pa's Ford Ranger on National Road Number One, slow-snaking flat, low-bushed country with rocky outcrops, pale-red sandy patches.

Dream-heaving.

"How far?" I ask from the back seat.

"Not far."

"How's Ma?"

He looks over, says, "Out." (2014, 5)

Very little is contextualised or explained, and this terseness persists throughout. Many (but by no means all) South Africans would recognise the setting as Beaufort West, the farming centre turned gritty truck stop on the main road from the Highveld to Cape Town.⁴ But the greater reason for the impenetrability of the novel is its language, and here, again, little concession is made to the reader.

Before turning to this and other features of the novel, perhaps a brief overview of the story is in order. The first-person narrative centres on 19-year-old Bill B (no surname provided), who's clearly a troubled young man in a very dysfunctional

family. His father and mother barely relate to each other: the mother is usually zoned out on prescription pills and wine, while the father, a colonel in the South African Police Service, drinks far more than is good for him and is having an affair with a policewoman colleague. There's a bond between mother and son, but not enough of a meaningful relationship to keep the son from straying into trouble.

When the colonel drops Bill off for his first day of matric at his new school he warns him: "Don't screw this up, Bill" (14), adding, "I'm serious, Bill . . . you're getting a bit old to be hanging round school" (14). His father wants him to complete matric and join the police force, while Bill is angling to become a professional cage fighter. He's useful with his hands already, felling the school bully with a single punch and showing himself amply capable of fighting his own corner on several occasions.

He befriends Bridge, a gay schoolmate, who introduces him to the seamy side of life in this Karoo town – drink, drugs and prostitutes. This brings Bill into contact with former Cape Flats gangster Ou Joe Kelly and his cohorts, who have moved up from the Flats to run a drugs-and-prostitute racket in town. A head-on collision with the colonel, who's been sent to the town to clean it up (the former station commander had been neutralised through blackmail by the gangsters), is inevitable, and this occurs at the novel's conclusion, at the end of a long, action-filled day in which a fatal farm stabbing is investigated and, unconnectedly, a prostitute is killed by her pimp, who is in turn shot dead by the colonel when the pimp strikes the policeman with a rock. The narrative then reaches its final climax with a Wild West-style standoff between Bill and Ou Joe, in which the latter is killed and Bill seriously (mortally?) wounded.

As this synopsis indicates, *Karoo Dusk* is hardly a eulogy to the beauty of the region (its title is therefore perhaps an ironic nod to *Karoo Morning*, the first part of Guy Butler's autobiographical trilogy). The dusk of the novel's title refers not to the charm of the Karoo twilight but rather to a deeply disturbing inner darkness. *Karoo Dusk* is baleful, pitiless and bleak, leaving the reader with a powerful sense of having strayed, somewhat unwillingly, into the dark heart of the country.

The novel's bleak tenor is aptly conveyed towards the end of the novel's last climactic day, on which Bill and Bridge accompany the colonel to a nearby farm when the body of a farm labourer is discovered. The day drifts long and nightmarishly into night, but neither Bill's mother nor Bridge's is concerned about her son's

whereabouts. While the colonel is having his wounds seen to in the hospital, Bridge and Bill are in his car – Bridge passed out from booze, Bill still at it:

I reach around, find the bottle. So ja, it's taken a hammering. One tall swig and I'm running on empty sitting there waiting. I find I want home with Pa off to see his lady cop and the drinks left unguarded.

Bridge?

So I wondered if he phoned, not like his ma worries, the two of us aren't blessed that way.

I tell you . . . it's an affliction of the age. Unworried mas. (199)

Karoo Dusk is powerfully dystopian in its portrayal of a contemporary South Africa⁵ in which drugs, prostitution, blackmail, corruption, alcohol abuse, unbridled violence and dysfunctional families appear to have become the norm. This is a society whose fabric is unravelling with disturbing rapidity.

A striking indication of this is the novel's farm episode, which throws into stark relief the distance between Louw's grim anti-pastoral vision and the traditional plaasroman genre, in which the farm is presented as the locus of social and economic harmony and productivity. On this particular farm the idyll has gone awry. The mother of the household, neglected by Willem, her corpulent husband (who that evening feasts on his supper and gets drunk with the colonel), initiates a bout of carnal sex in the guest bathroom with the rampant Bill B. This is Bill's perspective on how the sexual encounter is initially broached:

I sit down opposite the auntie; she sits there tight and drawn.

"Auntie getting any?"

"Huh?"

I smile wickedly, say, "Food, Auntie?"

"One has to look after the figure, Bill."

"Nothing wrong with it," I say, "you must exercise, Auntie?"

"I run to the main road and back every morning."

"I can see it." (164)

After this flirtatious exchange the mother pointedly tells Bill where the guest bathroom is, and he meets her there. Not much mention is made of the encounter in

the novel, Bill's elliptical "I'm telling you, someone needs to do something about me real quick" (166) sufficing to indicate what happened. This is mere animal lust being expressed, rather than anything more affirming and meaningful, and, of course, it breaks traditional social mores about extramarital sex.

An important aspect of the plaasroman idyll is the ritualistic passing on of the productive farm from father to son. Here, too, the idyll has been disrupted. Willem's namesake son is gay, and hangs out with Bridge in his outside room playing endless games of *Gran Turismo*, but can't drive a real car (he's failed his driver's test twice).

So, rather than presenting a scene of bucolic tranquillity as an uplifting contrast to the sleaze of town life, the farm is just another locus of unease and dysfunctionality in *Karoo Dusk*. Like the town-dwellers, the farm-folk are all about immediate gratification: Willem senior indulges his yen for gluttony; his wife looks to a boy her son's age for sexual gratification; the son has friends over for weekends of computer games and sexual indulgence; and, for their part, the farm labourers, it appears, settle scores with deadly stabbings.

The characters of *Karoo Dusk* are deeply fatalistic, but not as a consequence of wisdom or quietude of the soul or anything of the sort; instead, their fatalism comes from a profound sense of hopelessness. Without hope for the future they live in the present, are unabashedly selfish and seek immediate physical gratification, or – failing this – oblivion. Most seem hell-bent on destruction – of others and/or themselves. Bill's description of "unworried" mothers ("an affliction of the age") is thus apt as a view of the society at large that the novel depicts.

Why, though, is the novel worth engaging with? What is its literary value or interest? Louw's achievement is to make the characters and setting utterly compelling. To read *Karoo Dusk* is to engage with a South Africa so viscerally convincing that it appears self-created, not a work of literary artifice. The characters appear ready-made from the outset, simply waiting to be discovered in the darkness of their souls.

Louw achieves this partly by using a highly effective style that is both laconic and sardonic. However, to someone unfamiliar with South Africa, with Afrikaans, and with local slang and gangster argot the novel must be a bewildering, perhaps alienating, experience. And here my argument about the novel's very appeal (its intense and convincing localism) deterring a wider readership is pertinent.

The following extract serves as an example of the novel's linguistic style (I could have chosen others almost at random). It details an exchange between Ou Joe and his young nephew and heir-apparent, Kurt, in which they discuss the entrapment of Bill and his father. It is typical of the novel as a whole in its code-switching and use of Cape slang, and warrants quoting in full. Kurt wonders why Ou Joe has allowed Bill to have sex with the prostitute they reserve for 'special' locals only (including the former station commander):

“How is it that, Uncle, is just a fokken laaitie.”

“Ghie.”

Ou Joe lights another Dunhill, that slight quiver to the hands again, slaps the Zippo shut – coughs.

“He's connected somehow, Kurtie, so says little Bridgie.”

“Ja?”

“To the Boere, to the police.”

He looks Kurt straight in the eye; it's as if the ancient cold wet of the Cape Flats crosses the table and slams into Kurt's chest.

Hoarsely. “Whispered it into this ear, here,” says Ou Joe, pointing.

Kurt sits back, licks his lower lip.

“He did? He is?”

Ou Joe exhales slowly, watches a Jeep Cherokee in full off-road kit go past.

“Don't know how, yet,” he says, “ma' ek reken ons lat hom los, Kurt, 'cause I've been trying to get hold of Major fokken Molefe all afternoon – but he's on blerrie voicemail.”

“He is?”

“Exactly.”

Kurt says nothing. He's avoiding Ou Joe's eyes. Feels like the right thing to be doing.

“It got past me, Uncle.”

“Nephew, Nephew,” smiles Ou Joe, blows smoke, folds a hand over Kurt's and pats gently. “Find out, in the meantime, let the laaitie have his fun, ons invest innie future, al daai.”

“Okay.”

“Until we know more.”

“Okay.”

Kurt gets up, turns to go, reaches for his cell in a top pocket.

“And ask Lover Boy to come down,” says Ou Joe. “Ask cook to make us a stew, no freaking salads tonight.”

“Maak so, Uncle.”

“You do that.”

“Skaap, groenboontjie, of tamatie?”

“Bliksem, it all sounds good.”

“Which?”

Ou Joe thinks a while, rolls his eyes upwards, snake-sniffs air.

“Skaapkerrie,” he says.

“Sal die maag dit vat?”

Ou Joe smiles. “Ek’s noggie dood ’ie, kind.” (44–45)

44 of the 276 words in the extract (16%) are in Afrikaans or local slang, so not readily accessible to a non-South African reader. This percentage is probably a little higher than that for the novel as a whole, approximately 10% of which is in Afrikaans or local slang. But fully one tenth of a novel that, as pointed out, is also laconic to the point of obscurity in its overall style means that it is unlikely to be grasped and embraced by a wider readership.⁶

This is not to suggest in the least that Louw was somehow misguided in the way he crafted his novel. Like most artists, he clearly obeyed the creative instincts that guided his artistic consciousness, and questions of book sales did not come into it. The internal qualities of *Karoo Dusk* might limit its appeal to a more international readership, but the work remains a worthy novelistic endeavour. Indeed, it is exemplary as a work of fiction that reflects the feel and texture of South Africa at its most gritty and visceral, and must be valued for this.

How representative, though, of South Africa is *Karoo Dusk*? While the novel could be from nowhere else, so heavily marked is it by local idiom, setting and themes, it cannot claim to represent the country in all of its cultural and linguistic complexity. It is, in fact, principally a novel of the Cape Karoo, and can perhaps be taken to represent other parts of South Africa where coloured people have a significant presence, but it would be inaccessible to any South African (and, of course, foreigner) who has no grasp of the Afrikaans language and associated coloured patois.⁷

The problem that *Karoo Dusk* implicitly raises is this: if South African writers give in to current imperatives to ‘decolonise’ and engage seriously with the local, to deploy

local content and languages in literature in a way that gives it an intensely South African quality, they will inevitably exclude a large body of potential readers.⁸ This is certainly the case with *Karoo Dusk*: its considerable artistic merit notwithstanding, its very localness consigns it to a local (probably small) readership.

The larger point is that the days of defining national literatures narrowly and then jealously guarding them against foreign influence are long gone. So, too, has the possibility of shedding the languages and cultures of the West. While strident calls to decolonise the South African educational curriculum (which, presumably, would include a 'return to the local' for South African literature) are being heard, much more heat than light is being generated in this debate. Merely a moment's reflection on the inexorable imperatives of globalisation reveals that turning back the clock and expelling all non-African influences from Africa is simply not possible.

Short of some unforeseen apocalypse on an epic scale, the forces of globalisation will prove irresistible. A key aspect of globalisation is language, and proficiency in one of the international languages is seen as highly advantageous.⁹ Turning inward and being parochial are therefore increasingly out of step with global trends, which show that people are tending more and more to become connected and to communicate with each other – quickly and effectively. This process is aided enormously by the Internet and digital forms of communication.

Another important feature of twenty-first-century life is the frequency and ease with which people travel across borders and continents. This applies, of course, not only in the case of tourist travel, but travel for work (for short- or long-term contracts) and also travel involving emigration. National borders are porous or merely notional, and, accordingly, languages and cultures are increasingly open to outside influences.

A writer whose life and work reflect the complexities of domicile and choice of setting is Steven Boykey Sidley, who burst onto the local literary scene with the gripping thriller *Entanglement* (2012), set entirely in the US, with only passing references to South Africa. Sidley lived in Los Angeles for many years, and, like Mda, is clearly exploiting his intimate knowledge of the US in order to set his four novels there and thereby reach a wider readership.

I want to conclude with a look at his latest novel, *Free Association* (2017), which continues (indeed, takes to a higher level) the author's flair for writing fast-

paced, quirky, up-to-the-minute novels of ideas that have a non-South African setting and a wide appeal. *Free Association* represents the opposite of parochialism in a South African writer, in substance and in form.

In form the novel alternates between putative transcripts of Max Lurie's podcast, also titled *Free Association*, which are in the first person, and third-person-narrated chapters – sometimes single and sometimes in clusters – on Max's unfolding life and experiences.

Significantly for the themes of the novel, Chapter 1 begins as follows:

He imagined another time.

Some indeterminate distant past. Where information and its means of dissemination were quaint and unhurried affairs. Wisdom received by word, perhaps by books, painstakingly typeset and bound by proud artisans. Paintings commissioned by men of taste and wealth and patiently awaited, visited with reverence. Orchestras playing pieces that would never be heard again, their paper manuscripts swept asunder after a single performance. (Sidley 2017, 7)

By contrast, Max's own life is, he reflects, at the mercy of a digital avalanche: "he wondered how long he could keep this up, navigating through all manner of digitally hurled messages and arguments and opinions and memes and facts that he faced in any given day" (7). He fantasises about closing all of his social media accounts and "[m]oving to a far-flung place where he would shop daily at a small market selling vegetables and goat's milk and not be assaulted by the hiss of seductive brand messages" (7).

Much as he fantasises about this alternative lifestyle, his weekly podcast attracts 50 000 listeners a week, and so it seems a viable way to make a living. However, he becomes increasingly concerned about running out of ideas, and some of his listeners also comment acidly in emails to him about his podcast being nothing more than a weekly bout of narcissistic introspection and complaining. His producer, ex-South African Bongani Maposa, whom he meets randomly when they both gatecrash a media event, also starts becoming concerned about freshness of content.

Punctuated weekly by his podcasts, Max's life gets increasingly out of control. In the background there is always his concern about his father's progressively worsening Alzheimer's, but on a day-to-day basis bizarre, mostly self-inflicted

mishaps threaten to undo him completely. Thinking that a podcast on the Deep Web would be a departure and novelty for him, he illegally purchases a handgun online. He also befriends a local hobo, who, it turns out, is a gifted physicist but suffers from severe and untreatable schizophrenia. When gun and schizophrenic cross paths, the result can only be calamitous.

Sidley is described by former *Mail & Guardian* books editor Darryl Accone in the following way: “A writer of that rare and endangered thing, the novel of ideas, Boykey Sidley skewers hidebound attitudes in prose that is wide-ranging and plain-speaking.”¹⁰ Accone aptly captures Sidley’s outward-directedness and frank engagement with global issues and preoccupations. His choice of style, setting and theme is the opposite of Louw’s. Neither is right or wrong, but each choice has significant consequences.

South African literature in English post-2000 has sprung spectacularly into life. Most striking about the new literature is its variety, its (often rude) vitality, its no-holds-barred approach, and – most encouragingly – its quality. Quite simply, there are an ever-increasing number of writers who can write with extraordinary flair, and Sidley is a fine example of this. Typically, the new literature is fast-paced, innovative, fresh, cheeky, abrasive – and international.

Unquestionably, apartheid had a stultifying effect on South African literature in a number of ways. It compelled writers to address local issues: anything else was deemed escapist, or, worse still, tacitly accepting of the regime back home. It forced ‘serious’ writers onto the small canvas of South Africa, with its rigid social relations and predictable themes (hardship and humiliation as a consequence of race-based policies and social practices, the dangers of inter-racial sexual relations, police and state brutality, the heroism of resistance to apartheid).

Necessary as it might have been then (although the role cultural resistance played in apartheid’s downfall is very debatable), all of this has been blown away by the new wave of South African literature. Writers are now free to write what they like – and not in the Steve Biko sense (writing in defiant opposition to the state): they, quite simply, can set their works wherever they choose, tackle whatever themes they want, and choose whatever genre or style of writing takes their fancy. The only pressure now is one that has always been there for writers of all times and regions: to gain an audience and sell books.

Perhaps an even greater influence on the new literature is globalisation and the rapid and irreversible spread of the new electronic media: online news content, websites like YouTube that can spread content faster than ever before, the new social media, where communication is instant, and global cell phone technology, which connects people seamlessly and constantly.

One of the many consequences of this is the rapidly developing taste for instant and bite-sized information. There are no doubt some who will still settle down to a tome on Byzantine history, or a massive ‘serious’ novel, but the vast – and rapidly increasing – majority will want their culture in smaller, more assimilable forms: the short video clip, the terse news item, the short, fast-paced novel.

Another important factor is the borderlessness of culture: with some exceptions (the last totalitarian states, and those without the necessary infrastructure and literacy rates), people all over the world are logging on (with computers or smart cell phones) and accessing content globally and without restriction. These are some of the new realities confronting writers.

This article looked at some choices South African writers are making and the implications of their choices. Those calling for the decolonisation of local literature will inevitably have to take account of the much larger and more compelling logic of a global marketplace and borderless cultures. These are likely to be forces that the decolonisers will be unable to resist.

NOTES

1. It is interesting that *The Guardian*'s report on the award makes the following observation: “Published by the tiny UK press Angry Robot, *Zoo City* beat not only [Ian] McDonald, but also the US National Book award winner Richard Powers and the Guardian children's fiction prize winner Patrick Ness” (Flood, 2011).

2. In her acceptance speech on 22 October 2014 upon being awarded the 2014 main UJ Prize for South African Writing in English, Beukes spoke with a North American accent, and remarked to me afterwards that she did this in order to be more accessible to a wider audience in her numerous publicity tours all over the world.

3. I could trace no reviews of it in its English version, but there were a few short notices of the novel in Afrikaans, *Die sirkel van bekende dinge* (which Louw himself translated into

English for simultaneous publication). One of these, by Deborah Steinmair on *LitNet*, notes: “Dit het soms gevoel asof ek ’n boek lees wat geskryf is deur ’n wese van ’n ander spesie” (Steinmair 2014; it sometimes felt as if I was reading a book written by a being of another species). However, she also notes: “Ek kon dit nie neersit nie” (2014; I could not put it down). So both its strangeness and irresistibility are noted, qualities I point to in this article.

4. Louw playfully uses the real name of an iconic Beaufort West hotel, the Masonic, but fictionalises many other aspects of the town.

5. The narrative present tense of the novel is c. 2011. See the reference to Gaddafi and the Battle of Sirte, which took place in October 2011 (Louw 2014, 186).

6. The intense localness of the novel is perhaps best illustrated in Louw’s innovative use of the utterance “Ghie” by various characters, which the reader eventually works out is an onomatopoeic rendering of a low chuckle in the throats of the characters. It is closely related to the guttural “g” that is frequently used in Afrikaans, and represents a kind of mirthless humour – something that pervades this dark novel throughout.

7. The question of representivity is inevitably a vexed one. Those calling for a decolonised South African literature will come up against the considerable difficulty of deciding which of the 11 official languages to use, or which combination. However, Afrikaans (especially of the demotic variety) has a strong claim. The 2011 Census (see Brand South Africa, 2017) reported that Afrikaans is the home language for 6.85 million South Africans, and is particularly predominant in the Western and Northern Cape, where, on average, 51.75% of people use it as a home language. Perhaps this article should have been titled “One of the Sounds of South Africa”, because Louw’s linguistic style is merely one in a multiplicity of literary voices being heard in South Africa. Nonetheless, it can claim to represent the majority of people across a broad swathe of the western part of the country.

8. It has to be pointed out that it is exceedingly unlikely that the struggle era’s cultural prescriptiveness will ever be revived. In other words, South African writers are not likely ever to be dictated to again as to the style, substance and audience of their work. The remarks of Barbara Masekela, former head of the ANC Culture Desk, in 1990 therefore strike us today as quaint and dated: “Those who wish to speak on behalf of the South African people must be part of structures which can join with them in shaping and giving mandate to their message, so that when it reaches the world, it truly represents us as a nation” (Masekela 1990, 16). The notion of ‘speaking on behalf of the South African people’ strikes us today as quaint, or perhaps, more sinisterly, as Stalinist. It would not even occur to the writers who have emerged since the mid-1990s to claim to speak ‘on behalf of’ anyone in particular.

9. As R. W. Johnson astutely remarked in May 2016 (at the height of the student protests at UCT): “At the moment the Nigerian, Ghanaian and Kenyan elites all send their children to British and American universities (they want English, not Xhosa and not even Yoruba, Hausa

or Kikuyu) at great expense. They would be delighted to send them to UCT instead” (Johnson 2016). But, he adds, UCT is aiming to make it compulsory for all students to do a course in Xhosa, which will effectively drive all foreign students away.

10. Accone’s comment appears as a shout on the back cover of Sidley’s *Free Association*.

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