“This Dream of Arctic Rest”
Memory, Metaphor and Mental Illness in Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica*

Night falls fast.
Today is in the past.

Blown from the dark hill hither to my door
Three flakes, then four
Arrive, then many more.

(Millay 1981: 18)

**ABSTRACT** Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica*, an autobiographical text published in 1997, engages with Antarctica not only as a literal place, but also as a location of the mind. Her imaginative response to what has traditionally been perceived as an inhuman landscape allows her to view the Polar regions as a mental space, signifying a complex system of images and symbols. Diski’s physical voyage functions primarily as a metaphor for her attempt to locate an interior psychological terrain, the discovery of which will dispel her profound sense of self-estrangement.

This article contends that Diski’s use of the interconnecting metaphors of skating, ice and frozen or numbed emotions provide a rich tapestry of associations which serve to illuminate the process whereby
traumatic experiences can subsequently manifest themselves in depression and mental illness. In this respect, the narrative, which explores the author’s passion for emotional oblivion and obsession with the colour white, represents a desire to experience her life as an accretion of meaning.

KEYWORDS Antarctic, metaphor, cold, depression, skating, whiteness

In an interview conducted in 2004, Jenny Diski attempted to explain the overwhelming sense of estrangement she feels when interacting with other people, and how difficult it is for her to bridge the distance of mutual separation through conventional forms of social contact. “People interfere with my apprehension of reality, they muddy how I can know myself, confuse my understanding of how I am, which is centred around the notion that solitude is a state of perfection” (Brown 2007). This confession partly explains why Diski’s writings revolve around issues such as isolation, emotional disconnection, fear of intimacy and a fragmented or non-existent sense of self. Interestingly, in the same interview, Diski revealingly claims that “I write cold” (Brown 2007) and states that her admiration for the novels of Nabokov is based upon the fact that “There’s something cold there that I seek and respond to” (Brown 2007). It is possible to view Diski’s journey to the coldest region on earth – the Antarctic – and the subsequent recollection of the expedition in *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), as representing not only an investigation into her attraction to a frozen physical terrain, but also an attempt to chip away at the “ice-block” of her emotions. It is my contention that the text, which alternates between graphic childhood scenes, a shipboard cabin and her bedroom at home, utilises the metaphors of ice, cold and skating to illuminate a process whereby traumatic experiences can subsequently manifest themselves in an overwhelming tendency to “freeze” all emotion.

*Skating to Antarctica* – a volume of autobiography published in 1997 – fruitfully engages with the idea of Antarctica as a mental, as well as a physical, space. Diski makes clear that there is an interior component involved in her journey to the Antarctic which takes the form of “a dream of Arctic rest” (Spufford 1996: 80). Her physical voy-
age functions primarily as a metaphor for her attempt to locate an interior psychological terrain, the discovery of which will help dispel her profound sense of self-estrangement. In this respect, the narrative, which explores Diski’s passion for emotional oblivion and her obsession with the colour white, represents a desire to experience her life as an accretion of meaning. The text, which is given a grounded, dramatic contrast through her daughter’s curiosity about her mother’s past, depicts Antarctica as a gateway to an inward, spiritual territory. As Diski herself has written: “We explore ideas as readily as we do the physical geography of the planet and neither kind of exploration is untainted by the other” (2002: 181). Diski’s physical journey to what has been called “a perfect nullity of a landscape” (Spufford 1996: 1) symbolises an assignment of an entirely different sort; that is, an attempt to renegotiate her relationship to a painful family history and the crippling effects of a serious depressive illness. It is necessary to begin, however, by situating Diski’s quest within the historical, cultural and literary framework of Arctic exploration in order to understand what she describes as “the voice of this otherness calling to the soul and making individuals pit themselves against an inhuman landscape” (2002: 184).

David McGonical and Lynn Woodworth have claimed that Antarctica – sometimes known as “the Crystal Desert” – is “the only continent that, from the perspective of human thought, began as a sophisticated concept emerging from a series of deductions” (2002: 114). Although in the seventh century BC, Parmenides divided the world into five climatic zones not unlike those that we know empirically today, it was not until the fifteenth century AD that the world began to gain accurate knowledge of the polar areas; indeed, the Antarctic remained virtually unexplored until early in the twentieth century (McGonicall & Woodworth 2002: 149). Explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sailed in frail wooden vessels into the harshest environment on earth and gradually a true picture of the Polar regions emerged. As Francis Spufford has noted in his seminal I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination, attitudes to the barren world of ice and to the literal and figurative meaning of exploration had acquired a particular intensity by the mid-eighteenth century (1996: 80). This conflation of the actual and imaginary meaning of the world of ice was appropriated by influential members of the British establishment who recognised
its usefulness to the imperial designs of the British Empire. One such prominent individual was the Marquis of Lothian who stated that “[t]he main thing [is] that the work of Antarctic research should be done by Englishmen” (2002: 80). Given such a climate of jingoism and expansionism it was perhaps inevitable that the placing of the Union Jack at the South Pole was seen as epitomising civilisation’s struggle to overcome the alien. Equally prevalent was the view that the ability to test physical and mental boundaries of endurance was somehow a quintessential English trait. Indeed, by the time of Scott’s bid for the Pole, both to conquer the elements and to be conquered by them, was viewed as endowing both nobility and moral worth (2002: 87).

In *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986), Barry Lopez notes how the need to exert oneself against formidable odds and to cast one’s character in the light of ennobling ideals was profoundly shaped by Victorian sentiment. It is for this reason that the literature of Arctic exploration frequently pits the resolute will of the explorer against the menacing fortifications of the landscape. Military metaphors which defined the relation between the body and the environment of the Antarctic were frequent in Polar writings, particularly during the early stages of British exploration. The records of Arctic expeditions presented to the public were arranged to bolster a preconceived vision of the impersonal hostility of the region, and as the journals and biographies of the explorers make clear, themes of quest or defeat, of aspiration and accomplishment constantly reappear. As Lopez points out, in such writings:

> The land’s very indifference to human life ironically becomes a point in its favour. In the most extreme form of disassociation, the landscape functions as little more than a stage for the exposition of [...] scientific or economic theories, or for national or personal competitions. (1986: 358)

There was, not infrequently, an additional reason for undertaking such a journey; the belief that one might derive not only prestige, money and social advantage, but also notable awards and public adulation. In this respect, Arctic history could rightly be said to represent “a legacy of desire” (Lopez 1986: 309).

However, there has also existed an alternative kind of Polar history, one which has in Francis Spufford’s words been “largely uncharted”
and which is of particular importance in relation to Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*. It involves an aesthetic attraction to the cold regions of the Earth, and views the Antarctic as more a location of the mind than a literal place. This perspective represents an imaginative history of Polar exploration as opposed to a strictly chronological one, and embodies a genealogy markedly different from a straightforward chronological chain of events. As Spufford has noted, theories such as Edmund Burke's concept of 'the sublime' mingled both with the Romantic Imagination and the perceptions of the Victorians to produce a fervent interest in the metaphorical significance of sights that were deemed "great though terrible" (1996: 18). Such experiences were believed to relieve "the pressure of actuality" and often involved psychological fantasy of the most compensatory kind. When experience of the Antarctic and the Romantic imagination merged, the infinitude of Antarctica's landscape allowed fantasy to replace real scrutiny and it became possible to view the region as a mental space, signifying psychological extremes and an internalised picture of the mind. Such perspectives inevitably made the Antarctic available to the idea of contrast and metaphor. A Classic example of this approach is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where the North Pole is hardly depicted as a real place at all, as its extreme cold functions as a metaphor for human estrangement. In Shelley's text, the Arctic is used as a setting for a philosophical debate concerning what is, or is not, human, personified in the battle between flesh and ice. Another example of this imaginative response to the Arctic landscape occurs in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In a scene from the novel, Jane picks up and begins to read Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*, in an attempt to alleviate the intolerably repressive atmosphere of her Aunt Reed's household. Her attention is caught, not by Bewick's detailed descriptions of various seabirds, but by his evocative representation of the Arctic landscape. In the heroine's reaction to Bewick's descriptive powers, it is possible to perceive how the cold, icy landscape becomes available as a place that aids the process of psychic integration through the stimulation of a complex system of images and metaphors. Jane is said to be transfixed by:

[. . .] that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights
above heights, surround the Pole and concentrate the rigours of extreme cold. Of these death-white regions I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strongly impressive. The words in these Introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray. Each picture told a story, mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding. […] With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy. (2006: 19)

In *Skating to Antarctica* Diski confesses that when she first read two classic works of Arctic literature – Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World*, and *South*, Ernest Shackleton’s account of the 1914 *Endurance* voyage – she was “immediately lost in wonder” (1997: 120). Nevertheless, although she admits to an abiding interest in Shackleton’s expedition, Diski makes it abundantly clear that her trip to the Antarctic is not related to a fascination for tales of exploration or “derring-do.” Neither is she interested in “a search for roots,” or adding to the sum total of human knowledge. Rather, her journey is intimately linked to an overdue attempt at reconciling herself with seriously traumatic childhood experiences. In an article dealing with the perceived deterioration of traditional family values, originally published in the *Guardian* newspaper in July 2003, Diski admitted that: “It is possible that I’m not the best person to ask about family. Mine was a sorry mess, a ground zero of attempted suicides, mental institutions, dismal disappointments, destitution and love (or something called love) turned nasty” (2002: 191).

First abandoned by her father at the age of six, Diski was forced to live with foster parents after her mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was interned in a mental hospital. Her father returned briefly to the household when she was eleven, then absconded permanently towards the end of her time spent in primary school. Sent to a progressive boarding school on the advice of several well-intentioned social workers, she was expelled at the age of fourteen. After experiencing genuine destitution and penury when temporarily reunited with her mother, Diski was admitted to her first psychiatric hospital a matter of days before celebrating her fifteenth birthday (1997: 97). The theme of dysfunctional family relationships is central to *Skating to Antarctica* and clarifies the complex reasoning behind what she
calls “her irrational desire to be at the bottom of the world in a land of ice and snow” (120). Diski employs the metaphor of ice, together with her memories of ice-skating, in order to illuminate the ambivalent feelings she has towards her mother. Recalling that the physicality of ice “is quite easily accessible to the memory bank in each of my senses” (15), she contrasts the profoundly insecure environment in which she grew up with the euphoric sense of solidity and wholeness she experienced when engaged in the act of ice-skating. Whereas living with her mother on a daily basis is described as akin to “skating on newly formed ice” (130), the ritual of actual ice-skating confers confidence and an empowering sense of control. Remembering that “[a]ll the clumsiness disappeared. Suddenly I was perfectly equipped” (18), she claims that:

to skate is magical, as you find yourself coasting free and frictionless. The clear distinction between yourself and the ice you are on strengthens the sensation of your own body and its capacity both for control and for letting appropriate things happen. (16)

Diski uses the metaphor of ice-skating to examine the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘boundaries’, ideas that are intimately linked to her attempt to re-enact the aforementioned experience of psychic integration. Although for Diski’s mother, her daughter’s fascination with the ritual of ice-skating gives rise to associations of future fame and limitless wealth, for the skater herself the activity is imbued with an increasing awareness of the contrasting experiences of entrapment and freedom. Intensely aware that the rink itself is surrounded on all sides by a strategically placed, firm wooden barrier, Diski claims that the accompanying sense of enclosure symbolises “as cruel a reminder of reality as any that has been devised” (8). The act of skating itself, however, has associations of freedom and flight. Claiming that “[d]reams of flying are the nearest you get to the feeling of being on the ice” (15), her voyage to the vastness of the Antarctic can be viewed, not only as an attempt to circumvent the actual physical and emotional confines of her life – symbolised by the metaphor of the ice rink – but also as a desire to re-engage with the sense of wholeness that skating once provided. In this respect, it is noticeable that, at one point in the narrative, she refers to Antarctica as “an endless ice rink” (27), suggesting
that she views Antarctica, with its momentous landscape and open vistas, as symbolising a degree of freedom impossible to attain within the limitations of conventional boundaries. It is also significant that the metaphor of flight, with its connotations of freedom, is alluded to when Diski subsequently sails on a Russian-owned passenger ship and enters the Antarctic sound for the first time. While lying in her bunk, she experiences what she terms a “three-part syncopation” (75), involving her body, the sea and the boat itself: “it felt like I was drifting gently, unaided, through the air, the way the seabirds do catching billows of wind, rising on one and then falling on the next, which lifts them up again” (75).

In the text, the metaphor of ice is used in other, equally complex ways, as a means of denoting the reality of various emotional states. Whereas Diski’s recollections of skating evoke memories of both solidarity and metaphorical flight, her descriptions of traumatic childhood experiences and the constellation of conflicting familial loyalties to which she was once afflicted, lead her to employ metaphors of ice which reflect her sense of emotional vulnerability. Such depictions frequently suggest the experience of falling rather than of flight; for example, on one particular occasion, when her mother has returned home after a lengthy sojourn in the local mental hospital, Diski mentions that “now the surface of the world itself had turned to delicate ice and we all tiptoed around” (192). Interacting with her mother on a regular basis is, according to Diski, akin to “skating on thin ice” (15). When analysing the emotional fall-out of her parents’ relationship, she frequently uses metaphors of ice which convey images of impermanence and brittleness. It is tempting therefore to view her journey to the Antarctic, with its vast panorama of solid, impermeable ice, as an attempt to reconnect with the feeling of harmony and wholeness that she has previously only felt when skating.

The belief that her voyage to the ice-covered Antarctic involves an attempt to recapture such an exquisite sense of mental harmony experienced when ice-skating is subtly endorsed by Diski herself when she describes the debilitating bouts of clinical depression that have afflicted her since early adolescence. Diski has written revealingly – both in her fictional and non-fictional works – on the paralysing effects of depressive disorders, particularly when experienced in their most severe form. Her vivid descriptions of the illness’s bleak, barren,
yet agitated qualities arguably represent the most affecting and evocative passages in the whole of *Skating to Antarctica*. Although she has shown impatience with the modern predilection for pathologising the extraordinary and is resistant to the “intellectual slackness” of radical attempts to politicise the margins of human experience, she has admitted that, regarding her own experience, depression represents “a lifting of the veil” (1997: 182). She states “what was important – the only thing of importance – during a depression, was that I should see things as they really are” (182). She discovers that what actually lies behind the fatiguing and gathering murk of a chronic mood disorder is “blankness,” and argues that the only “truth” that resides within the residual chaos of what William Styron has referred to as “neurological deficit” (2004: 81) is that of oblivion. Revealingly, for Diski, oblivion represents, not an existential void, but “a place of absolute peace and quiet” (1997: 226), where emotion, consciousness and pain are absent. Her need to enter the psychic state of essential nothingness that oblivion represents is directly attributable to her propensity of “freezing” her emotions during her formative years. If the chaos surrounding her childhood experiences necessitated a form of emotional withdrawal, simply as a means of survival, her desire to embrace a psychological region which has oblivion as its central characteristic can be viewed as a protective device to shield herself from the emotional turmoil of catatonic depression. It represents a place where pain – and emotion, in all its forms – is absent, an area where it is possible to experience the nullification of emotion in a pure and pristine form.

This is why, in Diski’s mental universe, the idea of absolute absence holds as much attraction as it does revulsion. Her hankering for oblivion is therefore inseparable from her conviction that at the source of all existence lies “a blank reality” (1997: 120). The Antarctic, with its elongation of essential emptiness symbolises a physical place where her hunger for blankness and oblivion can be assuaged. She explains that “what it came down to was that I wanted to be there, in a white, empty, unpeopled, silent landscape” (120). Her relationship to the geographical space in which she hopes to indulge her passion for oblivion can therefore be seen as intensely metaphorical. She visualises it as being “filled with a singing silence. It is an endless ice rink. It is Antarctica” (27).

Diski’s engagement with the themes of absence and oblivion is
connected to her obsession with the emotional and intellectual significance of the colour white. Describing her expedition to the Antarctic as “a hopeful journey into whiteness,” she comments how “I wanted white for as far as the eye could see and I wanted it in the one place that was uninhabited” (212). It is through her discussion of the negation of colour and its link with her own depressive illness that Diski contributes her most interesting insights into the mental landscape of what have been termed “the affective disorders” (Styron 2004: 38).

*Skating to Antarctica* posits the belief that the vivid whiteness of the Arctic wilderness represents the realisation of absence in its most perfect form. Noting that “colour was light and made the world liveable in, but from time to time it was necessary to get to the blank reality” (182), she suggests that it is possible to achieve a state of oblivion by immersing oneself in a landscape that personifies the negation of colour. To Diski, the Antarctic represents the best possible destination: a place where the peculiarities and shapes of landscape are concealed behind an endless vista of whiteness. By positioning herself – both physically and metaphorically – inside the whiteness of the Antarctic, she hopes to dispel her own sense of personal estrangement. Equally, in an environment where there are “no shadows [and] space has no depth” a movement into perpetual whiteness induces a welcome confrontation with the ever-present threat of personal extinction. With the obliteration of the vagaries and hues of colour, the glittering whiteness drains, not only the physical surroundings of visual variety, but also Diski’s fear of annihilation. As she admits, “Death, of course [...] is what it is. A toying with the void that finally toys with us. In the face of the waiting I can’t escape, I head straight for its image and rest there for a while” (182).

Diski’s explanation for the significance of whiteness to what she self-deprecatingly refers to as “my mental health recuperation plan,” is replete with literary allusions, the most notable being Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). As the whale that Ahab pursues in the novel is said to be “a dreadful white,” Melville includes a chapter on the manifest meaning of whiteness, entitled “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Like Diski, he views whiteness as symbolising absence and negation, yet his interpretation of such emptiness is markedly different; believing that the retreat of the recognisable colour patterns from the Polar seas is suggestive of “a void behind the appearance of
things” (Spufford 1996: 90), Melville rejects the idea that it may be possible to initiate a peaceful, psychic migration into the Arctic landscape. In fact, the visible absence of colour is indicative of “a colourless [...] atheism from which we shrink” (Spufford 1996: 90). In Melville’s philosophy, the horror of whiteness lies both in its utter transparency, and the reminder it gives that nature is merely a signifier, marking the realisation that “the palsied universe lies before us like a leper” (Spufford 90).

For Diski, however, broaching the void through an immersion in whiteness induces attraction rather than terror and the originality of her approach becomes clearer when attempting to contextualise Skating to Antarctica within the genre of similar, non-medical writings on chronic depression. Even a cursory reading of the numerous first-hand accounts of the devastating effects of the condition, reveals a uniform tendency to invoke its reality through recourse to images of “darkness” or “blackness.” William Styron, in his aptly named memoir Darkness Visible, evokes “depression’s dark tempest” and notes how “the grey drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain” (2004: 49). The British writer Alan Garner, who reputedly suffered from a serious depressive illness for many years has written of an occasion when, on looking out at a beautiful summer morning, he felt “the light [...] going out. I could see, but as if through a dark filter” (Jamison 1997: 104). Roman Gary, a notable French author and notorious bon vivant, who committed suicide while still a comparatively young man, described his own depression as “this leaden and poisonous mood the colour of verdigris” (Styron 2004: 18). Andrew Solomon succinctly summarises the ubiquitousness of such images:

Depressives use the phrase ‘over the edge’ all the time to delineate the passage from pain to madness. This very physical description frequently entails falling into the abyss. [...] When asked, people describe the abyss pretty consistently. In the first place, it is dark. You are falling away from the sunlight towards a place where the shadows are black. (Solomon 2001: 27)

Even if Diski’s depiction of depression is remarkably free of such images it is clear that her urge to, as she puts it, “write white and shades of white” (1997: 120) also functions as a rite de passage in which she is forced to confront a plethora of conflicting emotions regarding her
mother. Diski’s mother – a Londoner of Eastern European descent – vanished from her only daughter’s life when the latter was in her late teens and has never attempted to renew contact in any shape or form. Prior to her journey to Antarctica, Diski becomes disconcerted when her own daughter Chloe informs her of an intention to seek information regarding her maternal grandmother’s whereabouts. After unsuccessfully attempting to persuade Chloe of the utter futility of the enterprise, Diski is forced to recognise the real possibility that, upon her return from Antarctica, she may well be confronted with news concerning her mother’s death. Although she claims that “[a]t the idea of her being dead, I could not summon a single thought, nor the hint of a feeling” (46), Diski seeks, both consciously and unconsciously, a negotiation with her past in order to understand the reasons why she feels such an overwhelming indifference to her mother’s fate.

In this respect, although Skating to Antarctica is essentially a memoir – albeit one that employs a somewhat unconventional narrative form – there are clear elements of the traditional Bildungsroman in the text. The process of maturation that operates as a central tenet of the Bildungsroman is most evident in the damaging effects that her parents’ manipulative personalities have had on her ability to feel. When recollecting the early years of her life, Diski reverts to metaphors of ice to explain why she “didn’t seem to know [...] how to feel how I felt” (1997: 80). She recalls that her mother’s initial pleasure in watching her daughter skate was quickly replaced by a profound disillusionment:

“... My mother dreamed of making me into an ice princess but something went wrong. What she got, to her bitter disappointment, though I think the irony may have been lost on her, was an ice maiden of another kind altogether.” (19)

Diski’s withdrawal into a state of emotional nullification and coldness can be viewed as a defensive response to her mother’s frequent hysterical outbursts of rage. Suffering from chronic disappointment at the manner in which her life has embraced professional and personal failure, Diski’s mother’s overwhelming sense of despair manifests itself in dramatic, exhibitionist displays of uncontrollable emotion, during which “she would accuse and curse. Her resentment and disappointment lived on the surface of her skin, trembling on her lips,
When faced with such a volatile environment, Diski acquires a predilection for emotional absenteeism and by appearing to be without feelings, she attempts to successfully negotiate and circumvent the chaos that is rapidly enveloping her world. Interestingly, her desire to become an “ice-maiden” is accentuated by her creation of an alternative persona called “Jennifer,” a creative invention whom she feels to be both intimately related to, and yet distant from, her “real self.” Jennifer – who is described as “part separate incarnation and part remembering self” – serves as a means by which Diski can investigate, not only philosophical questions concerning the nature of memory itself, but also how her childhood propensity to project feelings of pain onto a fictive alter ego, served a valuable function: “Jennifer as story suited me. I could look at her, think about her [...] from the distance of a story-teller or historian” (185). It becomes clear, however, that this attempt to distance, divide and compartmentalise experience ultimately leads to a freezing of emotion. Diski herself admits that, throughout the period of her mother’s mental illness, “emotionally I was as absent, I think, as she was” (196). This proclivity to disengage emotionally continues even after Diski is forcibly removed from her home and is sent to live with her foster parents: “I took care to keep my distance, and if I longed for comfort and love, I would under no circumstances ask for it” (193).

Diski’s investigation into her past also reveals a further, disturbing, indication of why she became emotionally frozen; when physically revisiting the domestic setting of her formative years, she discovers, not only evidence of her father’s frequent philandering, but also the fact that she has been sexually molested by her parents. It is not surprising therefore that her initial sense of emotional reconnection to her mother, and the beginning of the abeyance of her ice-queen persona, should centre upon a period prior to such an event; that is, the period of gestation in her mother’s womb. While sailing to South Georgia, the combination of the internal rhythm of the sea, together with the rocking of the boat, reminds her of the unavoidable fact that at one time she was suspended in the amniotic fluids of her mother’s body. Commenting that “I wondered that I had never thought about the fact of my mother – my mother – as my gestation site” (78), she admits: “It came to me as an incredible thought, but the strength and sensual-
ity of my delight on the being on the ocean made it certain. It must have been nice in there” (78). The realisation that “it must have been nice in there” and the subsequent thawing of frozen emotion that accompanies it is combined with a growing sense of perspective, verging on acceptance: “Some things I’ll never get away from, not even in the furthest reaches of the South Atlantic, but with a bit of effort, I can recognise them as a passing wind blowing through me to the bone, an act of nature that isn’t personal” (166). When she writes that “[a] great sense of freedom settled over me like a pure white goose-down quilt” (220) we are aware that she is referring to more than just her appreciation of the seeming infinitude of the Antarctic’s uninhabited regions. Indeed, this new-found equilibrium remains evident even when Diski returns home to London and is informed that her daughter has received a death certificate stating that Rachael Simmons (Diski’s mother) had died in March 1988, at the Royal Sussex Hospital, Brighton.

_Skating to Antarctica_ knowingly engages with Antarctica, not simply as a literal place, but also as a location of the mind. Diski’s imaginative response to what has traditionally been perceived as an inhospitable landscape allows her to view the Antarctic as a mental space, signifying a complex system of images and symbols. The interconnecting metaphors of skating, ice and numbed emotion provide a rich tapestry of associations which imbue the Antarctic region with more than just physical actuality. By revealing the link between depression and emotional blockage and critically engaging with the associations traditionally centred on the experience of oblivion, Diski’s text ultimately challenges many preconceived ideas concerning literary representations of the Polar regions. Her literal voyage has functioned primarily as a symbol for her attempt to locate an interior psychological terrain. The depiction of “frozen” or cold emotions is foregrounded in a complex usage of vulnerability and chaos, alternated with perceptions of solidity and permanence. These themes are examined within a fragmentary narrative structure which emphasises the experience of repetition, and dichotomisation – past/present, literal/metaphorical, cold emotions/emotional hysteria, etc. – and which also embodies elements of a traditional detective story. Part memoir, part travelogue, it frequently subverts its serious intentions with an occasional dose of levity, not to say irony. The latter quality is most evident in the fact that it is only in the Antarctic – a region traditionally viewed as
being cold enough to freeze all feeling – that Diski is able to escape emotional rigidity and reconnect with feelings that have been blocked and frozen in time.

Although Diski’s engagement with what could fruitfully be termed the “psychic margins” of human experience and her recognition of the intermittent attractiveness of oblivion could perhaps be viewed as verging on the idiosyncratic, her insight into what she terms “the pressure of actuality” (1997: 115) that constitutes the human condition imbues her text with universal significance. At the conclusion of a narrative in which she admits that “the truth or otherwise of a book about Antarctica and my mother [doesn’t] depend upon arriving at a destination” (1997: 220), it is precisely this sense of recognition that leads to an acknowledgement that Diski’s text engages with metaphors of ice, skating and frozen emotion in a manner that is ultimately both insightful and stimulating.

NOTES

1 Jenny Diski was born in 1947 in London, where she has lived most of her life. At the time of writing (2007) she has authored eight novels and three books of travel, two collections and a volume of short stories.

2 As Lopez points out, this view of the Antarctic was reproduced in the European landscape painting of the period, the subject of which was British Arctic exploration: “The theme was remarkably consistent – a nation blessed by God, at war with the elements in a treacherous landscape. The Arctic they painted was a place beyond the pale of civilisation, a beast that preyed on virtue and enterprise” (1986: 226). An interesting comparison can be made here, with the luminest tradition in nineteenth-century American landscape painting which suffused the productions with what art critic John Russell has called “the healing light” of the Polar region (in Lopez 1986: 226).

REFERENCES


