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Mirrors and Madness:
A. G. Mojtabai’s *Mundome*

CAROL BOOTH OLSON

A. G. Mojtabai opens *Mundome* with an image of dissolution and decay. The landscape she describes—like those of Pynchon, Barth, and Barthelme—is in the process of breaking down, losing its vitality and wearing away:

> When I think of our library I think of nothing less than the archive of the human estate, the house of the memory of man, and more than a house, memory itself, and more than memory, the slow cess of the spirit: vanity and devotion, illusion, and the martyred rose of prophecy—torn, yet living still. “Excrementum spiritus,” says Arragan-Horgan. We take it all in.

> We take them all in the cranks, the scholars ungowned, the weary, the sick. We call them all, without distinction, “readers.” Only last week, one of our readers died over his prop, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a section on the life of the salmon. We didn’t know until closing time, and by then his fingers were blue. It was a clean death. He was an old man and died naturally as old men die. He died of attrition.

Through her initial depiction of the moldering library, Mojtabai effectively juxtaposes external setting and internal psychology, providing the reader with access to the mind of her protagonist, Richard Henken. For the library in which Richard works as a “specialist in ephemera and fugitive materials” (151) is at once a symbol of the deteriorating consciousness of modern man and an objective correlative for Richard’s own psychological condition. Mojtabai’s discussion of the corrosion of collective memory and the debilitation of the human spirit mirrors the impoverishment of Richard’s own inner being and the “attrition” of his mental stability.

*Mundome* is in the tradition of what has been called the waste land novel in which “all energies are inverted and result in death and destruction
instead of love, renewal, or fulfillment.” When one of the librarians in the novel comments “God, what a dump! This place is a warehouse, cold storage . . . It’s dead. Unreal” (27-28), Eliot’s “Unreal City” of The Waste Land immediately comes to mind. Indeed, the patrons of the disintegrating library—the lonely, the weary, the refugees and outcasts whose misery lies “like silt over the tables and chairs” (12)—recall the living-dead who inhabit Eliot’s poem. Mojtabai’s characters share spiritual and emotional barrenness with their predecessors. They are isolated from one another; they can connect “Nothing with nothing.” But in the Shamrock Bar and Grill, a customer, rather than the bartender, reminds the crowd that time is running out: “I’m killing time because it’s killing me” (93).

Although Richard recognizes that the library has “ceased to live” (78), he continues to go through the motions to maintain a “pantomime of life” there, because he has far more terrifying “desert places” within. Mojtabai indicates a great deal about the isolation and sterility of Richard’s inner landscape through a wet dream which he describes:

It didn’t matter when I got home. Only sleep mattered. I was slowly covered by a blanket of nothingness. Sometime later, the blanket became a hanged man’s hood. I woke, heart racing, to find myself stewing in my own juice. I had just had a wet dream without a dream. Without any companionable illusion of human comfort, not even a face, without benefit of desire or pleasure or any erotic imagery whatsoever. I simply rushed out of myself into the surrounding desolation. (97)

In essence, the library is a backdrop against which Richard enacts his own drama, his struggle to save himself from “drowning in [his] own wastes” (100). His struggle becomes more desperate and more futile as the novel progresses: “Page by page the psyche is laid bare, and with it the feeble defenses that people use to keep hold on their sanity.” When the stage clears, Richard Henken is hopelessly entrapped with the prison of madness.

At the outset of Mundome, Richard is anxiously awaiting the arrival of his sister, Meg, who has just been released from a mental institution after many years of confinement. He appears to be a conscientious man—rational, reliable, and determined to do whatever he can to aid in Meg’s recovery. He is so dedicated to the idea of making the “sweet dream of reason” (21) a reality for Meg that he often becomes mentally exhausted from “thinking through” her “every motion” and “straining to inhabit her body” (20) to give her the energy to perform simple tasks like opening and closing her hand, eating lunch, or taking a walk. He evaluates her progress daily—often projecting “signs of wellness” (91) onto her which are merely
reflections of his own wishes. In short, Meg's rehabilitation is the focal point of Richard's existence and his reason for being: "We have an unspoken agreement. If Meg's happy, I'm happy; if Meg smiles, I smile" (23).

One tends to accept Richard as a stabilizing force in Meg's life because he has assumed responsibility for and is genuinely devoted to her. But Mojtahai intimates early on that Richard is too fragile psychically to act as anyone else's guardian or therapist. Although he creates the illusion of being well adjusted in his profession, the library is obviously as much a refuge for Richard as for his patrons who come in "to get warm, or to snatch a bit of sleep, or to get close to people without having to pay a fare" (12). He is, by his own admission, an "uncommon fellow" (13), an outcast who does not seem to fit in with his co-workers. Outside the office, Richard has an even greater difficulty relating to people. He either puts "a pane of glass" (100) between himself and others or he accosts or "obstructs" (39) people in a manner which causes instant rejection. By cutting himself off from others, Richard consciously denies himself access to meaningful relationships: "My life was full of echoes. . . . There was more and more space as time went on, fewer people" (123). Mojtahai reinforces the disconnection between world and self (Mundo-me) in the epigraph for the novel: "In this world I can affect nothing outside myself." She also indicates that Richard is not alone in his anxiety over and aversion to getting involved: "On past midnight, a man cried out 'Help me! Help!' I raced to the window. Others must have heard him as well as I, for there were repeated sounds of windows slamming shut, sounds regular as shots. Then quiet, quiet" (116).

With perhaps the exception of Tim (Meg's fiance of sorts), the only person Richard makes an effort to relate to is Meg; and she is, at best, remote and, more often than not, unreachable. Tim was originally attracted to Meg because of her "Mona Lisa quality" (76), but later he learns that her air of peacefulness and tranquility is an illusion disguising "blankness," nothingness. Now and then, Richard detects a spark of animation in Meg, but she can lapse into catatonia, becoming a statue, without a moment's notice.6 At the department store, for example, she freezes in the aisle and becomes a mannequin; her behavior, then, is not far removed from the "fixtures" (26) who patronize the library.

In many respects, Meg and Richard appear to be exact opposites of one another. Meg is the irrational side of the psyche; Richard is the rational. Meg is the secret female component of her masculine counterpart. She is identified with the body while he is associated with the mind. There is "no flow between Meg and the world" (99); in her periodic metamorphoses into a statue, she exhibits fixity. Richard, on the other hand, is fluidity: "I
was water. Others shaped it” (76). Meg is also basically apathetic and passive while Richard proceeds through life at a frantic pace—forcing himself to fill every moment as time closes in on him. She prefers “paralysis” and turns to stone “as if to annul action, as if the action, any outgoing action” is a grievous lapse” (85).

When one looks closely at these characters, however, some similarities in their personalities begin to emerge which make them difficult to categorize. For instance, Meg and Richard do not always display irrational and rational behavior, respectively. Meg is often extremely perceptive in her assessment of self and others, and her so-called schizophrenic ramblings are sometimes very sensible. After she froze into place and refused to budge during the peace demonstration, Meg explained that she could not move because she was “standing to a thought” (88). One immediately comprehends her tribute to the march that was taking place before her. Meg’s diagnosis of Miss Punch at the mental hospital who is testing Meg’s sanity by rattling off maxims like “The hot coal burns—the cold one blackens” (133) and evaluating Meg’s responses is also quite reasonable. Meg imperiously informs the psychologist: “You’re insane, that goes without saying” (134).

One hears that statement over and over in Mundane. Meg usually utters it in a matter-of-fact way to let people know that the seeds of madness exist in every individual. She needs to remind Richard, now and then, that they are “birds of a feather” (132) rather than polar opposites. One of the cases discussed in Laing’s The Divided Self concerns a girl named Julie who manifests three separate personalities—the bad internal mother, the big sister, and the good little girl. The role of the big sister in the triad is to protect her less rational but essentially good younger sister from her evil mother. The sanity of the big sister dimension of Julie “was, if you like, split off and encapsulated.” In a sense, Richard attempts to do just the opposite—split off and encapsulate his irrational, unsociable, and sexual impulses and project them onto Meg. Rank has explained the process as a “defense mechanism by which an individual separates himself from a part of his self which he wishes to escape.” But Meg resists being the scapegoat and continually mocks her brother for refusing to recognize his own reflection.

Richard feels that his life is always in a state of flux as opposed to his sister whose world is fixed. As a result, he is always searching for structure—some way to order the chaos he perceives in self and world. His longing is evident in the way he regards the buildings in the city: “I stood for
awhile leaning against the wall of the building, comforted, cased by its sheer mass and immobility, the intrepidity of cement and steel, holding firm, never running away" (103). In his quest for structure, Richard exhibits a kind of moral and social rigidity which parallels Meg's physical paralysis. In the sanctuary of the library, everything must be neatly ordered, categorized, and shelved—or the staff will have to answer to the efficiency expert. Richard tries to impose these same requirements on his personal life: "I must curb myself, really I must. Nothing but essential points and essential motions from here on out, nothing devious or fanciful or stray" (104). He has no room for spontaneity or emotional involvement in his daily routine; he has no outlet for impulses and desires because he feels compelled to maintain the illusion that he is "Richard the good" (92). After years of repression, denial, and withdrawal, Richard is nothing but an empty shell—he can give a "careful rendition" (111) of love, hatred, anger, fear, and lust, but he can feel nothing. The perfectly blank face which he encounters in the mirror each morning is an indication of his inner impoverishment. Significantly, Richard's lack of expression recalls Meg's "Mona Lisa quality": she is, after all, not the cause of her brother's psychological problems but a convenient excuse for his self-willed isolation.

Meg's precarious mental condition and her need for constant supervision provide Richard with a plausible reason to avoid having to connect with any other human being. The precise nature of his relationship with and commitment to Meg remains a puzzle until Sue, a library staff member whom Richard attempts to take on a date, makes sexual advances toward him. After Richard tells Sue that he does not want to be involved with her because of Meg, she asks who Meg is. He responds, "She's in my mind. . . . We live together" (94). His comment confirms the reader's growing suspicion that Meg may literally be a figment of Richard's imagination or, more precisely, an aspect of his psyche. Part of the confusion which arises over whether Meg is real or illusory stems from the manner in which the book is written. In a letter Mojtabai notes, "I wrote the book first with Richard and Meg as one character, then again as two, leaving in all the ambiguities of the first version without committing myself to either version. The book can read, and has been read either way." One also begins to wonder if Richard is a dimension of Meg's psyche rather than vice versa. Mojtabai leaves the question of identity unresolved. Meg's comment, "Oh that's Richard, Richard the true Meg the false Richard the good Meg the bad" (92), can be interpreted as either "Richard the true, Meg the false, Richard the good, Meg the bad" or "Richard the true Meg, the false Richard, the good Meg."
Once the reader is aware of the possibility that Richard and Meg may be psychological components of a multiple personality, many seemingly ambiguous references in the novel become clear. For example, when Meg first returns from the asylum, Miss Kay hits her in the back to force her to walk down the corridor of their apartment building; but Richard rather than Meg feels the blow: "It hit me with a jab in the small of my back. Hey, I felt that!" (22). Again, the morning after Richard contemplates massaging Meg's hand to help her unclench her fingers, he awakens with his fingers "stiff as bullets" and "welded" to his palms (32). The scene which best epitomizes the psychic union of Richard and Meg occurs during their picnic in the park:

She veered off into a playground and I caught up with her there. She had saddled herself on the end of a seesaw and was peering up at me expectantly with the wide eyes of a child. I saddled myself on the opposite end to counterbalance her. She is so light, I felt as if I were playing a dangerous game on a loose diving board. Our motion was abrupt, choppy. We rose and fell, rose and fell, now Meg, now myself ascendant. (23)

At this point, the personalities of the two characters almost fuse, but their fusion is really part of a "dangerous game" of balance and counterbalance. A very subtle battle is being waged for dominance and control.

Numerous references to the theme of the double occur throughout the novel, reinforcing the inextricable relationship of Richard and Meg. For instance, the fate of Richard's predecessor at the library, Ernest Coke, foreshadows Richard's own descent into madness: "At the end, he was talking to himself all the time. Loud. Man, it was loud. Like he wanted to provoke somebody—or maybe it was to drown out something—voices in his head or something, because it sounded like answers to questions nobody was asking" (15). The life of the would-be writer who brings in the remains of his book—which is his "one reason for going on" (63)—in a marmalade jar also resembles Richard's. His description of the "junk, trash," and "rubbish" that he peddled all his life sums up his existence and Richard's as well. Significantly, Richard files the ashes of the book, an accumulation of waste, in "F" for "fugitive and ephemeral materials" under the subheading of "fragmentary" (67). Richard's office is an appropriate place for the burial of Mr. Valparosi's manuscript because it is, in itself, a kind of tomb. As Valparosi notes, "That dump you work in gives me the creeps. Closed-in like. It isn't a real office. How can you stand it?" (69). Finally, "poor devoted Tim" who lets his best years go by in deference to a
sham engagement to Meg—Tim, who “lives like a man in a condemned building, like an uninvited guest at his own feast” (35)—is a reflection of Richard.

One key symbol used to convey the idea of doubleness is the mirror. When Richard looks into the mirror, he sees a “composite photograph” representing the duality of his nature which is “cleft down the middle” and “badly spliced” (124). While one side of his mouth smiles, the other leers; one eye squints and the other gazes. Richard concludes, “One side of my face was surely blabbing on the other, backbiting, fibbing, spreading outrageous slanders or, at the very least, giving away my jokes in advance.” He also admits that his life is a “procession of mirrors” (140) in which he is disoriented because he is always twice removed from genuine interaction. As a child, Richard was content to be Meg’s shadow and even earned the nickname “Little Me-Too” (121) for his efforts. One of Richard’s earliest recollections illustrates a tendency of both himself and his sister to step back and look at themselves dispassionately as if at actors in a play: “Meg was crying as before but, at the same time, watching herself in the mirror. . . . I was watching her watch herself cry” (121).

The scene suggests the degree to which Richard’s preoccupation with his sister is related to his obsession with himself. Robert Rogers has noted that the double can be a conscience figure, the diabolic other self, projected wish-fulfillment, or a reflection of narcissism. The narcissistic impulse may underlie Richard’s often conflicting emotions concerning Meg. For example, Richard assesses the problems which would face Meg if she were to recover her mental health:

The trouble with Meg is that she has a kind of integrity, a strange integrity, it is true, the integrity of a vacuum chamber. In order for her to get well, she’d have to be shattered, and the world would rush in with conditions and demands, real flesh on the knife. It would be a crime, a crime that begs to be committed. (56)

Part of Meg’s “integrity” is that she is not restrained or inhibited by social conventions and can respond to people and situations exactly as she pleases. She can tell the psychologist at the hospital that she is insane or fall asleep in the middle of her birthday party without regard to how other people might feel or what they might think. Richard envies his sister’s freedom from social responsibility as well as her imperviousness to loneliness and pain, and he wonders “Which is the false theater, which the true?” (24). Is the reality of Meg preferable to the illusion of order, propriety, and rationality maintained by Richard? Mojtabai intimates that the in-
violativeness of Meg’s insanity holds another attraction for Richard. His urge to commit a “crime” and “shatter” the sanctuary has sexual implications for Richard that he is unable to confront. His concern with propriety camouflages certain repressed impulses which he is not fully conscious of and does not comprehend. The underlying theme of incest and violation (deflowering) is evident:

Lately I’ve been noticing a contraction of Meg’s left hand, the fingers clenched so tightly that they leave red holes in the palm. I’m going to try massaging the hand each morning, fifteen minutes at a time. This means I’ll have to get up before seven. I’m also going to see whether a rubber ball, wedged between fingers and palm and kept there as long as possible, will help break the stiffness. I expect—the first time—it will feel like forcing a bud. (39)

Perhaps to compensate for his unconscious desires, Richard is preoccupied with Meg’s purity. He chooses to see her as both sexless and saintly: her hands “are the hands of an icon… The skin films over ivory tapers of bone” (19). He is, however, tormented that she may be the whore rather than the virgin and that he may bear responsibility for her desecration: “It’s not true what they say about my sister. I didn’t break and enter her, nor have I ever mounted her, ever. She is seamless, sealed, no man’s pouch, no vile receptacle. No, she’s not like other women” (98).Richard’s incestuous impulses may be a product of his own narcissism. Rogers points out that “the love of Narcissus for himself transcends mere admiration or egotism. That he wants in a literal way to possess himself sexually, is symbolized by his attempt to kiss his image in the pool.” Perhaps Richard, too, has fallen in love with his reflection—Meg. Significantly, Mojtabai describes Meg kissing the mirror early in the novel. The bisexuality of the Barai—creatures that Richard conjures up in one of his daydreams—also relates to narcissism. The Barai are a race of tiny people who have “no need for one another” because “they are themselves, each, both sexes” (113). When in despair, the Barai physically turn inward upon themselves: “All the senses close in and the outer world diminishes to a point” (114). When in a state of exhilaration, the Barai, like the hanged man, discharge their seed upon the ground, which “comes to nothing” in the waste land.

The pivotal point at which Richard loses his hold on reality and crosses that fine line between reason and madness occurs when Tim announces that he is abandoning Meg for another woman. Richard responds to the news like someone who has just lost a lover, and one begins to suspect that he may also have homosexual tendencies which he has been unable to face. All Richard can remember is kissing someone and mixing up “the
accelerator and the brake" (141). The remark refers not to a literal event but indicates, on a symbolic level, that Richard can no longer curb his passions or control his actions. He is desperately trying to remain "lucid," but he is aware that he cannot "hold out" much longer (141-42). As Richard becomes increasingly confused about the nature of his identity and his sanity is brought more and more into question, the novel itself becomes fragmented in form and content. The form of the novel now is reminiscent of a dreamscape Richard describes: "My dream is all shifting surface, no scale, no demarcations, only locations, punctures or mouth holes, where terror and lust are the sole inhabitants, and people are only the sites for these, only the tags" (72-73). Mojabai purposely chooses to "dislocate the reader, to shake the reader up, to dissolve the solidarity of things around him, to clear the ground for feeling in a new way." She intends that we experience the novel as participants and not as spectators, that we actively "feel Richard's vertigo." 

When Richard senses that he is losing his grasp, he becomes even more obsessed with efficiency and order. Filing away all the minutiae, keeping every detail in its place, might ward off the inevitable: "The date is very important, the name and the number attached to the day. It's a charm against--" (20). But the library grows more unreal each day: "Life goes on, but only a simulacrum of life; the blood no longer flows" (78). Just as the old delapidated books in the house of human memory—"the singular obscure monographs flaking away into chips and dust, the inconvenient books, the casualties with missing title pages... moisture, fungal mottle, firebrats, book lice, wood roaches... acid embrittlement, and time—time" (78)—are all exhumed and come to light when the shiny outer layer of new editions is peeled away in preparation for the coming of the efficiency expert, so Richard's facade wears away as his "psyche is laid bare." Both the physical and mental landscapes are characterized by disorder, neglect, and decay.

As mentioned earlier, the mirror plays a crucial role throughout the novel in defining Richard's relationship with Meg and in indicating the degree of his mental and emotional stability. After Tim's announcement, mental reflection merges with physical reflection to suggest Richard's gradual imprisonment within his own distorted thoughts:

What a strangeness the tongue in my mouth, a fat fish, isn't it? I have this habit of watching my reflections. Some thin, some fat, some false, some true. In fact, my life is nothing but a procession of mirrors. What with my limited mobility and lowered prospects, what else can anyone expect? There's no help for it, nothing for me to do
but reflect, reflect, reflect, until my own tongue lies like meat in my mouth and the hair on my head creeps like an alien vegetation. My own name sounds Turkish to me. (141-42)

Richard's feeling of remoteness from self and his sense of hopelessness about the future increase until he admits defeat and ceases to struggle to maintain his sanity: "Trapped between myself and the mirror, I cannot run. It is better to lie between the sheets, close to the horizontal, all fight gone, taking whatever comes" (151). The image of entrapment is reminiscent of both Plath's bell jar inside of which Esther Greenwood suffocates and the mirror-maze that Barth's Ambrose forlornly wanders through in Lost in the Funhouse. For all three characters, isolation from other humans eventually leads to desolation in the inner self. Richard ends up pleading with invisible strangers, "Everyone going so soon? Leaving so early? But we have so much more to say to each other" (138); and he wonders, "Have I come that far? So far that there's no one for me to talk to but the wall?"

While other contemporary novels, such as Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Greenberg's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, and Plath's The Bell Jar, close with an escape or a reprieve from the mental hospital and the world of madness, Mundane concludes with the suggestion that Richard's derangement is irremediable. In two of the final scenes, Richard appears to be incarcerated in the asylum. Mojtabai writes, "Little by little the stage clears. Until there's only Meg and myself, myself and Meg . . . tapping our spoons against our glasses which are not glass." When Richard says he is trapped between himself and the mirror, between the sheets, with all fight gone, one pictures him in a straight-jacket or a cold pack—especially when he adds, "I cut my hands to reach you, Meg. You've got to stick by me now" (151).

Suddenly, Meg has a turn to take the leading role in the drama. When Richard was the concerned relative and Meg the disturbed patient, he inquired, "How do you feel?" and she responded, "I feel with my fingers. Why? How do you feel?" (25). Now, wearing Richard's face, Meg asks the familiar question, and Richard automatically utters the programmed reply. Similarly, Richard, rather than Meg, now endeavors in vain to remember the date "as a charm against----." One is reminded of the rhythm of the seesaw ("Now Meg, now myself ascendant") for a transfer of power has taken place.

As the day commences and the novel closes, Richard informs us that "the screaming begins again" (154). One wonders whether the screaming and the other morning "messages" that "choke" the pipes emanate from the
mental hospital or from Richard's apartment in the heart of the city. In the same way that Meg and Richard have fused when she assumes his face, the inner and outer landscapes have become one; the world itself is the madhouse. Although Richard's drama is played out since he has no way "to settle accounts" or "have the last word" (154), it still may have a final message for the reader. Mojtabai suggests, "Only look within: the potentialities for almost anything are present in everyone." Meg might say it differently: "You're insane, that goes without saying."

NOTES

3 Mojtabai based her readers upon the patrons of the New York Public Library in New York City where people do wander in off the street.
5 In a letter to me dated 23 March 1975, Mojtabai wrote: "The epigraph is mistranslated. The New York Times Sunday Book Review started it, but the Washington Post set it right. It should read: In this world I can do nothing outside myself. Or, to phrase it slightly differently: In this world I can affect nothing outside myself." The epigraph is: "In hoc mundo nec extra me nihil agere posse."
6 When she was a student at Antioch, Mojtabai (then Ann Grace Alpher) took a summer job as an aide in occupational therapy at Chestnut Lodge Sanitarium in Rockville, Maryland. In a tape recording that she made for a class I taught at UCLA, Mojtabai says that she was assigned to try to relate to "a severely withdrawn, mute, immobile patient, a woman who had been considered catatonic schizophrenic for twelve years," because she responded to Mojtabai but would not communicate with her psychiatrist. "This catatonic woman," Mojtabai continues, "the model for Meg, presented me with a more or less blank screen to project upon and I did project." At first, she perceived "signs of wellness" in her patient (much as Richard does in Meg); but she later became disillusioned: "I began to feel myself on the side of the patient and opposed to the staff. I've learned this is a fairly common reaction. The patients at the Lodge seem to be more imaginative and sensitive than most of the staff members. I began to acquaint normality with dullness. In time, I was brought up short. The patients were not all that sensitive. I was brought up short for one thing with the sheer otherness of my patient, my special patient. Again and again, I had to confront the fact that my attempt to understand her condition was a devious way of probing my own condition. When I left the job, I was in a very shaky state; and my patient was no better."
This is something Mojtabai's "special" patient at Chestnut Lodge Sanitarium actually said to explain why she had become immobile during a walk the two were taking.

Mojtabai witnessed sanity tests like this when she worked at Creedmoor State Hospital in New York. In a postcard of 10 August 1975 Mojtabai mentions that she saw "some of the horrors of institutionalization" at Creedmoor.


Although Richard's fluidity and Meg's fixity may seem unrelated, John Vernon, *The Garden and The Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth Century Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 27, points out that these two responses to the world are essentially the same: "Total frenzy and complete immobility are in many respects the same, since both eliminate the temporal dimension of becoming."

In her taped discussion of *Mundane*, Mojtabai suggests that "Richard's goodness may be parasitic upon Meg's badness."

Mojtabai's letter to me, 23 March 1975.

Rogers, p. 30.

Richard's denial of incestuous impulses and his insistence upon Meg's purity recalls the relationship between Quentin and Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Rogers, p. 20.

Mojtabai's tape on *Mundane*.

Mojtabai's tape on *Mundane*.

Mojtabai's letter of 23 March 1975.