Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies

Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by
Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

Thinking Out of the Box
in Literary and Cultural Studies

Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VI. Contemporary Challenges

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

EMILIO AMIDEO, PhD in English, is a Research Fellow in English Language and Translation at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. His research interests lie at the intersection of English language and translation studies, cultural and postcolonial studies, gender studies, critical race theory, ecocriticism and body studies. He was a visiting scholar at Northwestern University (Department of African American Studies, 2015) and at Goldsmiths University of London (Department of Media and Communication Studies, 2016). He is a member of the editorial board of *Journal of Gender Studies* and of the advisory board of *JAm It! – Journal of American Studies in Italy*. He has published articles on James Baldwin, Isaac Julien, Essex Hemphill, Thomas Glave, Jackie Kay, Keith Jarrett and Dean Atta. His most recent publications include the monographs *Queer Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature* (Northwestern University Press, 2021) and *Il corpo dell'altro. Articolazioni queer della maschilità nera in diaspora* (ETS, 2021).

EMANUELA AMMENDOLA is a PhD student at the University of Naples Parthenope. Her research interests include translation studies, LSP and AVT. She studied linguistic and cultural mediation at the University of Naples l'Orientale with a bachelor's degree dissertation titled 'La memoria nella lingua. Lo Yiddish nel gergo di Berlino' (2014). Shifting her attention to English, she got her master's degree in LSP at the University of Naples 'l'Orientale' with a dissertation on the audiovisual translation from English into Italian of children's movies, titled 'La multimodalità della traduzione audiovisiva. *The Little Mermaid*: adattamento linguistico e culturale' (2017).

ANNA ANSELMO is a Junior Lecturer in English at the University of Enna KORE. In 2011, she received her PhD from the Catholic University in Milan. From 2012 to 2019, she taught English for Specific Purposes at the University of Brescia, the University of Vallée d'Aoste and the

University of Milan. Her research interests focus on the long eighteenth century, Romantic periodicals, terminology theory and corpus linguistics. She has published articles on John Keats (2011, 2013) Seamus Heaney (2016), and Anglo-French fashion terminology between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2014). More recently, she has published her first book: *The Poetics of Uncontrollability in Keats's Endymion: Language Theory and Romantic Periodicals* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016).

ANDREW BRAYLEY was a *ricercatore* at the University of Catania, subsequently a *professore a contratto* and now a *cultore*, in the same institution. His research interests can be summed up in three words: *Shelley e dintorni*, with particular reference to Mary Shelley, her stepsister Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron. His first publication in this field was an article entitled 'Shelley's Image of Italy' and in 1992 he read a paper entitled 'Shelley, Italy and Christianity' at a conference in Rome organized by Lilla Maria Crisafulli to celebrate the bicentenary of Shelley's birth. The following year he read a paper entitled 'The Phenomenon of Italomania' at a conference organized by Peter Vassallo of the University of Malta. Since 2001 he has taken part regularly in the AIA conferences and has read papers on Shelley, Mary and Claire. The publication (1995) of Claire's correspondence enabled him to prepare and read a paper entitled 'Claire Clairmont, God and the Catholic Church' at the 2001 conference in Catania.

MARCO CANANI is a Lecturer in English at the University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy. He received his PhD from the University of Milan with the dissertation *Vernon Lee and the Italian Renaissance: Plasticity, Gender, Genre*. Based on research conducted at Colby College (USA) and the University of Oxford (UK), the study was awarded an ESSE Bursary in 2014. He is a member of the Interuniversity Centre for the Study of Romanticism at the University of Bologna (CISR) and of the University Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE) at the University of Chieti-Pescara. His research interests include Romantic and fin-de-siècle literature and Anglo-Italian studies. In addition to articles on John Keats, P.B. Shelley, Vernon Lee, and A.J. Cronin, he has published the book *Ellenismi britannici. L'ellenismo nella poesia, nelle arti e nella cultura britannica dagli augustei al Romanticismo* (2014) and co-authored the volume *Introduzione allo studio della letteratura inglese* (2017).

Maria Elena Capitani holds a BA and an MA in English and French from the University of Parma (Italy), by which she was awarded the title of 'Doctor Europaeus' in 2016. In 2014 and 2015 she was a Visiting Scholar at the Universities of Barcelona (Spain) and Reading (UK). Her research interests lie in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British literature and culture, with a special focus on drama, fiction, intertextuality, identity, and adaptation/translation for the stage. She has presented papers at international conferences across Europe and published various articles and book chapters on contemporary British dramatists including Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Tony Harrison, Simon Stephens, David Greig, Liz Lochhead, Shelagh Delaney, and Harold Pinter. She teaches Anglophone Literature and History of English Culture at the University of Parma and is currently working on her first monograph, provisionally entitled *Contemporary British Appropriations of Greek and Roman Tragedies: The Politics of Rewriting* (Palgrave).

Rocco Coronato is Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Padua. His latest monograph is *Shakespeare, Caravaggio, and the Indistinct Regard* (Routledge, 2017). His work in progress deals with Shakespeare and complexity theory.

Elena Cotta Ramusino is Associate Professor at the University of Pavia, where she teaches English literature. She works mainly on Irish literature and twentieth-century authors. She has published books on W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Elizabeth Bowen. She has also worked on autobiography, the short story, contemporary translations from the classics and the Gothic. As to the first area she has published essays on Elizabeth Bowen's *Bowen's Court* and *Seven Winters*, Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, William Butler Yeats' *Autobiographies* and Richard Murphy's *The Kick*. As to the short story, she has published an article on Elizabeth Bowen's wartime short stories. She has written an article on Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* and on Ted Hughes's translations from the classics, with a focus on *Alcestis*. Finally, an article on Irish Gothic appeared in *Textus* in 2019.

Maria Luisa De Rinaldis is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Salento. Her research includes work on Anglo-Italian cultural exchange and translation in the early modern period,

Shakespearean criticism and interpretation, Walter Pater (*Corpi umani e corpi divini. Il personaggio in Walter Pater*, 2010). More recently she has investigated the representation of female subjectivity through song in Shakespeare and Fletcher (*Lingue e Linguaggi*, 2018) and contributed an essay on the reception of Shakespeare in Italy to the volume *Migrating Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

Maria Luigia Di Nisio holds a PhD in Human Sciences from 'G. D'Annunzio' University, Department of Philosophy and Pedagogical Sciences, where she has completed a research project on Victorian women poets and Darwinian science. She is now Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in English Literature in the Department of Literature, Arts and Social Sciences at 'G. D'Annunzio' University, Chieti-Pescara. Her research project focuses on women writers and the ancient classics in the nineteenth century. She has published articles on Amy Levy, Augusta Webster and Emily Pfeiffer. Her forthcoming monograph considers the relationship between poetry, evolution and women's emancipation in the work of Mathilde Blind, Amy Levy and Augusta Webster. She has also worked as a translator and has published Italian translations of contemporary novels, biographies and essays.

Annalisa Federici holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Perugia. Her main research areas are literary modernism, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, formal aspects in fiction, and the relationship between writing and psychological processes. She is the author of the books *Il linguaggio e la realtà. La narrativa modernista di Virginia Woolf e James Joyce* (2011) and *'In a Kind of Retrospective Arrangement': Essays on James Joyce and Memory* (2016), as well as of a number of critical essays on Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Ford Madox Ford, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor.

Andrea Fenice has recently completed his PhD in Scienze del Testo – Anglistica (English Studies) at Sapienza University in Rome. In his thesis he devised a theory of rhythm analysis based on narratology and semiotics, with a specific focus on the cognitive turn in narrative studies and how such theories can merge with more traditional semiotic approaches. Such a method was then applied to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and its adaptations in several media such as theatre, film, graphic novels and

television. On this topic, Fenice has also published in Italian and English; a first article, 'Il ritmo dell'*Agente Segreto*' appeared in *Anglistica Pisana*, and a second in *The Conradian,* titled 'Beyond Suspense: The Rhythm of Clues in *The Secret Agent*'; both explored, with different focusses, the complex rhythmic devices of the novel. He is currently working on refining his theoretical approach in order to create a method that can be applied to a wider variety of texts and media, and can be used to compare rhythmic strategies in intersemiotic adaptation.

Marta Fossati is a PhD candidate in Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Milan. Her research project investigates the South African short story in English in a diachronic perspective.

Ester Gendusa holds a Master of Arts in Gender, Culture and Politics from Birkbeck College (University of London) and a PhD in English literature from the University of Palermo where she teaches English Literature and Language as a part-time lecturer. Her research interests lie in the application of the theoretical paradigms of gender, post-colonial and black British cultural studies to the literary analysis of contemporary British and post-colonial women writers' works. The author of *Asimmetrie di genere e di razza in* The Grass Is Singing *di Doris Lessing* (Aracne, 2011) and *Identità nere e cultura europea. La narrativa di Bernardine Evaristo* (Carocci, 2014), she has written several articles and book chapters on Doris Lessing, Arundhaty Roy, Erna Brodber, Margaret Atwood as well as Pat Barker and published extensively on Bernardine Evaristo. She also edited the first collection of Evaristo's short stories, *Dove finisce il mondo* (Besa, 2015). She has recently published a critical edition of George Bernard Shaw's tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* (Aracne, 2020).

Francesca Guidotti is Assistant Professor of English literature at the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Bergamo. She has written quite extensively on English and American science fiction, especially on the cyborg and robot themes and on the British New Wave (*Cyborg e dintorni. Le formule della fantascienza,* 2003). Her research interests also include post-apocalyptic fiction (*Catastrofi. Disastri nucleari e incidenti spaziali nell'immaginario britannico,* 2020), the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, Romantic po-

etry, the reworking, remediation, and dissemination of literary classics and cultural icons (Shakespeare, Austen, Tolkien, *Frankenstein*), as well as the didactics of literature.

Giuliana Iannaccaro is Professor of English Literature and Anglophone Literatures at the Università degli Studi di Milano. She has published in the field of early modern English literature – on gender rhetoric, on polemic religious and political literature, and on Elizabeth I's foreign correspondence. A parallel field of research concerns South African literature in English, with a particular focus on the relationship between narrative, history, and ethics. She is currently working on mission literature in early twentieth-century South Africa.

Monica Manzolillo is Adjunct Professor at the University of Salerno. She holds a Master of Arts in European and Comparative Literary Studies from the University of Kent at Canterbury and a PhD in Literary and Linguistic Studies from the University of Salerno. Her research interests include modernist poetry, literature and media, the use of new media technology for teaching foreign literature. She has presented papers in national and international conferences. In addition to many articles, she has published the monograph *Studi su T.S. Eliot* and is currently working on *L'educazione linguistica e letteraria: un approccio integrato*, together with Bruna di Sabato (University Suor Orsola Benincasa, Napoli) and Linda Barone (University of Salerno) for the publisher UTET.

Luisa Marino is a PhD Candidate in English Language and Translation Studies at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. Her research project deals with the translation of body images and representations in Nigerian contemporary literature by women writers, from English into Italian. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Exeter (UK, 2020). Her research interests include: Translation Studies, Gender Studies, Stylistics, Cultural and Postcolonial Studies, Feminist Studies, Body Studies, Ecocriticism and Ecolinguistics. She has published articles on Translation and Gender, Translation and Paratexts and on the translation of Nigerian third-generation women writers into Italian.

Pierpaolo Martino is Senior Lecturer of English Literature at the University of Bari, Italy. His fields of enquiry include Modernism, postco-

lonial and cultural studies and Wilde studies. He has published on Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Colin MacInnes, Kamau Brathwaite, Paul Auster, Hari Kunzru, Hanif Kureishi, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Salman Rushdie, Nick Cave, Morrissey and Radiohead. He is the author of four monographs: *Virginia Woolf: la musica del faro* (2003), *Down in Albion: studi sulla cultura pop inglese* (2007), *Mark the Music. The Language of Music in English Literature from Shakespeare to Salman Rushdie* (2012), and *La Filosofia di David Bowie. Wilde, Kemp e la musica come teatro* (2016). He is the editor of *Exodus: studi sulla letteratura anglo-caraibica* (2009) and *Words and Music. Studi sui rapporti tra letteratura e musica in ambito anglofono* (2015).

GABRIELLA MILIA got a Master's Degree in Foreign Languages and Literature from the University of Cagliari. She is a tenured teacher of English Language and of Special Needs in a secondary school. She has worked for the University Language Centre of the University of Cagliari since 2003; she has taught several courses of General English Language and of English for Specific Purposes, and is currently involved in a pilot project meant to evaluate first-year students' spoken language levels of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. She has been a tutor and examiner (*cultrice della materia*) of English Language and Translation at the University of Cagliari since 2015. Her fields of interest and research include the theory and practice of translation, teaching English as a foreign language methodologies, and the acquisition of the English language.

MARIA GRAZIA NICOLOSI is lecturer in English Literature at the University of Catania, where she has taught English Literature as well as Cultural and Gender Studies. Her research interests focus on the ethics and aesthetics of contemporary women- and postcolonial writers. She has contributed to the Travel Literature Series of Agorà Edizioni directed by R. Portale; she has contributed with translations to G. Persico's anthology *Madonne, Maddalene e altre vittoriane*; she has also contributed to the 2019 issue of *Enthymema* edited by H. Aguilà Ruzola and D. Siviero. She has published essays and a monograph on Angela Carter, as well as essays and a monograph on Margaret Cavendish. She has published essays on J. Rhys, D. Dabydeen, A. Thorpe, J. Diski, C. Phillips, L. Appignanesi, and A.L. Kennedy. She is preparing a book on the poetics and politics of erotic dissidence in select women's fiction.

MARILENA PARLATI is Full Professor of British and Anglophone Literatures at the University of Padua (Italy). Her main areas of research are Anglophone literatures and cultures of the long nineteenth century, namely thing culture, commodity culture and waste; she also works on contemporary fiction related to trauma, disability, environmental and postcolonial cultural issues, suspended and altered embodiment, with a book on these issues forthcoming. She is currently writing a monograph on nuclear traces in modern and contemporary fiction.

GRETA PERLETTI is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Trento, Italy. Her research interests focus on the interaction between literary and scientific discourse. In addition to several articles and chapter, she has published a monograph on Victorian mental sciences and culture (*Le ferite della memoria. Il ritorno dei ricordi nella cultura vittoriana*, Bergamo University Press, 2008) and a monograph on pulmonary consumption and the making of the interesting self in the nineteenth century (*Il mal gentile. La malattia polmonare nell'immaginario moderno*, Bergamo University Press, 2012) and has co-edited with Raul Calzoni the volume *Monstrous Anatomies in Nineteenth-Century German and British Culture* (Vandenhoech & Ruprecht Unipress, 2015).

ALESSANDRA PETRINA is Professor of English Literature at the Università di Padova. Her research focuses on late-medieval and early modern intellectual history, and on Anglo-Italian cultural relations. She has published *The Kingis Quair* (1997), *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-century England. The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* (2004), and *Machiavelli in the British Isles. Two Early Modern Translations of the Prince* (2009). She has edited a number of volumes, including (with Clara Calvo), *Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (*Textus*, 2018), and (with Ian Johnson), *The Impact of Latin Culture on Medieval and Early Modern Scottish Writing* (Kalamazoo, 2018). Her latest book is *Petrarch's Triumphi in the British Isles* (MHRA Tudor and Stuart Translation Series, 2020).

DEBORA A. SARNELLI holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Salerno and a Master Degree in Literary Translation from the University of Pisa. She is currently working, as a member of the Project Coordinator team, at the Horizon 2020 R&I PEERS project 'Pilot Experiences for Improving Gender Equality in Research Organizations'. She

holds a research grant from the Department of Humanities of the University of Salerno and is currently Adjunct Professor of English Language at the Department of Medicine of the same university. Her main research interests include literary geography, the twentieth-century novel and detective fiction.

Eleonora Sasso is Associate Professor in English at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara (Italy). Her major research fields include Victorian literature and culture, the Pre-Raphaelites, cognitive linguistics, intersemiotic and audio-visual translation, and Canadian studies. She has translated into Italian W.M. Rossetti's *Some Reminiscences* and is author of four monographs, the most recent being *The Pre-Raphaelites and Orientalism: Language and Cognition in Remediations of the East* (Edinburgh University Press). She is the editor of a book series entitled 'Universale' published by Biblion (advisory board members include Carlo M. Bajetta, Susan Bassnett, Frederic Chaume Varela, Delia Chiaro, Jorge Díaz-Cintas, Tim Parks, and Sherry Simon) and is an advisory board member of the following scientific journals: *CounterText*, and *English Studies at NBU.*

Sara Sullam is assistant professor in English Literature at the University of Milan. Her research concentrates on Modernism in a comparative perspective (Woolf, Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Isherwood) and on Anglo-Italian relations in literature and publishing after 1945. She is the author of *Tra i generi. Virginia Woolf e il romanzo* (Mimesis, 2016), *Moll Flanders. Matrici* (Mimesis, 2018) and *Leggere Woolf* (Carocci, 2020). She has translated Joyce's essays and critical writings (in James Joyce, *Lettere e saggi*, il Saggiatore, 2016).

Carla Tempestoso holds a PhD in Literary, Linguistic and Translation Studies from the University of Calabria. She is both tutor and examiner (*cultrice della materia*) of English Literature and she is currently teaching English Literature at the University of Calabria (Italy) at undergraduate level. Her interdisciplinary research interests include Anglo/Caribbean studies, migration studies, and translation studies.

Daniela Francesca Virdis is an Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Cagliari, Italy. She is a member of the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA) Steering Group

and was the Secretary of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA). She is co-editor of *Language in Place: Stylistic Perspectives on Landscape, Place and Environment* (2021) and *The Stylistics of Landscapes, the Landscapes of Stylistics* (2017), and the author of *Serialised Gender: A Linguistic Analysis of Femininities in Contemporary TV Series and Media* (2012), which was awarded the Italian Association of English Studies (AIA) Book Prize 2013. She has published widely, both nationally and internationally, on witches and devils in Jacobean plays and treatises, language & sexuality in Victorian erotica, national-ethnic stereotypes, and late modern fictional and non-fictional prose from a historical pragmatic perspective. She is currently researching ecostylistics and metaphor theory.

INTRODUCTION

Rocco Coronato and Marilena Parlati

Getting out of the box is a way for innovative writers across the ages not simply to jettison their given cultural and national tools but to combine them inventively.[1] This book is driven by a concern for how changes in taste, genre, literary techniques can be figuratively conceived as the physical act of exiting a given environment of conventions. It aims to detect the many ways in which cultures negotiate their differences and eventually revise their boundaries: epistemological shifts are shown thanks to the changes in literary tastes and in conventions. In/out, the centre of the Empire and its (ex-)colonies, whiteness and blackness, man and woman, are among the main twin boxes that get revised and extrapolated. Not one single box is left untouched: fixed notions of genre, and of gender as well, are here discussed with a keen attention to the many moments where the writers' ambivalence causes a shift in literary creation.

Outsiderdom comes in many ways. One distinctive direction is the sense of cross-fertilization between different genres, which also proves how unsatisfactory periodizations can be. In their varied approaches, these essays share a beneficial resistance against the constraints of taxonomy: the instability of a literary code is shown to open up to new permutations whereby the writer's ethnic and gendered differences reshuffle all previous boxes. This book shows how revered critical terms such as the Gothic or Modernism are thus problematized and shown in their radical porosity. The notion of literary canon also beneficially suffers from the frequent leaps between different boxes: hybridization governs the formation of cultural and literary movements, as well as the personal careers of literary pioneers that love mixing different genres and media.

In some cases, this reshuffling out of the box is physically meant to refer to the act of bringing a text out of its original context, for instance by way of translation, or also to creatively adapt its original components and poetics in a strikingly different socio-cultural context imbibed with acts of transmediation. The cultural phenomena that this book explores

---

[1] This initial section, as well as sections 1 to 3, were written by Rocco Coronato. Marilena Parlati is the author of sections 4-6.

can be rendered in terms of movement across a cultural and intertextual space, across boundaries, off the margins. Perhaps the image that best binds together these essays is incorporation, showing how all these cultural and critical boxes are prised open and their elements are liberally included in new forms of literary poetics.

1. A Long Nineteenth Century

The first section analyses the shifting boundaries of many conventional definitions of genre and canonicity. Elena Cotta Ramusino ('Generic Instability: Gothic Fiction from an Irish Perspective in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century') tackles the mobility of the Gothic genre with its many examples of stable formulaic codification, showing how slippery its boundaries were, 'both always in excess (as something indefinable) and on the margins (as something repressed, frightening, and socially shocking)'. This exemplary instability is studied through the example of an interesting filiation of the genre, the Irish tradition that is usually made to stem from one of the foundational works of the Gothic, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Many Gothic works in fact came out before that date, fully showing one of the major dynamics of cultural change, the process of hybridization between the Gothic and the historical novel. Different forms, genres, and themes are blurred and mixed, and elements taken out of different cultural boxes co-exist in these mobile terms, often espousing the stylistic features of the genre with socio-cultural concerns, for instance the closeness between the Irish Gothic and the historical accounts of Catholic rebellions.

Places are often boxes that can be rearranged, both in larger terms as in the Irish Gothic, and in the wavy nature of the modern city. Greta Perletti ('"The Stream of Life that Will Not Stop": The "Memory of Places" and the Palimpsestuous Streets of the Nineteenth-Century City') studies the spatiality of modern places and their *memoria loci* through the lens of a metaphor, the palimpsest, that gained wide acceptance in the course of the long century thanks to new technical discoveries that enabled the revelation of earlier inscriptions on parchment scrolls. Urban spaces are places of memory in two senses: they retain forceful memories that are disclosed simply by walking or being transported through them, and they are also vividly remembered by the *flâneur*. This twofold kind of memory magically held by urban places is thus revealed by writ-

ers exactly in terms of a palimpsest, an ambiguity that is preserved by the action of remembering and deciphering the memory held by places. Perletti proposes 'to "think out of the box" by exploring the streets of the nineteenth-century city as a prime example of the *loci*'s propensity to haunt humans and to unsettle the agency we would expect to be at work in the mnemonic process'. She shows the connections between the city and mnemonic imagination first with a foray into the classical and early modern art of memory and then by setting it in the context of nineteenth-century palimpsest decoding techniques, 'when the palimpsest began to be used as a metaphor for the human mind, transforming the encounter with the memory of places in the city in an experience entailing a possibly pathological process'. This nineteenth-century fascination for the palimpsestuous emergence of memories is then probed by exploring how the Victorian mnemonic vestigia surface in two more recent works, Geoffrey Fletcher's *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray Portraits* (2002-3).

A different way of getting out of the box is translation and the novel ways in which literary tradition is literally brought out of its original context. Andrew Brayley's essay ('Shelley and Dante: Translation and Adaptation') studies how Shelley creatively translates and adapts a passage of the *Purgatorio* (28.1-51) where Dante describes the vision of a lady gathering flowers. Brayley recreates the complex network of influences that Shelley wove together by connecting Dante, *Matilda* (a short novel by Mary Shelley), and several Miltonic influences. The adaptation of a classical text is thus incorporated by Shelley into his poetic vision by enhancing the element of obscurity and threat in a hybridizing connection with the classical myth of Proserpine and the theme of motherhood.

The translation and adaptation of the classical tradition, though later in the century and with an emphasis on gendered differences, return in Maria Luigia Di Nisio's piece ('"A woman's heart, with manly counsel fraught": A. Mary F. Robinson, Greek Tragedy and Poetry in *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881)'). *The Crowned Hippolytus* is a remarkable example of Robinson's appropriation of Greek language, thought, and culture, as well as a turning point in her rephrasing her role as a woman of letters that tried to combine the task of translation with poetical effort. Placing Robinson's work within the context of Victorian Hellenism and the gradual rise of female academic access to the study of the ancient world despite many redoubtable social constraints, the work captures

the many ways in which Robinson's pioneering adaptation of Euripides gets out of all these cultural and social boxes in a period increasingly marked by the rise of the aesthetic movement. Getting out of the box also means reappraising the canon*: '*The Crowned Hippolytus* testifies to Robinson's embodied desire and active commitment to the ancient classics, in an unresolved tension between ambition and modesty, knowing and not-knowing, and always on the margins of scholarly knowledge'.

Gendered differences also surface in the essay by Daniela Francesca Virdis and Gabriella Milia ('Exploring Feminized Landscapes in Victorian Erotica: Ecocriticism Meets Sociology'), dealing with a subgenre, the fiction published on late Victorian licentious magazines such as *The Pearl, A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (1879-1881), in particular a novel entitled *Sub-Umbra*: under the shade of trees, 'a practice of feminization and sexualization of the physical environment' does emerge. The salience of the countryside, read in ecocritical terms, enables the two authors to detect 'the primary interests of feminist cultural geography: the association of the natural with the female and sexual pleasure, the metaphors of feminine nature as opposed to masculine culture, the visual and written encodings of feminine nature'. By comparing it to works such as *King Solomon's Mines*, they show how *Sub-Umbra* recombines the box of hegemonic manliness by describing the physical environment 'less as an object of domination or exploitation than as a sexual accomplice and partner ready to encourage and offer gratification [...] sexuality is figuratively connected to the physical environment'.

The last chapter of the first section, Francesca Guidotti's 'Mashing up Jane Austen's Classics: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies & Mansfield Park and Mummies*', also considers the two intertwined topics of gendered differences and adaptation of canonical texts. In the long afterlife of *Pride and Prejudice*, a recent striking occurrence was Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), a mash-up novel. Mash-up stands for 'the blending of two or more sources into a newly conceived and partly self-standing object', a transmedial practice now widely diffused that is however brought back by Guidotti to classical and early modern examples of mixing between old and new media. Guidotti argues that Austen's novel already obliquely enshrined some elements of monstrosity that the mash-up brings consciously to the light: 'Present-day readers may not be able to identify what is lacking in Austen's novels but are, nevertheless, intuitively aware of the presence of some textual gaps and,

in most cases, ready to welcome new hole-filling inclusions', such as the references to the Gothic elements that would surface in *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*, and the many muted omissions of contemporary history and its carnages. The mash-up novel brings these elements out of the unconscious box and explicitly stages them also by addressing the question of female independence, 'with new bodily and vital connotations: women are healthy, lively, energetic precisely in so far as they lack a class-defining status'.

2. Towards a Definition of Modernism

Section 2 explicitly deals with the porous quality of Modernism. Debora A. Sarnelli ('Crossing the Great Divide: The Golden Age of Detective Fiction as Lowbrow Modernism') ponders the usual critical divide between high Modernism and popular culture by testing how these boundaries might in fact have been more slippery than expected. Sarnelli especially focuses on these blurring conditions by analysing Agatha Christie's interwar novels. Christie's new style of detective fiction parted ways from canonical detective tradition and offered many elements that recalled the Modernist practice, 'a longer plot with a subplot, multiple suspects, a domestic setting and a new type of detective', as well as the use of irony, comedy, narrative unreliability, multiple perspectives and gaps. Some Modernist traits of the anti-hero can also be spotted in Christie's vulnerable detectives, thanks to the buffoonish Poirot's femininity and Miss Marple's social marginalization and reliance on gossip. The novels also betray Modernist signs of uncertainty, in a joint nostalgic look at the cohesive, relatable self of the past and the recognition of interwar precariousness.

The hidden negotiation between High Modernism and popular culture returns in Annalisa Federici's essay ('Was She Really a Snob? Virginia Woolf, the "Battle of the Brows" and Popular Print Culture'). Considering the intersections between Modernism and mass culture by testing the case of Virginia Woolf's collaboration with popular magazines such as the British *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, Federici reassesses the negotiations between the two poles and acknowledges the existence of multiple, ambivalent relations between the Modernist writer and the marketplace. The implication goes both ways: while non-fictional essays resort to Modernist techniques, fictional works

heavily rely on such descriptions of the pulsating urban landscape, pointing in both cases to the description of the narrator's/observer's mind: 'their appearance in popular periodicals created a complex interplay between high modernist aesthetics and decadent, "throwaway" consumer culture', adding to the 'portrayal of a multifaceted artist who never lowered her high aesthetic standards'.

Ester Gendusa's contribution ('Questioning the Canon and Re-writing/Re-righting the Female Colonized Subject: Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* and George B. Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*') juxtaposes two different critiques of renditions of the theme of the hegemonic representations of the female colonial Other, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* (1857), and George Bernard Shaw's 1932 prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God.* The box out of which the two works emerge by sharing a comparable 'oppositional aesthetics' is racial difference, seen in two starkly different phases of British imperialism. Travel writing is commonly associated with identity self-fashioning: Gendusa here considers how the two works deal with 'the intertwined analytic categories of gender and "race"' and 'contribute to deconstructing traditional conceptions of the white/black divide'. The two forms of dualism, man/woman, white/black, are interwoven by letting blackness undermine any Manichean polarizations. With her two mixed identities as a British subject and a Jamaican Creole, the protagonist of Seacole's work compounds all notions of identity and belongingness, with a sense of plurality that also rests on the stylistic mix between travel account and biography. In-betweenness is thus yet another form of outsiderdom, deconstructing both cultures and genders with a complex mix of admiration and resistance. Shaw's cultural hybridity is informed by a different condition of marginality on the author's part, hailing from Ireland and testifying to the influence of Modernist technique such as the multiplicity of time levels and voices. Otherness also impairs European notions of normativity, resisting the association between blackness and nature.

The last chapter of the section on Modernism, Monica Manzolillo's 'Back into the Box: T.S. Eliot's Preface to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', analyses the hitherto unexplored ambiguities surrounding T.S. Eliot's editorial practice while accepting Barnes's masterpiece for publication. In his introduction to the novel, Eliot falls short of praising *Nightwood* for its utter originality and instead resorts to the language of criticism

by underlining the hardly self-evident similarity between Barnes and Elizabethan tragedy. Manzolillo explores the several ways in which Eliot deliberately omits to consider the novel's merits and instead praises the poetic language of the American writer, as yet another manifestation of his own ideal of the literary genius secluded in an ivory tower: 'for him it was more useful to delete this section and limit *Nightwood* to the portrayal of a spiritual crisis he knew very well of [...] which was more suitable to the economy of his literary and editorial views'.

3. *An Experiment in Dialogue: H.I.E. Dhlomo Across Genres'*

The third section is wholly devoted to the fascinating example of an author that recombined all gender, generic, ethnic boxes, the South African writer Herbert Dhlomo, who dwelt on multiple thresholds, between the colonial world and the United Kingdom, literature and politics, fiction and journalism. Giuliana Iannaccaro ('The Teacher and the Bard: Herbert Dhlomo's Historical Drama') studies how Dhlomo combined his joint knowledge of Western literary models and indigenous dramatic forms with his belief in the ultimate instructive power of literature, especially drama. Blending styles and traditions from both boxes, in his 'syncretic project of attempting to fuse the best of African and European artistic traditions, the young writer saw himself as the prophet of a new cultural awakening, as well as the "bard" of the developing South African nation'. Getting out of the box often implies some driving social intent on the writer's part, and that especially applies to Dhlomo's pedagogic didacticism for the benefit of South African citizens. Iannaccaro analyses how Dhlomo draws on the European literary canon 'to instruct and enchant his readers', as well as to show how European historical events and political and cultural practices could be decoded through the instructive medium of drama. In an ambivalent pose, Dhlomo adopts both the role of the 'proficient pupil' who exploits his education and of the 'ungrateful and dangerously radicalized "native"' who aspires to being a leader for his country's moral conscience.

Valley of a Thousand Hills (1941), Dhlomo's arguably most poetic work, is the focus of Marco Canani's article ('Romantic Polyphony in Herbert I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills*'). Hailed as a masterpiece of African epic poetry, the poem was praised also for its evident political merits as a contribution to the shaping of a modern national spirit.

Getting out of the box is here coupled with genre experimentation: the poem is based on a masterly polyphonic interweaving of different genres that resembles the texture of *The Waste Land*, and in inspiration it largely draws on Dhlomo's conflation of British Romantic voices. Examining the circulation of British Romantic poetry among 1930s-40s New African intellectuals, Canani argues that the driving inspiration heavily stemmed from Dhlomo's inventive appropriation of Shelley's reformist and stylistic ideals in the light of his 'belief in the role of music in creating an absolute language that may defy the constraints of verbal discourse', while Keats seemed to influence the South African writer with his faith in the 'epistemic value of suffering': this 'imbrication of genres, voices, and allusions leaves textual scars which, despite causing multiple narrative fractures, produce a polyphonic effect that documents Dhlomo's tormented attempt at negotiating between cultures at a literary and political level'.

The study of Dhlomo's short fiction, so far the object of scanty critical attention, informs the two chapters by Sara Sullam ('An Experiment in Reading: Narrative Composition in H.I.E. Dhlomo's Short Fiction') and Marta Fossati ('Literariness and Genre Mobility: Journalistic Features in the Short Stories by Herbert Dhlomo'). Sullam investigates the extent to which the Modernist tag can make sense of Dhlomo's short stories: while clearly showing several elements of melodrama, the stories also draw on some 'narrative dissonances', those narrative techniques that are usually inscribed into Modernist practice and that 'illuminate the tension between the didactic aims that characterize Dhlomo's fiction and the challenges of modernization'. Sullam considers a few revealing practices, for instance the way in which 'the omniscient narrator is challenged by the discourse of a female character in the form of free indirect speech [...] The tension between a melodramatic narrative revolving, once again, around incest, and a narrative composition that, instead, enhances a plurality of points of view'. Working with both the native and European boxes, Dhlomo thus shows a 'controversial and contradictory implied author' that offers an interaction 'between (i) a plot built on the elements of the cheap melodramatic novelette (recognition, incest), (ii) a narrator who, with his broad and authoritative generalizations, patronizingly counterbalances the melodramatic mode of the stories, and (iii) the emergence of a different discourse, from both a narrative and an ideological point of view, through the use of specific narrative techniques traditionally associated with modernist writing'.

Fossati probes the salience of Dhlomo's short stories by comparing them with yet another important dimension of his output, journalism. One of the problems surrounding these stories, which remained mostly unpublished, is also what makes them especially rewarding in terms of outsiderdom: the indeterminacy of their genre, veering between actual journalism in disguise and fiction with a social and informative intent. The stories also show again that getting out of the box is often driven by a stringent desire to propose a different societal view. Shifting between genres in his mixture of reporting and fictionalization, Dhlomo voices potentially dangerous ideas such as the portrait of the plight of rural blacks and his rejection of tribalism, ticking both the colonial and the native boxes with distinctive force.

4. *Intermediation*

The papers included in the section on 'Intermediation' all deal with some of the many intricacies of multimedia and multimodal crossings. In his 'Questioning Definitions: The Challenge of Rhythm Analysis', Andrea Fenice sounds the possibilities and predicaments of Gérard Genette's and Mieke Bal's takes on narrative rhythm and the relevance of speed and pace in narrative discourse. By suggesting the possibilities inherent in the concept of 'textual relief' and in the complementarity between tension and rhythm recently suggested by Daniele Barbieri, and by also referring to semiotic approaches which insist on the cognitive and affective responses narrative can trigger and deploy, Fenice approaches the 2016 BBC adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. He reads the novel as informed by 'an altered temporal exposition' by which Conrad managed to put to the fore or hide some elements of the plot; in his view, while it remains 'faithful' to the novel, the film adaptation he focusses on underplays the articulate rhythmic structure of Conrad's work in favour of short-term devices of a more conventional mould.

Emanuela Ammendola's contribution to this section, 'AVT: Britishness in *Paddington*', investigates via a set of multimodal lenses a very well-known British animated film and its Italian version. By analysing some of the cultural premises already extant in the original version, in particular its self-conscious parodied sense of 'Britishness', Ammendola follows the dubbing strategies which mark the rendition of the 'humour, stereotypes and culture-bound elements' of that alleged national

belonging. Both in the dubbing and in the audiovisual channelling of the film, she posits, the self-conscious satire of the source is partially lost. In Ammendola's view, in the Italian adaptation a few cultural referents are left unnoticed, and instead of embracing the same ironical stance as the source, it also reinforces some of the stereotypes *Paddington* had visibly attempted to undermine.

In his 'From *Velvet Goldmine* to *The Happy Prince*: Portraying Oscar Wilde's Outsideness in Contemporary Cinema', Pierpaolo Martino sets out on a journey along some of the routes Oscar Wilde, as a multifaceted global pop icon, continues to take in contemporary culture. More specifically, he attends to the many reverberations which have remarkably reassessed Wilde's position in and out of many canons since the explosion of glam culture in the 1970s, renewed and triggered by the numerous cultural events that celebrated him in the 1990s. For Martino, *Velvet Goldmine* highlighted 'Wilde's outsideness, in relation to Victorian culture, rewriting him as a postmodern icon and as the first pop idol of British history'. More widely, the very phenomenon of glam is read as a complex articulation of masked identities, of ironical performances and transvestitism which was still vibrant in the very famous *Wilde* starring Stephen Fry. The second film explored in depth in this paper is Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince,* which depicts a post-trial, derelict and lonely Wilde, dying out like the gilded statue of the fairy tale whose title the film bears.

Luisa Marino contributes to this section by looking not only out of the box, but *at* the box itself, in her 'Dis-Covered. Book Covers and the Representation of Female Narratives in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists*'. Her paper surveys book covers as paratextual apparatuses, which foster and orient the reception and consumption of cultural texts, and work as forms of translation in their own terms. In her view, 'book covers anticipate the access to the verbal text providing readers with the first instruments to interpret it'. Her chosen examples are a very famous novel and a talk, later published in a short-essay form, given by the globally known writer, intellectual, activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose iconic perambulations Marino follows from Nigeria to the US, and later to Italy, Portugal and Brazil. The status of celebrity attached to Adichie and reinforced by the amazing popularity surrounding her 2012 talk *We Should All Be Feminists* directs the book format the last has taken. In both cases, Marino analyses what Genette

defines as the 'epitextual' and 'peritextual' circulations and crisscrossings in and out of the materiality of books, markets, and cultures.

The many predicaments inherent in multicoded translation are at stake in Eleonora Sasso's 'Trespassing Cultural Boundaries in Audiovisual Media: Aboriginal Female Discourse and Cultural Heritage in *Maïna*'. She suggests that the very act of subtitling, in the case of recent non-mainstream, non-majority films in the Canadian multilingual panorama, is a perfect example of a 'multimodal and interlingual form of discourse', entailing 'thinking out of the box, including minority cultures, becoming aware of the existence of alien communities'. Sasso investigates *Maïna. An Unusual Love Story,* 'a multilingual film shot in Innu and Inuit, with English subtitles and English voice-over narration'. In her view, the film manages to convey the richness of First Nations cultures and languages, without flattening or framing them within mainstream and colonial coding confines. Sasso reads subtitles as the 'outside' of the film box, and is intent on applying cognitive science in order to read through the subtitling strategies adopted in *Maïna*.

5. Bodies

In the section on 'Bodies', papers focus on revisiting embodiment, and take 'the body' as their intended, fluctuating, and impassable 'object' of study. Anna Anselmo contributes a paper on 'Reconfiguring the Dead Body. Shapes of the After-life in Gunther von Hagens and Seamus Heaney'. In this case, the box is the body *itself,* in its engaging materialities, in its revisiting the confines between subject and object, and in some of the recent investigations and artistic practices sounding the porous boundaries between life and death. Anselmo uses Deleuze's concept of *devenir* to read through *Body Worlds*, the globally renowned and radically innovative anatomical exhibition format devised by von Hagens, and also some 'bog poems' by Seamus Heaney. In the first instance, Anselmo suggests among other things that 'the cadaver is no longer an ontological fact antipodal to a living body, but an exhibit that has undergone several stages of remediation, therefore a category all unto itself'. Her discourse later highlights the phenomenal status of bog bodies, another famous instance of the ontological and temporal disruption of seemingly secure boundaries: she concludes that 'Heaney captures the symbolic essence of these bodies, their being in-between: they are caught in becoming, a pure event, a simultaneity'.

Maria Luisa De Rinaldis also investigates the in-between status of the human body, in her 'Skulls: from Aids to Meditation to Fashion Accessories', with the declared intention of thinking outside the box. She adopts 'an intermedial perspective' and thus sets out to 'trace a trajectory of the image from its use in the Renaissance to remediations in fiction and fashion'. Thus, De Rinaldis carefully interrogates the boundary between representation and materiality in the many centuries she surveys with examples which prove to what extent modern and contemporary Western culture has been obsessed by human remains, more in particular by the skull, metonymical subject/object *par excellence.* From emblem books to the Renaissance stage, from Victoriana to Pater, from Virginia Woolf to contemporary fashion visual discourse she follows the twists and turns of skulls in their being – and being read, seen and marketed as – meaningfully beyond boundaries.

Emilio Amideo's paper on 'Rethinking the Human: The Use of Animal Metaphors to Language the Utopianism of the Black Queer Existence' attempts a reading of some of the innumerable ways in which 'power relations are expressed in and naturalized through language [in] the process of metaphorization'. Amideo clarifies that metaphors, even and more specifically those 'we live by', are never neutral, rather, they have often been devised and used to marginalize and degrade non-dominant groups, in the cases studied here with a specific focus on animalization in relation to black queer experience. He starts by analysing the concept of 'parahumanity', and later moves on to explore 'Shell', a short story by the Scottish writer Jackie Kay. In Amideo's view, Kay manages to assert the relevance of afro-fabulation and write against the grain of a disempowering metaphorical tradition; in 'Shell', Kay 'recovers the trope of the animalization of both black Africans and women in Western culture and rewrites it in order to create an alternative reality'. If language can be and has been a stricture, rewriting often naturalized and made invisible stereotypes may help dismantling it, and thus work to 'deviate from commonly known forms of embodiment pertaining to contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy'.

6. *Contemporary Challenges*

The three essays included in the section on 'Contemporary Challenges' also work against the grain of heteronormativity and canonical reading

in elucidating a few very recent works on embodiment, relationality and excruciatingly topical geopolitics. Maria Grazia Nicolosi contributes to this composite volume with '"She lives now in two worlds": Re-placing the Embodied Other in Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child*'. Her theoretical framework is founded on theories on orientation (Ahmed) and practices of vulnerability on the part of an author, Phillips, who has often dedicated his works to rewriting and revisiting the British canon in order to make visible and audible the other voices and embodied others obliterated, silenced, mutilated and murdered by a far too long history of colonial epistemic violence. For Nicolosi, '*The Lost Child* materializes onto this recursive inheritance of "loss" the violence that lurks between the (un) written lines of the British (post-)colonial and (post-)imperial imagination'. In her reading of *The Lost Child*, only tangentially a reappropriation of *Wuthering Heights,* she crosses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological take on embodiment as 'open wound' with Butler's thoughts on multivocal and cross-temporal proximate vulnerability and concludes that Phillips manages to achieve his project, 'the re-clamation of place and the re-possession of voice by those embodied others whose involvement in the world has been most inhumanly called into crisis'.

In her 'Walking a Thin Gender Line: Transgender Identity and Gender Fluidity in MacCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*', Carla Tempestoso captures an instance of literature intrinsically rooted in 'contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization'. In her analysis of the audacious and iconoclastic *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), she also adopts the frame of 'becoming' – which fosters a clearer understanding of the 'complex and processual nature of identity formation' – to peruse the multiple means by which the novel puts to the fore transgenderism, namely in MacCabe's choice of a protagonist moving 'across, between, or beyond the binary categories of male and female' and breaking 'through each layer of the enforced gender segregation by putting them in the shoes of the oppressed'.

Our last essay in the volume is Maria Elena Capitani's 'A Tale of Two Countries: the Shadow of Brexit in Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017)'. Her analysis is rooted in Derrida's 1992 exploration of European identity and possible futurities, where the philosopher insisted that 'for Europe to continue to exist, it needs to embrace its own internal contradictions and aporias', including accepting its being an 'over-colonized European hybrid'. Capitani argues that

Brexit and the evergrowing BrexLit which is coming to terms with its cultural (and ideological, political, financial) consequences can work both to build walls *and* cross them, especially when it comes to linguistic inventiveness. Her special attention goes to Ali Smith's *Autumn* and to Amanda Craig's satirical *The Lie of the Land*. Capitani maintains that 'both novels investigate the fissures of an inevitably fractured, gloomy, and disconnected Britain, in which Remainers and Leavers, cosmopolitanism and insularity, urban landscapes and the English countryside, immigrants and native people, future scenarios and nostalgia for the imperial past violently clash'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I.
A LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

GENERIC INSTABILITY: GOTHIC FICTION FROM AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

Elena Cotta Ramusino

The definition 'Gothic fiction' does not point to a monolithic category: it rather comprises a diversity of narratives, thus challenging the only seemingly rigidly codified conventions characterizing it. The mutability of this genre, as well as its instability and heterogeneity, is widely acknowledged by critics. The Gothic is conventionally considered to have started in the mid-eighteenth century, to have had its heyday in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and to have flourished until its end. Recent criticism of Anglo-Irish Gothic, though, has extended the accepted temporal limits and anticipated *The Castle of Otranto*, locating the onset of the genre in the late seventeenth century, in fiction which is hybrid and unstable as to its generic form. The critical debate records divergent positions on the issue, which only demonstrates the vitality of the subject. The Gothic has been praised for its ability to express deep-seated fears, to give voice to political criticism, to reveal sexual anxieties, to host, in Freudian terms, the return of the repressed. This chapter focuses on Irish Gothic from a critical perspective: it takes into account the profusion of critical works on the subject and gives an overview of the development, characteristics, and internal tensions of the genre. With the support of some Gothic narratives from the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this contribution explores characteristic features of the Irish Gothic, such as the issue of legitimacy, the obsessive return of the past, and the genre's peculiar engagement with history, developing into a confrontation with present history after the 1798 Rebellion, which provided dreadful subject matter to Gothic literature.

Irish Gothic; Generic Instability; History

A long-established and successful genre, the Gothic continues to excite passionate interest, accompanied by the awareness, widely shared in criticism, that it is a difficult terrain. The genre is both mobile and unstable, 'both always in excess (as something indefinable) and on the margins (as something repressed, frightening, and socially shocking)';[1] as Suzanne Rintoul claims, 'critics have expressed growing anxiety about

---

[1] Suzanne Rintoul, 'Gothic Anxieties: Struggling with a Definition,' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 17, 4 (2005): p. 706.

the slippery boundaries of the Gothic genre'.[2] Laura Pelaschiar opens her 2018 essay claiming that

> it has by now become a commonplace *sine qua non* to begin any article, collection, or book which explores the Gothic with a canonical lament/warning in which the critic, with very detailed evidence, declares what a troublesome and frustrating process it is [...] to attempt to define Gothic. This aesthetic category, or mode, or genre, or register, is, it seems, shrouded in mystery, ontologically evasive, resisting every taxonomic effort.[3]

These considerations are emblematic, as they give voice to the prevailing contemporary critical opinions on the genre. Indeed – as Laura Pelaschiar has shown – scholars usually open their volumes, companions, guides, studies on the Gothic emphasizing the difficulty of its definition: W.J. McCormack, the editor of the section on 'Irish Gothic and After (1820-1945)' introduced by his influential essay in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 1991, opened it with these words: 'Gothic fiction, as initiated by Horace Walpole [...], is not easily defined'.[4] In his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold Hogle writes that it is 'a highly unstable genre',[5] and David Punter that 'the notion of what constitutes Gothic writing is a contested site'.[6] In the following page he also claims that 'this book, [...] is not going to answer the question "What is Gothic?",[7] seemingly a reply to the question posed by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy at the beginning of their introduction to the 2007 *Routledge Companion to Gothic*, 'What is Gothic? There is no single, straightforward answer to this question'.[8]

These recent critical considerations go against a more traditional view of the Gothic, generally regarded as a highly conventional, formulaic genre. Its analysis has often been accompanied by lists of its generic fea-

---

[2] Rintoul, p. 701.

[3] Laura Pelaschiar, 'Irish Catholic Gothic: The Heretical Gothicisms of James Joyce, Seamus Heaney and Neil Jordan,' in *'The common darkness where the dreams abide:' Perspectives on Irish Gothic and Beyond*, eds. Ilaria Natali and Annalisa Volpone (Perugia: Aguaplano, 2018), p. 215.

[4] W.J. McCormack, 'Irish Gothic and After (1820–1945),' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 831.

[5] Jerrold Hogle, 'Introduction: the Gothic in Western Culture,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

[6] David Punter, 'Introduction: The Ghost of a History,' in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 1.

[7] Punter, p. 2.

[8] Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, 'Introduction,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

tures, ranging from architectural to geographical characteristics, from a variety of ghostly apparitions to figures who typically appear in these narratives, to the use of foreign names with exotic overtones.[9] Such lists have been variously expanded, but the awareness, nonetheless, that something escapes, has increasingly spread. Gothic fiction comprises a diversity of narratives which have changed over time, and has come to be seen, in Marine Galiné's suggestive words, as a 'a polymorphous prism through which one can apprehend anxieties, tensions and violence'.[10] Difficulties are increased by the long life of the genre, while the critical unease about it is a more recent stance.

1. *The name and the nature of Gothic*

In her 'The Genesis of Gothic Fiction', Emma Clery summarizes the history of the genre and reminds her readers that the phrase 'Gothic novel' is 'mostly a twentieth-century coinage',[11] as it appears as 'a generic term [...] in two literary overviews in 1899 [...] It was established in Britain by Edith Birkhead in 1921, and in 1932 J. M. S. Tompkins followed suit'.[12] The 1970s is unanimously seen as the decade that fostered academic interest in the Gothic, while the last two decades of the twentieth century saw challenges to conventional definitions of Gothic writing. As Richard Haslam points out,

> during the 1990s, critics examined in greater detail the 'range' of not only 'tone and focus' but also ideological diversity in Gothic fiction of 1764-1820. For James Watt, 'the elevation of [*Otranto*] to the status of an origin has served to grant an illusory stability to a body of fiction which is distinctly heterogeneous'.[13]

---

[9] Robert Miles gives a list of such generic features and their exemplification: 'geographical features (the recess, ruins, the rock, Alps, black valley, black tower, haunted cavern); architectural features (priory, castle, abbey, convent, nunnery, ancient house, cloister); generic pointers (historical romance, legends, tales, memoir, traditions); ghosts and their cognates (apparition, spectre, phantom, the ghost-seer, sorcerer, magician, necromancer, weird sisters); exotic names (Manfredi, Edward de Courcy, Wolfenbach); and generic or historical figures (the monk, the genius, the minstrel, knights, the royal captives, Duke of Clarence, Lady Jane Grey, John of Gaunt)'. Robert Miles, 'The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, pp. 41-2.

[10] Marine Galiné, 'The 1798 Rebellion: Gender Tensions and Femininity in the Irish Gothic,' *RISE* 2, 2 (2018): no page number.

[11] Emma J. Clery, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, p. 21.

[12] Clery, p. 37.

[13] Richard Haslam, 'Negotiating the Poetics of Irish Gothic Fiction Via Casuistry,' in *'The common*

As is well known, the use of 'Gothic' as a qualifier in titles or subtitles was very scarce: the first to use it was Horace Walpole in the subtitle of the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, 1765: *A Gothic Story*. Among the few following texts that display this adjective in the subtitle the most famous is Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*, *A Gothic Story*, 1778. Indeed, as Emma Clery aptly clarifies, 'A handful of fictions feature "Gothic" in their titles after Reeve, including Richard Warner's *Netley Abbey: a Gothic Story* (1795) and Isabella Kelly's *The Baron's Daughter: a Gothic Romance* (1802)'.[14]

The meaning of the qualifier, Gothic, was very different in Walpole's time: it was a word which came into use in English in the seventeenth century, and 'its original meaning – pertaining to the Goths (or Germans) and their language – was derogatory. It implied crudity and barbarism. It was primarily used as a descriptive term for medieval architecture'.[15] As both Kilfeather and Miles point out, by the mid-eighteenth century a Gothic revival in architecture was spreading, and 'as powerful Whigs invested ideological energy in the image of the Goth, Gothic things rose in aesthetic value. Nowhere was this more true than in architecture. Prior to the Gothic revival, "Gothic" had been a synonym for barbarism'.[16] Moreover, referring to Tacitus, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Law* (transl. 1750), put forward the idea, which was both disputed and shared, 'that the English derived "their idea of political government" [political liberty resulting from its constitution] from the Germans, from their "beautiful system ... invented first in the woods"',[17] that is, the Gothic Witan, a 'communal gathering',[18] seen in this perspective as a sort of Ur-Parliament. After the French Revolution the positive connotations of the term shifted to architecture, 'while the glamorously negative meanings were poured into the Gothic novel'.[19] Besides, it was not the adjective *Gothic* that was used in

---

darkness where the dreams abide:' Perspectives on Irish Gothic and Beyond, p. 33. He quotes James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.1.

[14] Clery, p. 37, n. 1. In the same note Clery refers to Alfred E. Longeuil, 'The Word "Gothic" in Eighteenth-Century Criticism,' *MLN* 38 (1923): 453-60 for a few rare early instances of the term being applied in a literary critical sense.

[15] Siobhán Kilfeather, 'The Gothic Novel,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. J.W. Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 78.

[16] Robert Miles, 'Eighteenth-century Gothic,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, p. 12.

[17] Emma J. Clery and Robert Miles (eds.), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 63.

[18] Miles, 'Eighteenth-century Gothic,' p. 11.

[19] Miles, p. 17.

novel subtitles of the period, but rather the noun *romance*: '"A Romance" is by far the most common subtitle among writings of the period now described as "Gothic"',[20] and 'a number of descriptive titles were invented, including "modern Romance", "the *terrible* school" and "the *hobgoblin-romance*"'.[21] Hostile critics often targeted the form's conventions, as shown in the 1798 satirical 'Terrorist Novel Writing', which looks down on this new genre and gives a catalogue of its specific generic features:

> *Take* – An old castle, half of it ruinous.
> A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.
> Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
> As many skeletons, in chests and presses.
> An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.
> Assassins and desperadoes '*quant suff*'.
> Noises, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.
> Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering places, before going to bed. PROBATUM EST.[22]

The term did 'nothing to describe what was ground-breaking and influential about the novel',[23] as '"gothic" was not then a codified generic label';[24] moreover, it was used mainly retrospectively to define these works. For this reason, the use of this adjective by Walpole did not point to a new and recognizable literary genre: it rather 'underscored cultural concerns over historical transition in the period'.[25]

2. Irish Gothic

Within this wider debate, Irish Gothic has also become a controversial terrain. The phrase itself was introduced in the 1980s[26] and since then the genre has attracted constant critical attention and sparked off intense dispute, which 'suggest its contested nature. Variously described as

---

[20] Clery, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction,' p. 37.
[21] Clery and Miles, p. 183.
[22] Clery and Miles, p. 184. As the editors point out, this 'recipe' concludes a letter to a journal.
[23] Clery, p. 21.
[24] Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 5.
[25] Morin, p. 6.
[26] In his chapter entitled 'Irish Gothic', Haslam traces the history of the phrase until the twenty-first century. He actually points out that it was first used in 1972 by John Cronin writing on Sommerville and Ross, but that the phrase gained currency in the 1980s. Richard Haslam, 'Irish Gothic,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, p. 83.

a "canon", "tradition", "genre", "form", "mode", and "register", Irish gothic literature suffers from a fundamental terminological confusion, and the debate over exactly which term best applies has been both heated and, ultimately, inconclusive in the past 30 years'.[27] Scholars have devoted considerable efforts to define suitable categories and language 'with which to discuss a body of literature that seems so resolutely to resist definition and categorization'.[28]

There is a general critical consensus that '"Irish Gothic" [...] speaks of fiction that explores the mixed fears and desires of a minority Anglo-Irish population threatened – imaginatively if not actually – by the unsettled native Catholics over whom they maintained precarious control'.[29] On the other hand, although Irish Gothic has usually been considered 'distinctly protestant',[30] a 'Catholic or Catholic-nationalist Gothic'[31] as Seamus Deane has suggested when analysing James Clarence Mangan's autobiography, emerges in the early nineteenth century, exemplified by authors such as Michael and John Banim, William Carleton (a Catholic turned Protestant) and Gerald Griffin.

An issue which has become controversial in recent years concerns the chronology of Irish Gothic: Christina Morin has devoted a large amount of work to bring to the critical fore a vast extent of Irish Gothic works so far forgotten. In her opinion, the limited attention devoted 'to the Irish contribution to the form's development' has condemned 'to silent oblivion a significant number of texts that contributed directly to the rise of the Gothic novel in late-eighteenth century Britain'.[32]

As a result, her work undermines the assumptions both that Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is the text that marks the birth of the Irish Gothic novel, and that the genre only flourished in the nineteenth century, while at the same time challenging McCormack's claim

---

[27] Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie, 'Introduction: De-Limiting the Irish Gothic', in *Irish Gothics – Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions*, eds. Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

[28] Morin and Gillespie, p. 1.

[29] Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland,* pp. 1-2.

[30] McCormack, 'Irish Gothic and After (1820-1945),' p. 837.

[31] Deane writes: 'The Autobiography is clearly one of the most obvious Gothic fictions of the century in Ireland, [...] Irish Gothic is generally considered to be a Protestant phenomenon – as indeed for the most part it is. [...] But Mangan introduces us to a new genre – what we may call Catholic or Catholic-nationalist Gothic.' Seamus Deane, *Strange Country – Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 126.

[32] Christina Morin, 'Forgotten Fiction: Reconsidering the Gothic Novel in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,' *Irish University Review – Special Issue: Irish Fiction, 1660-1830* 41, 1 (2011): p. 80.

that 'the idea of a coherent Irish Gothic fictional tradition, commencing in the late eighteenth century, is doubtful'.[33] Actually, McCormack has been sceptical about an Irish Gothic tradition since his *Field Day Anthology* essay, where he defined it as 'slender'.[34] Morin's exploration of late eighteenth century Irish Gothic fits within the ongoing more general recovery of Irish fiction 'of the long-eighteenth century [which] has until recently suffered from comparative neglect',[35] as Ian C. Ross wrote in his 2011 article. The conventional assumption that *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is the first Irish novel has, according to the scholar, 'not only obscured those works of fiction published during the previous century but has frequently seemed to deny their very existence'.[36]

As a result of the recent focus on the literature of the period, many studies have shed light on a number of Gothic contributions that had appeared before the publication of *Melmoth*. These texts show the blurring and the overlapping of generic boundaries, which is a typical and recognized feature of eighteenth-century Irish prose. At the time, what later came to be identified as different genres hybridized with one another. Gothic and historical fiction began to assume recognizable and distinct generic features in the 1790s according to Christina Morin, who claims that the

> critical concentration on the regional novel, the national tale, and the historical novel – literary forms that rose to prominence in the run-up to and aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Union in 1801 – is arguably the primary reason for our current shortsighted understanding of late-eighteenth-century Irish Gothic fiction. Such is the focus on these forms, that we very often forget that they emerged organically from the Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth century and, indeed, continued to deploy the themes, images, and tropes made familiar by earlier Gothic works, such as Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), Anne Fuller's *The Convent; or, the History of Sophia Nelson* (1786), and Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1785) among many others.[37]

Stressing the hybrid nature both of the Gothic and of fiction in general at the time, several critics[38] have presented and explored a variety of

[33] W.J. McCormack, 'Irish Gothic' in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 303.

[34] W.J. McCormack, 'Irish Gothic and After (1820-1945),' p. 833.

[35] Ian C. Ross, 'Mapping Ireland in Early Fiction,' *Irish University Review – Special Issue: Irish Fiction, 1660-1830* 41,1 (2011): p. 2.

[36] Ian C. Ross, 'Fiction to 1800,' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 1 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 682.

[37] Morin, 'Forgotten Fiction,' p. 81.

[38] Siobhán Kilfeather gives a list of Irish Gothic novels from the second half of the eighteenth

Gothic fiction published from the second half of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, Richard Haslam rejects the recent enlargement of the range of Irish Gothic fiction to include the late eighteenth century suggesting instead the idea of a Gothic 'mode' rather than a Gothic tradition. This is characterized by an 'often intermittent suite of themes, motifs, devices, forms and styles, selected in specific periods, locations, and rhetorical situations, by a succession of different writers'.[39]

The recent critical studies focussed on predating Irish Gothic[40] have undermined the assumption that Gothic, even intended as Gothic mode, 'lay relatively dormant in the 1770s and 1780s'.[41] Such a variety of critical stances on the subject further complicates the recurrent admission that the Gothic is a difficult terrain. This position brings us back to the notion of the blurring, mixing and contiguity of different genres, as characteristic of the fiction written in this period, which begins to acquire more definite generic contours with the new century. This obviously means the co-existence of elements which later developed into different genres, and not the predominance of one. Indeed, as Ian C. Ross argues, 'Eighteenth-century fiction [...] should not be judged [...] by criteria appropriate to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel'.[42]

The dissemination of Gothic elements points to the foundational nature of the Gothic in the development of Anglo-Irish literature: 'the gothic, in fact, lies at the very core of Irish literature in English'.[43] As

century. Very rich, it does not mean to be exhaustive, leaving out relevant works, such as the anonymous *The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley* (1760) or [Mrs] F.C. Patrick's *The Irish Heiress*, 1797, while quoting her *More Ghosts!* Still, her list is an informative instance of the abundance of the genre in the period. 'Irish Gothic novels which appeared in this heyday of the genre include Thomas Leland's *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762); Elizabeth Griffith's *The History of Lady Barton* (1771) and *Conjugal Fidelity: Or Female Fortitude. A Genuine Story* (1779); Anne Fuller's *Alan Fitz-Osborne* (1787); James White's *Earl of Strongbow* (1789); Stephen Cullen's *The Haunted Priory* (1794); Anne Burke's *The Sorrows of Edith* (1796); Elizabeth Ryves's *The Hermit of Snowden* (1797); [Mrs] F.C. Patrick's *More Ghosts!* (1798); Anna Millikin's *Plantagenet; or, Secrets of the House of Anjou* (1802); Catharine Selden's *Villa Nova* (1804); Marianne Kenley's *The Cottage of the Appenines or the Castle of Novina* (1804); Luke Aylmer Conolly's *The Friar's Tale; or, Memoirs of the Chevalier Orsino* (1805); *W.H. Maxwell's O'Hara* (1825); *George Croly's Salethiel, or The Wandering Jew* (1828).' Siobhán Kilfeather, 'The Gothic Novel,' pp. 80-1.
[39] Richard Haslam, 'Irish Gothic: A Rhetorical Hermeneutics Approach,' *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 2 (2007): p. 4.
[40] Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, 'The Publication of Irish Novels and Novelettes – A Footnote on Irish Gothic Fiction,' *Cardiff Corvey – Reading the Romantic Text* 10 (2003): pp. 17-44.
[41] Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland,* p. 30.
[42] Ian C. Ross, 'Fiction to 1800,' p. 682.
[43] Jim Shanahan, 'Suffering Rebellion: Irish Gothic Fiction, 1799-1830,' in *Irish Gothics – Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions*, p. 77.

Morin and Gillespie point out, 'Kilfeather [...] powerfully suggests that the literature produced in post-1798 Ireland was a literature of terror [...] fundamentally gothic in nature'[44] and that 'the language of the literary gothic allowed writers to register contemporary atrocity'.[45]

The key issues of Irish Gothic – the fear of violent revenge, the issue of legitimacy, of ownership and dispossession – pervade both Protestant and Catholic Gothic. Several critics have pointed out the closeness of historical accounts of Catholic rebellions and Irish Gothic, thus high-lighting their interconnectedness. For Jarlath Killeen 'the sense of horror and terror [...] can be followed at least back to Sir John Temple's response to the 1641 rebellion'.[46] Characteristically, this pamphlet was reprinted at times of Protestant fears of resurgent Catholic violence. The same holds for Rebellion narratives printed immediately after the 1798 rising: al-though ninety per cent of the thirty thousand victims were on the rebel side, the rebellion narratives which were published immediately after the crushing of the rising and written by loyalists portray the rebels as bar-barous and brutal and 'as being on a religious crusade to exterminate all Protestants'.[47] These gory *factual* accounts were reprinted several times throughout the nineteenth century and are contiguous to Gothic fiction, providing a language and a content suitable to Gothic writing. If, beside all this, one takes into consideration the decadence, more perceived than real, of the Anglo-Irish gentry, it is no surprise that the nineteenth cen-tury is considered the heyday of Irish Gothic fiction.

Irish Gothic openly engages with history, but it abandons the Middle Ages, a favoured Gothic past, at the end of the eighteenth century, thus putting an end to the closeness between English and Irish Gothic. The watershed is represented by the Irish Rebellion in 1798:

> before 1798, the Irish Gothic was close to the English Gothic in terms of its dual interests in early British and Irish history (see Leland, Fuller and White) and in ghosts and sensational terrors (Griffith, Cullen, Roche and Patrick). [...] After 1798, the terrors of the Gothic became much more explicitly related to those of contemporary life in Ireland, and the realism became much more horrific and dangerous than previous fantasy literature had suggested.[48]

---

[44] Morin and Gillespie, p. 2.
[45] Morin and Gillespie, p. 2.
[46] Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction – History, Origins, Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 49. The reference is to John Temple's *The Irish Rebellion*, 1646.
[47] Shanahan, p. 84.
[48] Kilfeather, p. 81.

A response to Irish history as well as an echo of an Irish rebellion can be seen in 'Conjugal Fidelity', a novelette published by Elizabeth Griffith in 1780. The story is set 'at the time of the late Civil Wars, about the year 1640'.[49] Violence is recorded in the text, as defining the background – 'thus were they situated when the fatal event of the Irish Massacre took place, in which so many English Protestants were destroyed'[50] – and the temporal setting – 'Two years and more had elapsed [...] but Ireland was still rent with intestine commotions'.[51] In this novelette violence is especially connected to the figure of a Catholic priest who causes the death of the two protagonists as a result of his 'Catholic zeal for vengeance upon heretics'.[52]

A view on Irish historical events can also be provided by marginal characters of Gothic narratives, such as the exiled Lord Dunlere in Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont*, 1798: 'one of the most faithful and zealous supporters of James the Second, [who] in consequence of his attachment to that unhappy Prince, became an exile from his native country, Ireland, and lost a considerable property in it'.[53]

Charles Robert Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*, 1812, while fictitiously referring to an imaginary rebellion at the beginning of the nineteenth century, actually engages with the 1798 rising and Emmet's 1803 rebellion. In this novel 'Ireland is presented [...] as a dark, fearsome place haunted by the ghosts and memories of past violence, sectarian trouble, and bloody insurrection'.[54] The image that the country offers to Armida, the beautiful, gifted, and learned daughter of Lord Monclare, is that of a 'bleak waste of bog, scarce seen through the rain that beat heavily against the carriage windows',[55] even when it draws from her 'a cry of admiration': 'The character of the scene was grandeur – dark, desolate, and stormy grandeur'.[56] Ireland as a wild and inhospitable place is a recurrent trope. In *The Irish Heiress*, 1797, in which the Gothic excesses suffered by the heroine are those of revolutionary France, the newly-wed

---

[49] Elizabeth Griffith, 'Conjugal Fidelity: or, Female Fortitude', in Dr Goldsmith and Mrs Griffith, *Novelettes, Selected for the Young Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: Fielding and Walker, 1780), p. 182.
[50] Griffith, p. 182.
[51] Griffith, p. 186.
[52] Griffith, p. 188.
[53] Regina Maria Roche, *Clermont – A Tale* (London: Minerva Press, 1798), vol. III, p. 201.
[54] Christina Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 83.
[55] Charles Robert Maturin, *The Milesian Chief* (London: Henry Colburn, 1812) vol. I, p. 47.
[56] Maturin, vol. I, pp. 53-4.

future mother of the heiress, the daughter of an English viscount, resists going to Ireland with her husband for seven years as she 'could not bear the thoughts of going to Ireland, she was afraid of the *savages* – she supposed there was no bread to be got there, as they all lived upon potatoes, and what should she do for society, for she had heard her Mamma say they only spoke Irish and *howled*'.[57]

Armida, the female protagonist of *The Milesian Chief*, is utterly changed by her encounter with Ireland. Such transformation is evoked as soon as she arrives in the country:

> accustomed only to the sunny regions of Italy, or the cultivated fields of England, the effect of such a scene [the gloomy landscape near the castle] was like that of a new world. She shuddered at the idea of becoming the inhabitant of such a country; and she thought she felt already the *wild transforming effect* of its scenery.[58]

The novel offers no positive denouement, but it focusses on the return of the past: what *The Milesian Chief* asserts is that 'the only writing of the past that makes sense in an Irish context is one indebted to the Gothic'.[59] The past merges with the present and can never be put to rest: it 'spectrally stalks the present, demanding revenge'.[60]

The 'old Irish Prince',[61] the native Irish former owner of the castle and estate bought by Lord Monclare's family, sees the English Lord as 'rather the usurper than the purchaser of his property'[62] and is in turn referred to by the latter as 'the old savage'.[63] He lives in the past and refuses to accept the present, furious at the dispossession brought about by Lord Monclare. Blind with revenge and utterly bereft, his fury makes him see Armida as Queen Elizabeth in disguise: 'You are the Queen of England: the false daughter of the heretic Henry. You have dispossessed me of my rightful dominion'.[64]

Usurpation of the land and dispossession, which are central to *The Milesian Chief*, are closely connected to the issue of legitimacy which, in

[57] [Mrs] F.C. Patrick, *The Irish Heiress* (London: Minerva Press, 1797), vol. I, p. 20, emphasis mine.
[58] Maturin, vol. I, p. 55, emphasis mine.
[59] Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin*, p. 85.
[60] Morin, p. 95.
[61] Maturin, vol. I, pp. 51-2.
[62] Maturin, vol. I, p. 48.
[63] Maturin, vol. I, p. 49.
[64] Maturin, vol. III, pp. 157-8.

turn, haunts Irish Gothic fiction, and, again, is related to Irish history. Indeed, as Ian C. Ross argues, 'the legality of the Revolution of 1688-89 would trouble many Protestants for many years afterwards, leaving the permanence, as well as the legitimacy, of the Williamite land settlement and the restoration of a Protestant establishment in doubt'.[65] As events unravel, the tragic fate of the protagonists becomes inescapable:

> Ending with the violent deaths of its main characters as well as the defeat of the imaginary Irish rebellion on which the plot centres, *The Milesian Chief* offers no escape from these horrors [... it] echoes with the ghostly voices of the Gothic novel, the national tale, and the historical novel, emerging as a hybrid text that accurately reflects the social, cultural, and political fragmentation of the author's contemporary [post-Union] Ireland.[66]

As the author writes in the 'Dedication' to the novel:

> I have chosen my own country for the scene, because I believe it the only country on earth, where, from the strange existing opposition of religion, politics, and manners, the extremes of refinement and barbarism are united, and the most wild and incredible situations of romantic story are hourly passing before modern eyes.[67]

According to Christina Morin, 'Maturin's story underlines Ireland's inescapably Gothic nature, fittingly constructing it as a tragically haunted country unable to offer any kind of safe refuge for its people'[68] and constantly claiming victims for her sake.

3. Conclusion

The present article has opened with an overview of the critical debate on the Gothic, which indicates the difficulty of a clear-cut definition of the genre. Such difficulty has also been recorded in the more recent criticism of Irish Gothic, whose most controversial issue in contemporary studies is the proposed predating of the onset of the genre. These studies have highlighted its generic instability as well as its hybrid nature in the late eighteenth century. Finally, with the support of some Gothic narratives from the very end of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, the

---

[65] Ross, 'Fiction to 1800,' p. 14.
[66] Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin*, p. 83.
[67] Maturin, vol. I, p. V.
[68] Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin*, p. 102.

present work has focussed on the close relationship between Irish Gothic and history, a connection which enables these narratives to express the deep fears and anxieties of Irish society.

Bibliography

Clery, Emma J. and Miles, Robert (eds.), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

———, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21-39.

Deane, Seamus, *Strange Country – Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Galiné, Marine, 'The 1798 Rebellion: Gender Tensions and Femininity in the Irish Gothic,' *RISE* 2, 2 (2018): pp. 105-18.

Griffith, Elizabeth, 'Conjugal Fidelity: or, Female Fortitude,' in Dr Goldsmith and Mrs Griffith, *Novellettes, Selected for the Young Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: Fielding and Walker, 1780), pp. 179-191.

Haslam, Richard, 'Irish Gothic,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 83-94.

———, 'Irish Gothic: A Rhetorical Hermeneutics Approach,' *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 2 (2007): pp. 3-26.

———, 'Negotiating the Poetics of Irish Gothic Fiction Via Casuistry', in *'The common darkness where the dreams abide:' Perspectives on Irish Gothic and Beyond*, eds. Ilaria Natali and Annalisa Volpone (Perugia: Aguaplano, 2018), pp. 29-53.

Hogle, Jerrold, 'Introduction: the Gothic in Western Culture,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-20.

Kilfeather, Siobhán, 'The Gothic Novel,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. J.W.Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 78-96.

Killeen, Jarlath, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction – History, Origins, Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

Loeber, Rolf and Stouthamer-Loeber, Magda, 'The Publication of Irish Novels and Novelettes – A Footnote on Irish Gothic Fiction,' *Cardiff Corvey – Reading The Romantic Text* 10, (2003): pp. 17-44.

Maturin, Charles Robert, *The Milesian Chief* (London: Henry Colburn, Public Library, 1812).

McCormack, W.J., 'Irish Gothic and After (1820–1945),' in *The Field Day Anthol-*

ogy of Irish Writing, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), pp. 831–45.

———, 'Irish Gothic' in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts (New York: New York University Press, 2009, 1998[1]), pp. 303-5.

Miles, Robert, 'Eighteenth-century Gothic', in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 10-18.

———, 'The 1790s: the Effulgence of Gothic,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 41-62.

Morin, Christina and Gillespie, Niall, 'Introduction: De-Limiting the Irish Gothic', in *Irish Gothics – Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions*, eds. Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-12.

Morin, Christina, 'Forgotten Fiction: Reconsidering the Gothic Novel in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,' *Irish University Review – Special Issue: Irish Fiction, 1660-1830* 41, 1 (2011): pp. 80-94.

———, *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

———, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

Patrick, [Mrs] F.C., *The Irish Heiress* (London: Minerva Press, 1797).

Pelaschiar, Laura, 'Irish Catholic Gothic: The Heretical Gothicisms of James Joyce, Seamus Heaney and Neil Jordan,' in *'The common darkness where the dreams abide:' Perspectives on Irish Gothic and Beyond*, eds. Ilaria Natali and Annalisa Volpone (Perugia: Aguaplano, 2018), pp. 215-38.

Punter, David, 'Introduction: The Ghost of a History,' in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 1-9.

Rintoul, Suzanne, 'Gothic Anxieties: Struggling with a Definition,' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 17, 4 (2005): pp. 701-9.

Roche, Regina Maria, *Clermont – A Tale* (London: Minerva Press, 1798).

Ross, Ian C., 'Fiction to 1800,' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 1 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), pp. 682-7.

———, 'Mapping Ireland in Early Fiction,' *Irish University Review – Special Issue: Irish Fiction, 1660-1830* 41, 1 (2011): p. 1-20.

Spooner, Catherine and McEvoy, Emma, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-3.

'THE STREAM OF LIFE THAT WILL NOT STOP': THE 'MEMORY OF PLACES' AND THE PALIMPSESTUOUS STREETS OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CITY

Greta Perletti

This chapter intends to 'think out of the box' by showing how the combination of different media can prove an especially apt means to investigate the cultural discourse on the return of the past in the present. If the Western imagination of memory has always shown a powerful connection to a diversity of media, this contribution will be focussed in particular on the representation of the streets of the nineteenth-century city as palimpsestuous, creatively blurring the boundaries separating the present from the past, and the visible from the invisible. In works as diverse as Geoffrey Fletcher's book *The London Nobody Knows* (1962), its film adaptation by Norman Cohen (1967) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray* (2002-03), we find the belief that the streets of London may be recognized as a privileged site for the exploration of the transience and permanence of the Victorian past. While the palimpsest has proved an invaluable critical tool to investigate post-modernism, these works invite us to trace the palimpsest back to its nineteenth-century origins, when it functioned as a powerful metaphor deployed to make sense of the mysterious processes of the human mind. If the palimpsest was believed to be especially apt to describe the interplay of memory and imagination for creative work, it was also often associated with urban *flânerie* and with the encounter with the stratified diversity of the metropolitan space. Therefore, putting together a range of diverse and apparently heterogeneous texts, this chapter aims at investigating the hypothesis that at the core of the protean fascination with the city's palimpsestuous streets we may find their ability to offer themselves as a mental space, haunted by past images and words and in turn haunting any attempt to erase the ambivalent legacy of the past.

Nineteenth-century flânerie; Neo-Victorian London; Nineteenth-century Theories of Memory; Nineteenth-century Palimpsest; Gone Astray

In her influential monograph *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011), cultural historian Aleida Assmann begins the chapter devoted to 'Places' by focusing on the phrase 'the memory of places', or *memoria loci*. As Assman explains, the complexity of this phrase, and the fascination it has exerted on different authors and cultures, from classical antiquity to contemporary memory studies, relies on the fruitful ambiguity of its *genetivus*:

> The expression 'the memory of places' is both convenient and evocative. It is convenient because it leaves open the question of whether this is *genetivus objectivus*, meaning that we remember places, or a *genetivus subjectivus*, meaning that places retain memories. It is evocative because it suggests the possibility that places themselves may become the agents and bearers of memory, endowed with a mnemonic power that far exceeds that of humans.[1]

The semantic indeterminacy of the possessive in the phrase grants unstable agency to the action of remembering; while we would expect 'places' to be a direct object of a human-driven action ('*I* remember places'), we cannot exclude the possibility that places here take up instead the grammar function of subject (*places* remember). The consequence is that, beside being remembered by humans, buildings, monuments and cities can actually remember in the first place; indeed, much of the academic field of memory studies is concerned with the importance (as well as with the challenge) of deciphering, understanding, and protecting the memory held by places.[2] As Assmann's words implicitly make clear, however, there is also something uncanny and haunting in the figuration of places as 'agents and bearers of memory'. Places, as she puts it, are 'endowed with a mnemonic power' that appears far superior to the one granted to humans; a mnemonic power that, we may add, may even baffle, elude or overwhelm human attempts to identify and control the memory of places.

In this essay I have chosen to 'think out of the box' by exploring the streets of the nineteenth-century city as a prime example of the *loci*'s propensity to haunt humans and to unsettle the agency we would expect to be at work in the mnemonic process. To do so, the essay will outline the connections between the city and mnemonic imagination, first by

---

[1] Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, trans. Aleida Assmann with David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 283.

[2] Pierre Nora remains the theorist most closely associated with the importance of memory places. The concept of *lieux de mémoire* inspired his monumental three-volume edited collection *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98). The bibliography concerning sites of memory is immense, as the preservation and contested nature of memory places are among the most hotly debated issues at the heart of the academic field known as 'memory studies.' See for example David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Andrew Charlesworth, 'Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994): pp. 579–93; John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations, The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory,' *Parallax* 17, 4 (2011): pp. 4-18.

introducing the tradition of the art of memory in the classical and early modern age and then by emphasizing the changes this paradigm underwent in the nineteenth century, when the palimpsest began to be used as a metaphor for the human mind, transforming the encounter with the memory of places in the city in an experience entailing a possibly pathological process. In the final part, the essay will briefly explore two very different works like Geoffrey Fletcher's *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray Portraits* (2002/3), showing the extent to which their fascination with the streets of London stems from the nineteenth-century palimpsest and in turn contributes to transform these texts into further palimpsests that play with the legible and illegible traces left by the Victorians. As we shall see, the figure that accompanies such 'thinking out of the box' is that of the *flâneur*, whose eccentric, intoxicated or playful nature invites us to step beyond conventional assumptions and disciplinary boundaries by mingling together different time frames as well as different media.

1. *The city and the mnemonic power of places*

In the history of Western imagination, the city seems to be the site that most perfectly embodies the shift of agency from humans to places which Assmann identifies in the phrase 'the memory of places'. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben observe, 'one might even say that *cities remember* – and that we remember with and through them.'[3] In the classical tradition of the 'art of memory', which was still influential in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, the act of remembering 'through the city' was actually inscribed in mnemonics itself. Following the legendary example of Simonides of Ceos – who, as Cicero recalls in his *De Oratore*, was able to grant proper burial to the disfigured bodies of his fellow-guests by remembering where they had been sitting before the building suddenly collapsed – the 'method of *loci*' relied on the imaginary placing of images corresponding to the things to be remembered in imaginary mental places that often included the buildings of a city.[4]

[3] Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 'Troping the Neo-Victorian City: Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 7.
[4] See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

The method of *loci* was much more than a simple technique. Indeed, it was a real 'art', as defined in the title of Frances A. Yates's influential monograph:

> The word 'mnemotechnics' hardly conveys what the artificial memory of Cicero may have been like, as it moved among the buildings of ancient Rome, *seeing* the places, *seeing* the images stored on the places, with a piercing inner vision which immediately brought to his lip the thoughts and words of his speech. I prefer to use the expression 'art of memory' for this process.[5]

The relation with the city plays no marginal role in the perception of mnemotechnics as an art that enriches the mind of its practitioner. As Cicero walks down the real or imagined Rome, there is no doubt as to his agency in the remembering process: thanks to 'a piercing inner vision', the orator's mind exerts full mastery over the memory images that have been stored in the various imaginary places and need to be retrieved for his speech to be complete. The city is here an instrument for the enhancement of the powers of human recollection: the 'memory of places', clearly a *genetivus objectivus*, is at the service of the orator's ordered and well-regulated mental process.

The contemporary city, on the other hand, offers an altogether different memorial experience to its visitors, one in which places appear endowed with a mnemonic power of their own, not necessarily subjected to the mastery of the human minds that inhabit and visit them. We may understand this epistemological shift in the perception of the memory held by places by considering the metaphor of the palimpsest, which is today among the most widely used terms in theories and discussions of memory and/in the urban space.[6] The palimpsest became especially popular in the course of the nineteenth century, when the application of new chemical reagents to parchment scrolls revealed earlier inscriptions that had been erased from the surface of the paper when there was need to make room for newer writing. What was striking about the palimpsest was that with the help of the chemical process the earlier inscriptions could become visible, and in some cases legible, again.

---

[5] Yates, p. 4 (italics in the original).
[6] See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen (eds), *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

The palimpsest belongs to the group of memory metaphors that scholars like Assmann and Harald Weinrich classify as metaphors of writing (as opposed to metaphors of the storehouse or the archive and of space or landscape),[7] the archetype of which is the wax tablet, deployed as early as in Plato's *Teaetetus* to describe the workings of memory. In Cicero's *De Oratore*, for example, the wax tablet is evoked to provide evidence of the reliability and effectiveness of the mental process that attributes memory images to the various places of the imaginary city: just as a wax tablet is inscribed with letters, each 'locality' is stored with images.[8] In contrast to this view, Assmann explains that the introduction of the palimpsest to describe the act of remembering in the nineteenth century unsettled the neatness of the inscription process by foregrounding time alongside space. With the palimpsest metaphor, the perception of memory was considerably transformed: from a 'vast' power, memory became a faculty associated with the idea of unfathomable 'depths'.[9]

As a result, in the course of the nineteenth century also the relation between the city and memory underwent an important change in Western imagination. If in antiquity the mnemonic relevance of the city, as we have seen, relied on the carefully organized mental (re)visitation of the imaginary places in which the items that needed to be remembered had been stored, with the introduction of the palimpsest metaphor the city came to be imagined as a site retaining memories both visible and latent, and juxtaposing the past with the present.[10] Rather than well-regulated recollection through the arrangement of the buildings and the images, the nineteenth-century city now invited excavation; whereas classical and early modern discourses on memory by no means questioned the anthropocentric agency of the mnemonic act, the modern city confronts humans with a process of retention that is often mysterious, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

---

[7] See Harald Weinrich, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 4-5 and Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, pp. 137-50.

[8] Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.86.354.

[9] Aleida Assmann, 'Metafore, modelli e mediatori della memoria,' in *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi transdisciplinari*, ed. Elena Agazzi and Vita Fortunati (Roma: Meltemi, 2007), p. 520.

[10] See Luigi Cazzato, 'From Physical to Mental Space: Palimpsest-Cities in the 19th and 20th Centuries,' in *CityScapes: Islands of the Self: Literary and Cultural Studies. Proceedings of the 22nd AIA Conference, Cagliari 15-17 September 2005*, ed. Francesco Marroni *et al.* (Cagliari: Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Cagliaritana, 2007), pp. 195-204.

2. The nineteenth-century palimpsest: the all-remembering brain and its ailments

Thomas De Quincey is usually credited with first deploying the metaphor of the palimpsest to describe the human mind. In his 'Suspiria de Profundis' (1845) he describes the peculiar retention of the brain with a strongly suggestive imagery:

> Yes, reader, countless are the mysterious hand-writings of grief or joy which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain; and, like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness. But by the hour of death, but by fever, but by the searchings of opium, all these can revive in strength. They are not dead, but sleeping.[11]

De Quincey's extract is intensely visual, evoking the images of exotic and sublime places to account for the different layers that have constituted the human brain over the course of time. Although scholars have shown that some palimpsest imagery was circulating within discussions of memory even before 1845,[12] De Quincey's model brought about an important revision of the wax tablet metaphor by highlighting the permanence as well as the instability of the inscriptions: traces are retained, but they are not always available or retrievable.

As is well known, the palimpsest has enjoyed renewed popularity within post-structuralist and postmodernist criticism. Gerard Genette's exploration of transtextuality in his book *Palimpsests*, Linda Hutcheon's belief that adaptations are 'inherently "palimpsestuous" works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts' and Sarah Dillon's fine and extensive study of the palimpsest in post-modern theory have all shown the extent to which the palimpsest operates as an invaluable critical tool to demystify fixed meanings, disciplinary boundaries and historical linearity.[13]

---

[11] Thomas De Quincey, 'Suspiria De Profundis,' in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, Suspiria de Profundis and the English Mail-Coach* (London: MacDonald, 1956), p. 512.

[12] Roger Douglas-Fairhurst, for example, argues that Coleridge had already deployed the term 'palimpsest' to talk about his memory in 1828: Roger Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 149. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell suggest that Thomas Carlyle's essay 'On History' (1830) predates De Quincey's use of the palimpsest as a metaphor of the human mind: Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Introduction: Reading the Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Palimpsest,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), p. 8.

[13] Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Clau-

Recently, Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell have called attention to the fact that even in the nineteenth century the palimpsest proved a powerful instrument for radical and critical thinking. Deployed as a metaphor to make sense of 'abstract notions of time, memory, selfhood',[14] the nineteenth-century palimpsest called for an intrinsic intermediality, evoking both the visual (the recognition of earlier traces) and the textual (the legibility or illegibility of such traces). As also De Quincey's extract implicitly suggests with its richly visual imagery, the palimpsest unsettles rigid demarcations between image and text, because it speaks to 'the combined visuality and textuality – the complex over layering of words, images, and texts – that the Victorians themselves developed through their illustrated books and periodicals and cartoons'.[15] In line with this view, Tania Agathocleous has shown that the popular genre of the nineteenth-century urban sketch, combining the literary and the visual, is a fascinating if neglected component of literary realism.[16] As we shall see, a similar intermediality is a consistent trait of the works interested in the palimpsestuous[17] nature of the streets of London.

While showing affinities with the model of the mind as a blank slate presented in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), De Quincey's palimpsest significantly revises that model by introducing two aspects that will be extremely important for nineteenth-century representations of the mental processes of memory. The first is the extreme retentiveness of the brain: already in 1817 Coleridge had argued, in his *Biographia Literaria*, that 'in the very nature of a living spirit, it may be more possible that heaven and earth should pass away, than that

de Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 6; Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007).

[14] Jones and Mitchell, p. 8.

[15] Jones and Mitchell, p. 8.

[16] Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[17] In my usage of the adjective 'palimpsestuous', I follow Dillon's distinction between 'palimpsestic' (which reads the relation between past and present as the vertical movement of archaeological excavation) and 'palimpsestuous'. The latter follows the practice of Foucauldian genealogy and focuses on the surface over which the traces of earlier inscriptions manifest themselves. A 'palimpsestuous reading' is interested in unexpected connections between the past and the present and is 'an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none'; Sarah Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,' *Textual Practice* 19, 3 (2005), p. 254. In her later monograph, Dillon further elaborates on her choice, arguing that '"palimpsestuous" suggests a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation'; Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 3.

a single act, a single thought, should be loosened or lost',[18] emphasizing the ability of the mind to obscurely store memories of important as well as marginal past occurrences. The second aspect that De Quincey introduces is the important role attributed to altered mental states for the retrieval of the apparently invisible traces left on the brain as palimpsest: in the extract above, De Quincey mentions phenomena involving an alteration of consciousness, like proximity to death, fever and intoxication from opium, as the conditions that make memories that were hitherto unavailable come up again to the surface.

In Victorian culture, both the aspects presented by De Quincey's conception of the brain as palimpsest pose obvious problems, which contribute to construe the palimpsest – and the model of memory it implies – as an ambivalent source of wonder and anxiety. On the one hand, the discovery that early events and situations leave a trace on the brain that is only seemingly erased brings attention to the fact that an excess of memory may impair the legibility of the traces from the past. In his 1833 essay 'On History Again', Thomas Carlyle writes that 'oblivion is the dark page, whereon Memory writes her light-beam characters, and makes them legible: were it all light, nothing could be read there, any more than if it were all darkness.'[19] As an endlessly inscribed mental space, the all-remembering brain is haunted by the return of traces that appear illegible. On the other hand, the fact that the retrieval of memories is dependent on an altered mental state implies the inability to account rationally for the recovery of the traces and foregrounds a condition that is morally controversial, since a person undergoing an alteration of consciousness is, to use Locke's words, '*not himself*, or is *beside himself*'.[20] As a result, the palimpsest appears a problematic metaphor in Victorian culture, emphasizing the 'excessive' nature of human memory, its automatic activity and its ability to elude rational control. While the unaccountable availability of the traces of the past has the potential to inspire creative artistic work, the return of unbidden memories also appears to the Victorians as the prelude to mental derangement and pathology.[21]

---

[18] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, vol. 1 (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), p. 114.
[19] Thomas Carlyle, 'On History Again,' in *Historical Essays* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), p. 20.
[20] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 342 (italics in the original).
[21] On the representation of 'excessive' memory as dangerous in the nineteenth century see

3. *The* flâneur *and the city*

The nineteenth-century city offers itself as a particularly apt place to experience the ambivalently creative and pathological potential of memory. As Julian Wolfreys puts it, memory is embedded in the experience of living the city, as 'the city is a place of layers, erasures, disappearances and losses, as much as it is a site of architectural and monumental persistence.'[22] Represented spatially as a chaotic maze,[23] the Victorian urban space appears dominated in its temporal dimension by the 'traces' that are symbolic of the mnemonic excess of the brain as palimpsest.

Key to understanding this aspect is the figure of the *flâneur*, a man (less frequently, a woman)[24] who receives energy as well as creative inspiration from the plunge into the bustling life of the city's streets. While the *flâneur* is most typically associated with Paris, London has had a long tradition of famous strollers, like Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Arthur Machen, Virginia Woolf and George Orwell. Today, the tradition of London *flânerie* survives in contemporary authors and psychogeographers like Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair and 'The Gentle Author', who runs the blog *spitalfieldslife.com*. For the *flâneur*, the encounter with the streets and the past life imbuing them results in a heightened vision: in the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin approvingly quotes Ferdinand Lion, who argues that 'whosoever sets foot in a city feels caught up as in a web of dreams, where the most remote past is linked to the events of today'.[25]

The *flâneur*'s creative encounter with the city streets in the act of strolling is arguably understood as a palimpsestuous experience. This encounter is at its most creative when the physical space of the city nourishes the *flâneur*'s mind while at the same time subjecting him to the

---

Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Greta Perletti, *Le ferite della memoria. Il ritorno dei ricordi nella cultura vittoriana* (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2008).

[22] Julian Wolfreys, '"Part Barrier, Part Entrance to a Parallel Dimension": London and the Modernity of Urban Perception,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 134.

[23] Linda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000).

[24] Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,' *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2, 3 (1985): pp. 37-48. For a reassessment of Wolff's view see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, pp. 68-9.

[25] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 435.

return of the traces that were inscribed on his mind but were not previously available to consciousness. In 'A Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* receives energy as well as images for his mind while among the street crowds: 'a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness' during the day, he creates art at night, when 'all the materials, stored higgledy-piggledy by memory' come back to him as he is fixing his 'steady gaze' on the sheet of paper.[26]

The encounter with the palimpsestuous city streets can also entail a kind of memory disorder, as the mnemonic excess inscribed in the traces of the city's past life reverberates on the mind of the viewer. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) we find an example of this process when Dorothea Brooke is confronted, during her honeymoon, with 'the weight of unintelligible Rome'.[27] The traces of Rome's past weigh on Dorothea's mind, as if the city were an immense and all-remembering brain, whose extreme retentiveness, like Carlyle's perpetual day-light, prevented the inscriptions from being meaningful. Dorothea's gaze recognizes the presence of different temporal stratifications and of confusing contrasts between the glory of the past and the degradation of the present, but the memory held by places has the power to deprive Dorothea of mastery over the experience of perception:

> Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present [...]; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her.[28]

The vision of the traces emerging from Rome's past does more than simply confusing Dorothea's mind: it undermines her agency as a perceiving self, the traces 'urging' themselves on her and causing her organism to be turned into a passive spectator. Shortly after the reported extract, the narrator identifies Dorothea's strange experience as a kind of mnemonic dysfunction, as the ghosts of these remembered images return unbidden to haunt her: 'forms both pale and glowing fixed themselves on

---

[26] Charles Baudelaire, 'A Painter of Modern Life,' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 401, 402.
[27] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 177.
[28] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 177.

her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years'.[29]

Another aspect that reveals the affinities between the *flâneur*'s experience of the city as a palimpsest and the mnemonic imagination of the brain as palimpsest is the fact that the traces of the city's past lives can be best re-activated while in an altered mental space. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), the protagonist Lucy Snowe becomes a *flâneuse* after being given an opiate: the altered mental state caused by the intoxication allows the reserved and respectable English teacher to find the confidence of walking alone in the night, this one time looking at people rather than being looked at. One thing that strikes Lucy as she looks back to this episode is the strange route she pursued in her walk: 'I knew my route, yet it seemed as if I was hindered from pursuing it direct: now a sight, and now a sound, called me aside, luring me down this alley and that'.[30] What Lucy is describing here is the condition of walking aimlessly or 'drifting', with no direction, a well-known movement typical of *flânerie*. However, rather than being the consequence of an alteration of consciousness as it is in Brontë's novel, drifting in the city streets, following no pre-arranged plan but only chance associations, may be arguably understood as *producing* (as opposed to simply *mirroring*) a peculiar state of consciousness, one that allows the *flâneur* to be immersed in city life and to perceptively grasp what goes unnoticed by other inhabitants of the city.

Today, the idea of 'drifting' is associated with *flânerie* especially in Surrealist and Situationist practices, where it identifies a playful but meaningful way of remapping cities according to affective or surprising routes, aiming at renovating the enjoyment of the city. Guy Debord, the theorist of the concept known as *dérive*, is also the founder of psychogeography, a practice which ideally combines psychology and geography. As Merlin Coverley observes,

> like the skilled chemist, the psychogeographer is able both to identify and to distil the varied ambiances of urban environment. Emotional zones that cannot be determined simply by architectural or economic conditions must be determined by following the aimless stroll (*dérive*), the results of which may then form the basis of a new cartography.[31]

---

[29] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 177.
[30] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 454.
[31] Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 59.

Dérive is intended as a way to elicit a peculiar mental state that, as Debord explains, should include not only 'letting go', but also 'knowledge and calculation'.[32] In this state of perceptive alertness, the *flâneur* becomes alive to the city's 'psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones'.[33]

Although *dérive* is a typically postmodern concept, it is important to remark that 'drifting' was a very important trope also for Victorian culture. Starting in the 1850s, many important studies on mental physiology focused on theories of human consciousness based on a system of channels or streams, some manifest and some latent.[34] In George Eliot's narrative, for example, consciousness is imagined as a place for 'meeting streams',[35] and drifting on water indicates that the character is surrendering to his or her unconscious mental life.[36] This is most visible in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Romola* (1862-63), where the two young protagonists Maggie and Romola are tempted to give way to their obscure and illicit desires – the attraction to her cousin's suitor for Maggie, death for Romola – while gliding on a boat.[37] While unconscious mental processes in Victorian culture are often viewed as degrading and inferior to conscious mental activity, Eliot's examples show that this is not necessarily the case with drifting. The aimless movement on the water and the peculiar absent-minded mental states it symbolizes are actually conducive to (if not productive of) the highly moral resolutions the young women will make shortly after these scenes: Maggie gives up Stephen, while Romola's 'drifting away' is the prelude to her subsequent 'waking', when she realizes that the boat has become 'the gently lulling cradle of a new life'.[38]

Also in the urban context drifting is productive of insights that be-

[32] Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive,' in *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, *Spaces of Visual Culture*, ed. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 77.

[33] Debord, p. 77.

[34] See Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[35] 'Meeting Streams' is the title of Book 2 of George Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

[36] On the importance of psychological and physiological research in Eliot's work see Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially pp. 142-200; Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

[37] The scenes occur respectively in Chapter 13 ('Borne Along by the Tide') of *The Mill on the Floss* and Chapter 61 ('Drifting Away') of *Romola.*

[38] George Eliot, *Romola* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 548.

speak of the fruitful if dangerous interaction between conscious and unconscious mental life, especially in the writings of Charles Dickens, the author that appears most emblematic of London *flânerie*.[39] Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* quotes Chesterton's remark that as a child Dickens 'had no other resource but drifting, and he drifted over half London'.[40] This is actually the subject of 'Gone Astray', a short tale Dickens published on *Household Words* in 1853, which focuses on the one-night adventure of a young child lost in London and aimlessly moving from one bizarre scene to the next across the slum neighbourhood of St Giles, in an atmosphere that appears suspended between hallucination and comedy.[41] Dickens writes in a letter that '[the streets of London] suppl[y] something to my brain, which it cannot bear, when busy, to lose': they are like a 'magic lantern', whose light nourishes his creativity but at the same time gives birth to unpredictably spectral images.[42]

Drifting among the city's past life produces in Dickens the hallucinated state that mingles external perceptions and inner projections, past and present, death and life. Thus, in the article 'Night Walks' (1860), the sleepless and houseless narrator has a vision of the dead of London rising from the churchyard and depriving the living of vital space.[43] Similarly, Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) opens with the reflections of a *flâneur* narrator evoking the image of a convalescent who is overwhelmed by 'the hum and noise' of the city, and by 'the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious in a noisy churchyard'.[44] Dickens offers abundant examples of what Benjamin calls the 'anamnestic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about in the city':[45] a form of altered mental state that, springing from embodied memory (as implicit in the adjective 'anamnestic'), allows for deeper insights and a keener gaze.

---

[39] The bibliography on Dickens and London is extensive. See in particular John Rignall, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* (London: Routledge, 1992); Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009); Julian Wolfreys, *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

[40] Benjamin, p. 438.

[41] Charles Dickens, 'Gone Astray', in *Night Walks* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 14-29.

[42] Benjamin, p. 426.

[43] Charles Dickens, 'Night Walks', in *Night Walks*, p. 9. Dickens's article and nightwalking habits are discussed also in Matthew Beaumont's recent book *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2020), pp. 45-49.

[44] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.

[45] Benjamin, p. 417.

The liminality between pathology and creativity in Dickens is noticed also by Victorian physiologist William Carpenter, who mentions Dickens when dealing with the peculiar mental state which, following some intense concentration of thought, allows the 'ideal creations' of imagination to be 'reproduced with the force of actual experience', making it increasingly difficult to distinguish among recollected and imagined faces and events.[46] The proverbially hypertrophic Dickensian vision is at the core of what Benjamin labels '[t]he psychology of the *flâneur*',[47] a form of mnemonic dysfunction that is productive of the art of the *flâneur* as well as of a disturbing confusion between outer and inner, city and brain. While Orwell argued that Dickens's imagination 'overwhelms everything, like a kind of weed',[48] for Chesterton 'Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places'.[49] In one passage of 'Night Walks', the narrator reflects on the contiguity between sanity and insanity during sleep, and reports a short conversation with an asylum inmate:

> Said an afflicted man to me, when I was last in a hospital like this, 'Sir, I can frequently fly.' I was half ashamed to reflect that so could I – by night.[50]

Dickens's imagination is inseparable from the strange altered mental state that feeds on the streets of London and mingles individual memories with the memory held by places; like the narrator of his tale, Dickens knows that going astray in London might bring about pathology – but on the other hand, he also knows that drifting can make him fly.

4. *The palimpsestuous streets of London*

The keener gaze of the observer of the city and the *flâneur*'s alertness to the palimpsestuous nature of the streets is crucial for the exploration of some works that, following Wolfreys's phrasing, we may define para-Victorian, as 'they take up the language of the place, and with that, become shaped [...] by the other that is the constellated tracery of the

---

[46] William B. Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology* (London: Kegan, Trench, Trübner, 1896), p. 456.
[47] Benjamin, p. 438.
[48] George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens,' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Gollancz, 1940), p. 308.
[49] Benjamin, p. 438.
[50] Dickens, 'Night Walks,' p. 8.

city.'[51] The Victorian palimpsest, I would argue, is the trace that shapes Geoffrey Fletcher's book *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray* (2002/3). Despite the obvious differences between these works, what they have in common is, first, the desire to explore the resurfacing of the past traces in contemporary London through the literary and the visual text; secondly, both Fletcher and Strand rely on the figure of the *flâneur* for the exploration of palimpsest imagery. Finally, and most intriguingly, by engaging playfully as well as self-consciously with the traces of the Victorian past (and, most notably, with Dickens's voice), Fletcher's and Strand's texts may be recognized as themselves palimpsestuous, because they add a further layer to the experience of walking down (or looking at) the streets of London.

The London Nobody Knows is the best-known work by Fletcher, who has been a writer, illustrator, art critic and columnist of *The Daily Telegraph* for more than 30 years. The peculiarity of this book lies in the association of texts with sketches by Fletcher himself, complementing each other and focusing on hidden or little-known spots of London. As a narrator, Fletcher appears *flâneur*-like, leading readers across a journey that is highly idiosyncratic, unpredictable and bizarre: sometimes his chapters focus on districts of London, sometimes on single architectural details or styles; in addition, the illustrations and the corresponding text are sometimes distanced by several pages, thus making the experience of reading the text and looking at its visual counterpart discontinuous and disjointed.

The narrator is particularly intrigued by the juxtaposition of past with present in the London streets: in an illustration of a street lamp in Islington, for example, a horse trough and a Georgian building co-exist with a birth-control shop.[52] While the corresponding text makes only a passing remark on the Georgian building hosting a 'wonderful enamel advertisement for female pills',[53] the sketch confronts the viewer with a palimpsestuous surface, in which the traces from the past can be grasped by an attentive, discerning eye.

Although the tone of the narrator is at times overtly nostalgic, 'his mode of representation', as Isabelle Cases argues, 'seems less intent on sentimental yearning or mourning than on self-consciously discompos-

---

[51] Wolfreys, '"Part Barrier, Part Entrance,"' p. 140.
[52] Geoffrey Fletcher, *The London Nobody Knows* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 65.
[53] Fletcher, p. 51.

ing our everyday apperception of the city'.[54] This, as we have seen, is consistent with the playful and demystifying *dérive* of psychogeographical *flâneurs*; but I would argue that in Fletcher we can also find some aspects that evoke the Victorian drifting, with its intermingling of conscious and unconscious mental activity. The narrator's *flânerie* allows him to plunge into a dreamy atmosphere, especially when he is confronted with the emergence of the city's past life on the palimpsestuous streets. In the extract below, for example, the narrating voice superimposes the past over the present Sidney Street, theatre of the anarchist riots:

> Whenever I go, in spite of modern changes [...], I seem to see the top-hatted figure of Winston Churchill peering round a doorway during the gun battle, and policemen with walrus moustaches stare out of the past, along with loungers in greasy cloth caps.[55]

The extract is strongly Dickensian in the way the encounter with the city as palimpsest triggers the altered mental state of the *flâneur*, blending vision with imagination, and the present with the past: haunted by the trace, the perceiving subject is confronted with the power of the memory of places to conjure spectral illusions. In another Dickensian extract, Fletcher describes the Kensal Green Cemetery with gasometers in the background and this juxtaposition of past and present life prompts him to imagine, like the narrators of Dickens's 'Night Walks' and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the return of the 'dead but conscious' past inhabitants of London: 'among the leafy avenues, accompanied by the smell of gas, [the dead] are awaiting the general resurrection. I imagine them breaking open the costly sarcophagi'.[56]

Fletcher's sentimental nostalgia for the disappearing past has been read as reactionary, as in Dan Cruickshank's 'Foreword' to the 2011 edition of the book, where Fletcher is described as 'looking, appreciating, recording – but not participating, not actively battling to save those things he loved'.[57] This would also set Fletcher in tension with the playful, unsettling and irreverent modes of psychogeographical *dérive*. And yet, as

---

[54] Isabelle Cases, 'Re-Imagining the Victorian *flâneur* in the 1960s: *The London Nobody Knows* by Geoffrey Fletcher and Norman Cohen,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 117.

[55] Fletcher, p. 94.

[56] Fletcher, p. 26.

[57] Dan Cruickshank, 'Foreword,' in Geoffrey Fletcher, *The London Nobody Knows* (London: The History Press, 2011), not paginated, par. 6.

Kate Mitchell argues, the contrast between 'a conservative, even naïve, nostalgia' and postmodernism's 'somehow more authentic, because critical, attitude towards the past' appears unproductive for cultural memory.[58] Written before the Victorian heritage became fashionable, Fletcher's book may arguably have entrusted the *flâneur*-like journey created in its pages with a sort of revelatory power: in other words, Fletcher may have designed his book with the purpose to help us adopt a gaze that recognizes the memory held by places. Building on palimpsest imagery, Fletcher stimulates readers to re-activate the traces that were illegible because of the unpoetic overwriting by modernity and postwar economic boom. Fletcher's lesson survives today most clearly in the activism of The Gentle Author, who is committed to look at the changes affecting the East End through his daily blog *Spitalfields Life*, in an attempt to save what is left before gentrification sweeps it away. With an intermedial approach that brings together the textual and the visual (especially photography), The Gentle Author appears especially attentive to palimpsest imagery and gives space to photographers like Adam Tuck and C.A. Mathew, who experiment with making visible in their work the re-emergence of past traces in contemporary London.[59]

It is not surprising that photography should play an important role in palimpsestuous imagination. De Quincey's essay on the palimpsest famously includes the description of the vision related by a woman who was rescued from drowning: in this experience, as the previously unavailable traces were reactivated by the altered mental state provided by proximity to death, the past incidents appeared as a visible picture. The Victorians elaborated on this, as the recent discoveries about the photographic technology provided a powerful metaphor to describe memory. William Carpenter, for example, used the comparison between the mind and photographic paper to account for phenomena involving the unbidden return of memories that were not available to ordinary consciousness:

> any 'trace' […] although remaining so long outside 'the sphere of consciousness' as to have seemed non-existent, may be revived again in full vividness

[58] Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.
[59] 'A Walk Through Time in Spitalfields' (12 February 2020), https://spitalfieldslife.com/2020/02/12/a-walk-through-time-in-spitalfields-x/ (accessed 15 February 2020); 'Upon the Subject of C.A. Mathew's Pictures' (6 March 2014), http://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/03/06/upon-the-subject-of-c-a-mathew%E2%80%99s-pictures/ (accessed 15 February 2020)

under certain special conditions – just as the invisible impression left upon the sensitive paper of the Photographer, is developed into a Picture by the application of chemical re-agents.[60]

The photograph and the palimpsest are understood in Victorian culture as implying an extremely similar model of memory, one that emphasizes the automatic nature of recollection and its propensity to elude conscious activity.

The photographer Clare Strands plays with the intertwinings between the palimpsest, photography, and the return of the traces of the past in the present. The palimpsestuous surface of Strand's series works on both the literary and the visual level: the title of her photographic series of portraits *Gone Astray* (2002/3) is an explicit reference to Dickens's 1853 tale about the child lost at night amidst the London streets, while the use of pastoral painted backdrops for the portraits is reminiscent of the studio settings of nineteenth-century portraitists, most notably recognisable in the illustrations that accompany Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). As David Chandler argues, the juxtaposition of people taken from the contemporary London streets with the nineteenth-century backdrop confers to the portraits 'an air of pastiche'.[61] Indeed, Strand argues in an interview that she likes 'to operate with opposites – the extraordinary versus the ordinary, the factual as opposed to the unreal and the comedic offset by the serious,'[62] and here she uses palimpsest-like images to question people's tendency to stick to 'types'. In particular, the theatricality of the nineteenth-century streets, popularized by Dickens's writing and by Victorian photography in the representation of the working-class inhabitants of the East End are here super-imposed over the portraits of contemporary London 'types'. As a result, Strand's series forces us, Kate Flint argues, to question our tendency to make 'assumptions based on typology',[63] drawing our gaze to the incongruous detail that makes the picture crack: the torn stocking, the running mascara, the split lip, the vulnerable pose.

[60] Carpenter, p. 436.
[61] David Chandler, 'Clare Strand: Vanity Fair,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), p. 9.
[62] Clare Strand in conversation with Chris Mullen, 'Interview,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph*, p. 93.
[63] Kate Flint, 'Afterword: Photography, Palimpsests, and the Neo-Victorian,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), p. 8.

In Strand's work, too, the *flâneur* is a key figure, not only second-hand, via the reference to famous strollers like Dickens and Mayhew, but also because the idea came to Strand as she was living in London with a year's fellowship at the London College of Printing, and as she everyday walked down the streets of the metropolis. While drifting is embedded in the very title of this work, Strand reports that the idea of the project came to her as she developed a sort of sudden awareness of the invisible and intangible dimension of London: 'it alerted me to what was happening underneath the hum of the pavement, the tunnels and the channels – what is there and what is not there? I followed ideas of magic and the supernatural in the City'.[64] As a *flâneuse*, Strand partakes in the hallucinated mental state that blurs the real and the unreal, the actual and the imagined person, contemporary photograph and the remembered image. Strand's portraits may arguably raise issues with what Benjamin terms 'the phantasmagoria of the *flaneur*: to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character'.[65] While the term 'phantasmagoria' points to the fact that the images-traces are the haunting memories held by the streets, Strand's evocation of the Victorian past invites us to go beyond the stable and reassuring dichotomies upon which nineteenth-century *flânerie* inevitably relies.

5. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to 'think out of the box' by showing the extent to which the Victorian palimpsest can be recognized as inspiring fruitful, productive and intermedial ways of imagining the relations between memory and the city. In contrast to the earlier tradition of the art of memory, the introduction of the palimpsest as a metaphor for memory admitted the possibility that 'the memory of places' may elude human agency in unpredictable, pathological and creative ways. The city becomes a mental space that offers the *flâneur* (and the *flâneuse*) the spectacle of an all-remembering brain, whose traces can be re-activated by his or her drifting away. Suspended between hallucination and creativity, the mnemonic power of the nineteenth-century city streets will continue to inspire artists and writers to engage with the metaphor of the palimpsest, whose fascinating and at the same time disturbing nature the Victorians taught us to appreciate.

[64] Clare Strand in conversation with Chris Mullen, p. 95.
[65] Benjamin, p. 429.

Bibliography

Agathocleous, Tanya, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Assmann, Aleida, 'Metafore, modelli e mediatori della memoria,' in *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi transdisciplinari*, ed. Elena Agazzi and Vita Fortunati (Roma: Meltemi, 2007), pp. 511-30.

———, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, trans. Aleida Assmann with David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Baudelaire, Charles, 'A Painter of Modern Life,' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 390-402.

Beaumont, Matthew, *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2020).

Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin Mc-Laughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Bolzoni, Lina, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Carlyle, Thomas, 'On History Again,' in *Historical Essays* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), pp. 15-22.

Carpenter, William B., *Principles of Mental Physiology* (London: Kegan, Trench, Trübner, 1896).

Cases, Isabelle, 'Re-Imagining the Victorian *flâneur* in the 1960s: *The London Nobody Knows* by Geoffrey Fletcher and Norman Cohen,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 97-125.

Cazzato, Luigi, 'From Physical to Mental Space: Palimpsest-Cities in the 19th and 20th Centuries,' in *CityScapes: Islands of the Self: Literary and Cultural Studies. Proceedings of the 22nd AIA Conference, Cagliari 15-17 September 2005*, ed. Francesco Marroni *et al.* (Cagliari: Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Cagliaritana, 2007), pp. 195-204.

Chandler, David, 'Clare Strand: Vanity Fair,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), pp. 8-11.

Charlesworth, Andrew, 'Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994): pp. 579–93.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817).

Coverley, Merlin, *Psychogeography* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2010).

Cruickshank, Dan, 'Foreword,' in Geoffrey Fletcher, *The London Nobody Knows* (London: The History Press, 2011), not paginated.

Dames, Nicholas, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Davis, Michael, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

De Quincey, Thomas, 'Suspiria De Profundis,' in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, Suspiria de Profundis and the English Mail-Coach* (London: MacDonald, 1956), pp. 445-551.

Debord, Guy, 'Theory of the Dérive,' in *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, *Spaces of Visual Culture*, ed. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 77-81.

Dickens, Charles, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

———, *Night Walks* (London: Penguin, 2010).

Diener, Alexander C. and Joshua Hagen (eds), *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

Dillon, Sarah, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,' *Textual Practice* 19, 3 (2005): pp. 243-63.

———, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007).

Douglas-Fairhurst, Roger, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Eliot, George, *Middlemarch* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

———, *Romola* (New York: Random House, 2003).

Erll, Astrid, 'Travelling Memory,' *Parallax* 17, 4 (2011): pp. 4-18.

Fletcher, Geoffrey, *The London Nobody Knows* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

Flint, Kate, 'Afterword: Photography, Palimpsests, and the Neo-Victorian,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), pp. 331-40.

Genette, Gerard, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977).

Gillis, John R. (ed.), *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Huyssen, Andreas, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Jones, Anna Maria and Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Introduction: Reading the Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Palimpsest,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), pp. 1-36.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben, 'Troping the Neo-Victorian City: Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 1-40.

Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Mitchell, Kate, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Nead, Linda, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

Nora, Pierre, *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98).

Orwell, George, 'Charles Dickens,' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Gollancz, 1940).

Perletti, Greta, *Le ferite della memoria. Il ritorno dei ricordi nella cultura vittoriana* (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2008).

Rignall, John, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Ryan, Vanessa L., *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

Shuttleworth, Sally, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Strand, Clare in conversation with Chris Mullen, 'Interview,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), pp. 93-103.

Tambling, Jeremy, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009).

Weinrich, Harald, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Wolff, Janet, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,' *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2, 3 (1985): pp. 37-48.

Wolfreys, Julian, *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

———, '"Part Barrier, Part Entrance to a Parallel Dimension': London and the Modernity of Urban Perception,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp.127-47.

Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

SHELLEY AND DANTE: TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION

Andrew Brayley

Shelley was a fervent admirer of Dante and decided to translate a famous passage from canto 28 of *Purgatorio*: 'Matilda Gathering Flowers'. By all accounts Shelley's first encounter with the *Divina Commedia* was his study of H.F. Cary's translation. It is interesting to note that while Cary tried to follow the original closely he did not make any attempt to adopt Dante's *terza rima* but opted instead for blank verse. Shelley, by contrast, was bold enough to use Dante's metre and at the same time in his translation took greater liberties. We find a close connection between this translation and Mary Shelley's short novel *Matilda* in that in both texts we find the theme of pain and the loss of loved ones which for Mary was a *punctum dolens*: like the heroine of the novel Mary never knew her mother – Mary Wollstonecraft – and in Italy she lost a son and a daughter. In addition she had a difficult relationship with her father. Similarly, Dante speaks about Ceres' loss of her daughter Proserpine as a result of her rape by Pluto while she was gathering flowers. But what is particularly significant is that Shelley, by using darker colours in his translation, gives much greater emphasis to the obscure and menacing forces that the canto might seem to suggest than Dante himself does and so mirrors Matilda/Mary's deep depression. At the same time he also gives greater emphasis to singing and gathering flowers on the part of Matilda and by so doing he once again adapts Dante's text to Mary's novel because her heroine compares herself to Proserpine. In brief, Shelley gets 'out of the box' by translating in such a way as to span five centuries and adapt a classic text to a new situation.

P.B. Shelley; Mary Shelley; Dante Alighieri; Translation, Adaptation

1. Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was born in 1792 and died in 1822, was a fervent admirer of Dante. By all accounts he first became acquainted with the *Divina Commedia* when he studied H.F. Cary's translation which appeared in 1814. This translation was very popular with some of the Romantics, in particular with Coleridge. Cary tried to follow the original closely but made no attempt to adopt Dante's *terza rima,* opting instead for blank verse.

Shelley, his wife Mary, their two children Clara and William and Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont arrived in Italy in April 1818 and

went to stay in Milan. He was fascinated by the cathedral and decided to read Dante there:

> There is one solitary spot among these aisles, behind the altar, where the light of day is dim and yellow under the storied window, which I have chosen to visit, and read Dante there.[1]

In *A Defence of Poetry,* Shelley writes that: 'The Poetry of Dante may be considered as the Bridge thrown over the stream of Time which unites the modern and ancient world'.[2] These words lead to the theme of this essay which is an analysis of a famous passage of the *Purgatorio*: the first 51 lines of canto 28 which describe the poet's vision of a lady gathering flowers. The lady's name is Matelda which links this canto with a short novel by Mary Shelley entitled *Matilda.* In this novel, Mary quotes from this canto and the aim of this essay is to show how Shelley gets 'out of the box' by translating in such a way as to span five centuries and adapt a classic text to a new situation. We can apply to this passage from the *Purgatorio* what Alan Weinberg writes in connection with Dante's sonnet to Guido Cavalcanti: 'Shelley incorporates ['translates'] Dante's vision into his own world'[3] and thus the original, while retaining Dante's vision, also acquires new aspects that the author may never have imagined.

2. *Canto 28 in its context*

Before analysing Shelley's translation and examining the way it chimes in with Mary's *Matilda*, we should place canto 28 in its context. In the preceding canto Dante, with Virgil and Statius, finds himself near the top of the mountain which is Purgatory in the circle destined for those guilty of the sin of lust, the *lussuriosi.* In order to be able to enter the Earthly Paradise and meet Beatrice, he must complete the process of moral purification by crossing a wall of fire, something which he dreads. With

---

[1] Percy B. Shelley, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck (London: The Julian Editions, 1926), vol. 9, p. 298.

[2] Percy B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry,' in *Poems and Prose,* ed. Timothy Webb (London: Dent, 1995), p. 267.

[3] Alan Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 41. 'A beautiful piece of craftmanship, [which] shows how quickly Shelley recognized and assimilated what was congenial to his temper in a foreign author', Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1987), p. 307.

Virgil's help he does so, then has a dream in which he meets a woman called Leah who, we learn from Genesis 29, was the first wife of Jacob. In this dream she is picking flowers and so anticipates Matelda. Leah is a symbol of the active principle while her sister Rachel, Jacob's second wife, symbolizes the contemplative principle and anticipates Beatrice, just as in the New Testament Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters (Luke 10), symbolize respectively the active and the contemplative principles. At the same time it is in this canto that Virgil, having accomplished his mission, takes his leave of Dante.

In canto 28 Dante comes to the top of the mountain of Purgatory and enters the Earthly Paradise. This canto, as one would expect, presents us with an idyllic vision dominated by the beauties of Nature. It speaks, for example, of 'la divina foresta spessa e viva' (2) in obvious contrast with the 'selva oscura' of the opening lines of the *Inferno* (2). Then the water of the Earthly Paradise is so pure that by contrast the purest earthly streams must contain 'mistura alcuna' (29). At the same time Dante, speaking of this pure stream which, as he soon learns, is the river Lethe which eliminates the memory of one's sins, adds the following lines:

> avvenga che si mova bruna bruna
> sotto l'ombra perpetua, che mai
> raggiar non lascia sole ivi né luna (31-3).

As we shall see shortly, these lines made a great impression on Mary who quotes them in *Matilda.* They also led William Keach to declare that: 'In the episode of Mathilda walking in the field Mary in a way re-dramatizes the process of composing *Mathilda* as a process of reading canto 28 and reveals obscure and menacing forces behind an apparently idyllic scene'.[4] In addition, Matelda, the beautiful woman who gathers flowers and who represents earthly happiness as it existed before the Original Sin, reminds Dante of Proserpine who was raped by Pluto, thereby causing her mother, Ceres, to lose her:

> Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
> Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
> la madre lei, ed ella primavera (49-51).

---

[4] William Keach, 'The Shelleys and Dante's Matelda,' in *Shelley e l'Italia*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones (Napoli: Liguori, 1998), p. 398.

3. Matilda *and Shelley's translation*

We come now to Mary's novel *Matilda*. She wrote it in 1819 in a moment of profound crisis and deep depression, having lost her two children in the space of less than a year as well as having a difficult relationship with her father. In the event the novel was only published in 1959. The main character – Matilda – like Mary never knew her mother because she, like Mary's mother Mary Wollstonecraft, died shortly after giving birth. In the novel her father, now a widower, transfers his love for his dead wife to his daughter and thus becomes guilty of an incestuous passion. Matilda senses that her father is hiding something and implores him to speak out but when he does so she is horrified and shattered. Tormented by a sense of guilt, he commits suicide by drowning. Matilda herself is tempted to take her own life but is dissuaded by a friend. At the end of the novel she begins to hope that after her death, which she considers imminent, she and her father will meet again and be reconciled. She does this by meditating on canto 28 of *Purgatorio:*

> I pictured to myself a lovely river such as that on whose banks Dante describes Matilda gathering flowers, which ever flows
>> bruna, bruna,
>> Sotto l'ombra perpetua, che mai
>> Raggiar non lascia sole ivi, né Luna.
>
> And then I repeated to myself all that lovely passage that relates the entrance of Dante into the terrestrial Paradise, and thought it would be sweet when I wandered on those lovely banks to see the car of light descend with my long lost parent to be restored to me. As I waited there in expectation of that moment, I thought how, of the lovely flowers that grew there, I would wind myself a chaplet and crown myself for joy.[5]

In this passage Matilda quotes three lines of canto 28 which Shelley translated, thus linking the novel with his translation; by mentioning the flowers she also identifies herself with Matilda. At the same time we learn that she also identifies herself with Proserpine.

The car of light is – presumably – based on the chariot described by Dante in cantos 29, 30 and 32 of *Purgatorio:*

> un carro, in su due ruote, triunfale,
> ch'al collo d'un grifon tirato venne (29.107-8),

---

[5] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary* and *Maria* / Mary Shelley, *Matilda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 205.

while the light would seem to derive from the candleholders (*candelabra*, 29.50) which together with the chariot are part of a procession with the participation, among others, of twenty-four *seniori*:

> Di sopra fiammeggiava il bello arnese
> Più chiaro assai che luna per sereno
> Di mezza notte nel suo mezzo mese (29.52-4).

For Dante the chariot is a symbol of the Church but also of the goal – eternal beatitude and happiness – of the *seniori* (29.83), also called *la gente verace* (30.7) who 'al carro volse sé come a sua pace' (30.9), just as for Matilda the car is a symbol of peace and reconciliation. Mary adapts Dante's image and by so doing links the novel, if not directly to her husband's translation, certainly to the literary and spiritual context of which the translation is an integral part.

4. *Shelley as a translator*

Before analysing Shelley's translation of the Matelda episode a few words should be said about Shelley as a translator. The whole question has been examined in depth by Timothy Webb in his book *The Violet in the Crucible*.[6] From this book we learn that Shelley made translations from Greek, German and Spanish as well as from Italian. One example is his translation of Plato's *Symposium*.

Coming now to Shelley and Dante we can point out that while Cary, as we have already seen, tried to follow the original closely and made no attempt to adopt Dante's *terza rima,* Shelley was more adventurous and not only adopted this metre in his translation of the Matelda episode (not to mention *Ode to the West Wind* and *The Triumph of Life*) but also took certain liberties when he translated. For example, as Webb has pointed out,[7] in his translation of Dante's sonnet to Guido Cavalcanti he adds some words which are not to be found in the original. Here are the first four lines of the sonnet together with Shelley's translation:

> Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
> fossimo presi per incantamento,
> e messi in vasel ch'ad ogni vento

---

[6] Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
[7] Webb, p. 281.

per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio.

Guido, I would that Lapo, thou, and I,
Led by some strong enchantment, might ascend
A magic ship, whose charmed sails should fly
With winds at will where'er our thoughts might wend.

In these lines, the words *strong, magic* and *charmed* are additions on Shelley's part and are an example of his giving greater emphasis to some of Dante's words in order to incorporate 'Dante's vision into his own world'. At the same time it is interesting to note that Shelley, in a letter to his friend Leigh Hunt in connection with translating Greek plays and Calderón's dramas, rather modestly declares that they 'are perpetually tempting me to throw over their perfect and glowing forms the grey veil of my own words'.[8]

However, we have a very positive judgement on Shelley as a translator, at least as far as Italian texts are concerned, on the part of C.P. Brand:

> Shelley's translations are of the highest order combining great skill in the use of difficult Italian metres with a subtle sense of the tone of the original. It was on the strength of these renderings that Mazzini once declared that only Shelley could have succeeded in translating the sonnets of the *Vita Nuova*.[9]

5. Shelley's translation

It is now time to examine Shelley's translation. I will begin by quoting once again the lines that Mary quotes in *Matilda:*

avvenga che si mova bruna bruna
sotto l'ombra perpetua, che mai
raggiar non lascia sole ivi né luna.

This is the version published by Shelley's friend Medwin:

---

[8] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Works,* vol. 10, p. 130. We find an example of Shelley's modesty in the following words: 'Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet'. Shelley, *Defence*, p. 252. See also Giovanna Franci: 'Shelley e la traduzione', in *Shelley e l'Italia*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones (Napoli: Liguori, 1998), pp. 337-44.
[9] C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 62.

> Dark, dark, yet clear, moved under the obscure
> Eternal shades, whose interwoven looms
> The rays of moon or sunlight ne'er endure.

Let us now look at the following lines in the original Italian and the English translation:

> Coi piè ristetti e con li occhi passai
> di là dal fiumicello, per mirare
> la gran variazion di freschi mai (34-6);

> I moved not with my feet, but mid the glooms
> Pierced with my charméd eye, contemplating
> The mighty multitude of fresh May blooms.

This version was published by Medwin and is to be found in Hutchinson's *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* published in 1919.[10] It would seem, however, that he doctored Shelley's text (he had already translated, with Shelley's assistance, the Ugolino episode from the *Inferno*) and it is perhaps significant that the version quoted by Webb omits the words 'interwoven looms'. Instead, we find the word 'glooms', but only in brackets. But what is of great interest is the fact that word 'glooms' is also used to translate *fiumicello* which at first sight would seem to be, to use a colloquial expression, a howler. Webb, however, makes a very interesting comment:

> It looks as if Shelley has confused *fiumicello* (streamlet) with *fumo* (smoke) but it may well be that the general sense of the passage which emphasizes the darkness of the wood, added to the demands of the rhyme scheme, caused him to make a conscious choice of *glooms*.[11]

Apart from the choice of the word 'glooms' which would seem to confirm Keach's reference to 'obscure and menacing forces' Webb has listed a few other words which do not correspond to the original Italian. One in particular, the word 'bleak', is to be found in his translation of the line 'per la pineta in su'l lito di Chiassi' (20: 'The pine forest on bleak Chiassi's shore'). This word, like 'glooms', would seem to have a negative connotation in contrast with the calm and beauty of the Earthly Paradise.

---

[10] Shelley, *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1919), p. 720.
[11] Webb, p. 318.

We find another example in the following verse: 'sanza più aspettar, lascia la riva' (4). A literal translation of the last three words could be: 'I left the (steep) bank'. Cary writes: 'I left the bank', but Shelley writes: 'leaving the abrupt steep' in other words he adds the word *abrupt* which generally has a negative connotation as in the sentence 'he has an abrupt manner' and so gives greater emphasis to Dante's words.

The choice of these three words may be considered an example of Shelley's getting 'out of the box' because the 'obscure and menacing forces' would not seem to be, as far as Dante is concerned, part of the picture that he paints in this canto. For example, P. Cataldi and R. Luperini write that: 'l'acqua del fiumicello è limpidissima, sebbene scorra nell'ombra e sia scarsamente illuminata',[12] while Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, commenting on the line 'raggiar non lascia sole ivi né luna', writes: 'quasi a non turbar la solenne pace che regna nel luogo'.[13] Similarly, one well-known commentator, Natalino Sapegno, merely confirms the darkness of the wood – 'la fitta ombra degli alberi, che dura perpetua e non lascia penetrare mai raggio di sole o di luna'[14] – without seeming to suggest sinister forces while, to go back a little in time, Tommaso Casini and Silvio Adrasto Barbi in their edition of the *Divina Commedia* limit themselves to the following comment:

> Più tosto che correre cogli interpreti al significato allegorico di questi particolari, molto dubbio e incerto, ammiri il lettore la meravigliosa descrizione di un singolare fatto naturale che Dante poté osservare, meglio che altrove, nelle solitudini malinconiche e insieme grandiose della pineta di Ravenna, attraversata da canali di limpide acque che brune brune, scorrono sotto l'ombra degli alberi secolari.[15]

Another witness is the nineteenth century commentator Pietro Fraticelli who was also a member of the *Accademia della Crusca* and one of the four compilers of the *Vocabolario.* In connection with the water of the river he writes: 'Nonostante che scorra bruna bruna sotto l'ombra perpetua cagionata dalla selva'.[16]

[12] P. Cataldi and R. Luperini, *Antologia della Divina Commedia* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1995), *ad loc.*

[13] Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (ed.), *La Divina Commedia* (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), *ad loc.*

[14] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968), vol. 2, p. 307.

[15] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Tommaso Casini and Silvio Adrasto Barbi (Milano: Fabbri Editori, 1976), vol. 2, pp. 292-4. This edition contains Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante's poem.

[16] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Pietro Fraticelli (Firenze: Barbera, 1887), p. 433.

It should be clear from these quotations that Shelley's translation gives greater emphasis to 'obscure and menacing forces' than Dante himself gives. In particular, Chiavacci Leonardi's words, 'quasi a non turbare la solenne pace che regna nel luogo', suggest that the Earthly Paradise is just that – a place where there is no room for jarring notes and where 'Matilda is the presiding deity of perpetual springtime'[17] – while Casini and Barbi prefer to concentrate on natural beauty rather than on what they consider to be dubious and uncertain interpretations.

In connection with the words 'gloom' and 'bleak' we should note that the use of the former may have been suggested to Shelley by his reading of Cary's translation ('yet darkly on it roll'd, / Darkly beneath perpetual gloom')[18] while the same translation does not use the word 'bleak' in connection with the pine forest: 'Along the piny forests on the shore / of Chiassi'.[19] To quote Keach once again:

> ciò che è importante nella traduzione di Shelley è il modo in cui viene ampli-
> ficata l'enfasi di Dante sulle forze oscure che operano all'interno della visione
> idilliaca.[20]

At the same time, it would seem that Dante gives very little emphasis to these obscure forces. Rather, it is Shelley who emphasizes them.

We come now to the final tercet of the passage which Shelley translated, the one which compares Matelda to Proserpine. Let us quote it again:

> Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
> Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
> La madre lei, ed ella primavera.

In these lines Dante tells us that Proserpine's mother Ceres lost her daughter while she, Proserpine, lost the spring, that is the fields full of flowers near Enna in Sicily. How is all this connected with Mary's personal history? Ceres lost her daughter just as Mary lost a daughter, Clara, as well as her son William. At the same time, Ceres' loss of her daughter means that the daughter lost her mother, just as Mary never knew her mother Mary Wollstonecraft because, as we have already noted, the lat-

---

[17] Wenberg, p. 235.
[18] Webb, p. 316.
[19] Webb, p. 315.
[20] Keach, p. 331. It should be pointed out that while the abstract of his paper is in English the full text was published in Italian.

ter died a few days after giving birth to Mary. And as we have already seen, in the novel Matilda never knew her mother.

At the same time we should point out that Matilda not only, as we have seen, meditates on canto 28 of *Purgatorio* but also, in an earlier chapter, in connection with the change in her father from a loving parent to a harsh and irascible stranger identifies herself with Proserpine:

> Often, when my wandering fancy brought by its various images now consolation and now aggravation of grief to my heart, I have compared myself to Proserpine who was gaily and heedlessly gathering flowers on the sweet plain of Enna, when the King of Hell snatched her away to the abodes of pain and misery.[21]

We come now to Shelley's translation of the tercet in the version quoted by Webb:

> Like Proserpine
> Thou seemest to my fancy, singing here
> And gathering flowers, at that time when
> She lost the spring and Ceres her... more dear.[22]

This translation confirms what we have already said, namely that Shelley sometimes takes certain liberties with the original and this is certainly the case here. While Dante in lines 40-2 describes Matelda as

> Una donna soletta che si gìa
> cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore
> ond'era pinta tutta la sua via

in the last lines of the passage he makes no explicit reference to the gathering of flowers. By contrast Shelley, in the translation we have just quoted, repeats almost word for word what he had already written:

> A solitary woman, and she went
> Singing and gathering flower after flower
> With which her way was painted and besprent.[23]

Here Shelley once again jumps 'out of the box': by laying greater emphasis than Dante does on singing and gathering flowers he links his

---

[21] Wollstonecraft / Shelley, p. 164.
[22] Webb, p. 314.
[23] Webb, p. 314 (we might add that the word 'besprent' is an addition on Shelley's part).

translation with Mary's novel because, as we have seen, Matilda compares herself 'to Proserpine who was gaily and heedlessly gathering flowers on the sweet plain of Enna'. But in the novel there is another passage which links Shelley's translation with the novel: Matilda, speaking of her life in the country writes:

> I wandered for ever about these lovely solitudes, gathering flower after flower
> Ond'era pinta tutta la mia via
> Singing as I might the wild melodies of the country, or occupied by pleasant day dreams.[24]

This passage, even more than the one in which Matilda compares herself to Proserpine, shows the symbiosis that exists between the translation and the novel.

To come back to Dante, we may say that while in the last tercet he makes no explicit mention of flowers he does do so implicitly: the words 'ella primavera', in other words Proserpine's loss of spring, are generally interpreted as her rape by Pluto while she was gathering flowers.

6. *The Fall and the Original Sin*

At the same time we must not omit the theological aspect of the question: Proserpine's experience can be compared to Eve's loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden with the Fall and the Original Sin. And in fact Matilda, speaking of the transition from happiness to misery, says:

> Is it not strange that grief should quickly follow so divine a happiness? I drank of an enchanted cup but gall was at the bottom of its long drawn sweetness. My heart was full of deep affection, but it was calm from its very depth and fullness. I had no idea that misery could arise from love, and this lesson that all at last must learn was taught me in a manner few are obliged to receive it. I lament now, I must ever lament, those few short months of Paradisiacal bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! My companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall.[25]

Towards the end of the novel she also says:

> I believed myself to be polluted by the unnatural love I had inspired, and that I was a creature cursed and set apart by nature. I thought that like another Cain,

---

[24] Wollstonecraft / Shelley, p. 158.
[25] Wollstonecraft / Shelley, p. 162.

> I had a mark set on my forehead to show mankind that there was a barrier between me and them.[26]

This brings us to Milton's famous description of the rape of Proserpine in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* which Mary echoes in *Matilda*:

> Not that fair field
> Of Enna, where Prosepine gathering flowers
> Herself a fairer flower by gloomy Dis
> Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world (268-72).[27]

In this passage Milton says that the 'fair field of Enna', however beautiful, could not 'with this Paradise / Of Eden strive' (274-5). Shelley and Mary were familiar with Milton[28] and it is legitimate to suppose that these verses may have influenced Shelley when he translated Dante. It may be, for example, that his choice of the verb 'gather' rather than 'pick' in connection with flowers echoes Milton but what is perhaps more significant is that Shelley, following Milton, mentions Ceres explicitly, something that Dante does not do in this passage. Shelley thus gives greater emphasis to the idea of motherhood: Ceres lost her daughter Proserpine just as Mary lost her daughter Clara and then her son William. And it was of course this double loss together with a difficult relationship with her father William Godwin that was responsible for the crisis that led her to write *Matilda.*

7. Conclusion

Summing up, the aim of this essay has been to show how Shelley, unlike Cary, takes notable liberties when translating Dante, whether it be the sonnet to Guido Cavalcanti or the *Divina Commedia,* so as to incorporate 'Dante's vision into his own world' and adapt a classic text to a new situation. By using darker colours than Dante does and by laying greater emphasis on singing and gathering flowers, not to mention the idea of motherhood, he links his translation of the 'Matilda gathering

[26] Wollstonecraft / Shelley, p. 203.
[27] John Milton, *The English Poems of John Milton* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 188.
[28] Shelley, for example, speaks of *Paradise Lost* in *A Defence of Poetry* (pp. 267-9) while Mary mentions the poem in her diary: Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, ed. Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 258.

flowers' episode with Mary's novel *Matilda*, in which a tragic story with Dantesque resonances reveals 'obscure and menacing forces behind an apparently idyllic scene' although the heroine hopes and believes that – *solvitur in excelsis* – the epilogue will be one of peace, harmony and reconciliation.

At the same time, the theological and Miltonic aspects are discussed briefly: Matilda compares herself to Proserpine who, like Eve, lost her innocence and considers herself a fallen woman who, albeit unwillingly, was dragged into sin with the consequent loss of Paradise. The influence of Milton on Shelley's translation is also mentioned.

Bibliography

Alighieri, Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Pietro Fraticelli (Firenze: Barbera Editore, 1887).

———, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968).

———, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Tommaso Casini and Silvio Adastro Barbi (Milano: Fabbri Editori, 1976).

Brand, C.P., *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

Cataldi, P., and R. Luparini, *Antologia della Divina Commedia* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1955).

Chiavacci Leonardi, Anna Maria (ed.), *La Divina Commedia* (Milano: Mondadori, 1991).

Franci, Giovanna, 'Shelley e la traduzione,' in *Shelley e L'Italia*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones (Napoli: Liguori, 1998), pp. 337- 44.

Holmes, Richard, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

Keach, William, 'Gli Shelley e la Matelda di Dante,' in *Shelley e L'Italia*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones (Napoli: Liguori, 1998), pp. 325-36.

Milton, John, *The English Poems of John Milton* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Shelley, Mary, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, ed. Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1919).

———, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck (London: The Julian Editions, 1926).

———, *Poems and Prose*, ed. Timothy Webb (London: Dent, 1995).

Webb, Timothy, *The Violet in the Crucible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

Weinberg, Alan, *Shelley's Italian Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Wollstonecraft, Mary, *Mary* and *Maria* / Shelley, Mary, *Matilda* (Harmond-sworth: Penguin, 1992).

'A WOMAN'S HEART, WITH MANLY COUNSEL FRAUGHT': A. MARY F. ROBINSON, GREEK TRAGEDY AND POETRY IN THE CROWNED HIPPOLYTUS *(1881)*

Maria Luigia Di Nisio

On 28 March 1885 a cartoon in *Punch* figured a young woman in the midst of a crowd of gentlemen poring over weighty tomes. The lady was A. Mary F. Robinson, the only representative of her sex in the Reading Room of the British Museum, as she had been the sole female student attending classes of advanced Greek at University College London back in 1879: on her desk we discern a copy of her own collection of poems, *A Handful of Honeysuckle* (1878). In 1881 she brought out her second book, *The Crowned Hippolytus*, which was dedicated to John Addington Symonds and included her new poems as well as her translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Robinson's experience as a pioneer female student at UCL encouraged her interest in the playwright and the Hellenic world as a whole, while alerting her to the wider questions at stake in women's classical education. However, the idea of dealing with Euripides first came into her mind directly through Symonds, who played a leading role in the revaluation and reassessment of the tragedian in late-Victorian England. Shifting attention to the figure of Phaedra, whose relevance and complexity Symonds had openly dismissed in his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), Robinson points to a different interpretation of the ancient drama, influenced by and yet independent of her mentor's view. In her hands, the tragedy offers a means of exploring female sexuality while representing women's desire for poetry and for Greek. While bringing attention to the translation, I focus on the attached poems which Robinson saw as integral to her work on the Euripidean drama. Beside recovering a long-forgotten and uncanonical poet, this paper aims at showing how women like Robinson, who were able to think 'out of the box', in turn inspired by unorthodox writers, engaged with antiquity in creative and productive ways, providing fresh perspectives on the ancient past, while also throwing light on the most controversial issues of the present.

Women's Writing; Victorian Women Poets; Victorian Hellenism; Greek Tragedy

On March 28, 1885, a young lady appeared in a *Punch* cartoon representing the Reading Room of the British Museum: Agnes Mary Frances Robinson (1857-1944) was the only woman among many gentlemen, as she had been the sole female student attending classes of advanced Greek at University College London some years earlier. On her desk was a copy of her first collection of poems, *A Handful of Honeysuckle* (1878), which

attracted some notice among contemporary literary critics. In 1881 *The Crowned Hippolytus*[1] followed: it is, as the complete title indicates, a *Translation from Euripides with New Poems*. The book is dedicated to John A. Symonds, with whom Robinson shared every phase of its composition, from the onset to the last arrangements before its publication. At the time it was brought out, *The Crowned Hippolytus* was widely read and reviewed, but has received scant critical attention afterwards, with few exceptions, notably Yopie Prins, who has discussed it in her monograph *Ladies' Greek* (2017).[2] By contrast, more has been said about Robinson's later collections of poems, namely *The New Arcadia* (1884) and *An Italian Garden* (1886), as well as her relationship with Vernon Lee.[3]

In this essay I focus on *The Crowned Hippolytus*, relying on the 1881 copy held by the British Library, as no other versions are accessible as yet, not even in the digital archives in which other collections of poems and essays by the same author are available. Nor has the book ever been republished as a whole, whereas single poems have reappeared in the following decades. However, the translation and the poetry section are to be read in their mutual light, for they are both part of Robinson's painstaking re-appropriation of Greek language, thought, and culture.

---

[1] Quotations from these books are taken from A. Mary F. Robinson, *A Handful of Honeysuckle* (London: Kegan Paul, 1878), hereafter HH, and A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881), hereafter CH. Poems from both collections will be cited in the main text by page number.

[2] Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek. Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). The chapter on '*Hippolytus* in Ladies' Greek (with the Accents)' rewrites and expands upon a previous article by Prins, published in 2006. Prins has included a wide selection of letters from Mary Robinson's correspondence with Symonds, which is mainly kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and still largely unpublished. For the quotations from the letters I therefore rely on Prins' transcription in her 2017 monograph. Since a date is provided only for some letters, I will refer to manuscript numbers in corresponding footnotes. See also Yopie Prins, 'Ladies' Greek (with the Accents): A Metrical Translation of Euripides by A. Mary F. Robinson,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, 2 (2006): pp. 591-618. Besides Prins, Ben Glaser has dealt with *The Crowned Hippolytus*, analysing its metrical structure to see how Robinson adapted Greek metres to the English language. Ben Glaser, 'Polymetrical Dissonance: Tennyson, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Classical Meter,' *Victorian Poetry* 49, 2 (2011): pp. 199-216.

[3] Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'New Women Poets and the Culture of the *Salon* at the Fin de Siècle,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 10, 1 (1999): pp. 22-34. Sally Newman, '"Bizarre Love Triangle": Tracing Power and Pedagogy in the Letters of John Addington Symonds, A. Mary F. Robinson and Vernon Lee, 1878-1890,' *English Studies* 94, 2 (2013): pp. 154-70. Ana Parejo Vadillo has focused on Robinson's role as *salonnière* and her relationship with Vernon Lee, while Sally Newman has dealt with the double influence of Symonds and Vernon Lee on Mary Robinson in pedagogical terms. An interesting discussion of *The New Arcadia* is in Patricia Rigg, 'A. Mary F. Robinson's *The New Arcadia*: Aestheticism and the Fin-de-Siècle Social Problem Poem,' *Papers on Language and Literature* 51, 2 (2005): pp. 171-93.

Overall, *The Crowned Hippolytus* was a significant turning point in an ongoing reflection on her role as a woman of letters struggling to reconcile, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning had done before her, 'the scholar's knowledge and the poet's mind'.[4]

Robinson's work in the late 1870s and early 1880s is inseparable from the history of Victorian Hellenism, with its gendered access to the study of the ancient world, for if late-Victorian England witnessed 'a collective movement *into* the classical tradition by women writers and scholars', as Tracy Olverson has pointed out, 'formal access to such knowledge was, for much of the nineteenth century, more exclusive than inclusive'.[5] As we shall see, Mary Robinson's commitment to Greek language and tragedy offers an illuminating example of Victorian women's complex and ambiguous relationship with the classics, between desire and fear, ambition and modesty, pleasure and pain. Victorian Hellenism has been explored at different levels since the early 1980s, most notably by Richard Jenkyns and Frank Turner,[6] who however hardly considered any female contribution. By contrast, women's reception of the classical inheritance in the second half of the nineteenth century has attracted growing scholarly interest in the last two decades, as testified by the publication of books and articles on the subject, in the aftermath of Yopie Prins' landmark monograph *Victorian Sappho* (1999) and Isobel Hurst's full-length study on *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006).[7] Much has been done, as Noah Comet remarked in 2011, and yet much more remains to be done:

> In recent decades, the work of recovery has made admirable progress, but there are many archival shelves to search, many critical editions to assemble and many biographies to research and write. Until such initiatory work is complete, our concept of nineteenth-century classicism will remain disproportionately male-centric.[8]

[4] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows* (London: John Lane, 1901), p. vi. The Preface was written in 1891. Here Robinson refers to the epitaph which celebrated Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Florentine home: 'In cuore di donna conciliava scienza di dotto e spirito di poeta'.
[5] Tracy D. Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 3, 17.
[6] Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
[7] Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[8] Noah Comet, 'Nineteenth-Century Women Writers and the Classical Inheritance: Introduction,' *Women Studies* 40, 4 (2011): 399-403.

A more comprehensive view of the nineteenth-century passion for antiquity, especially Greek, including women's contribution is not an idle work of recovery of some long-forgotten books like *The Crowned Hippolytus*; rather, it implies a broader understanding of how the Victorians looked at the past, what they saw in it and why.

Furthermore, this essay puts *The Crowned Hippolytus* within the history of Euripides' reception in England. The 1870s and 1880s were years of transition in this respect, for after the long *damnatio* that the playwright had suffered in the previous decades, a renaissance was taking place.[9] Robinson's work contributed to the rehabilitation of the Greek tragedian, drawing from as well as revising Symonds' view on Euripidean dramatic art. While always looking at her friend and mentor for suggestions and guidance, she was eventually able to find her own poetic voice and to express her interpretation of the tragedy of Hippolytus, by choosing to identify herself with Phaedra, whom Symonds had deliberately sidelined in favour of the male hero. I will often refer to Symonds' *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873) for it is here that he delves into the history of Attic drama; moreover, Robinson herself often turned to this book for inspiration. Indeed, it was among her favourite readings.[10]

1. 'An unbearable beauty': Mary Robinson and the Greek past

From the very start of her career, Mary Robinson was identified with classical culture; therefore, the critical neglect *The Crowned Hippolytus* has suffered since the late 1880s is all the more surprising, for it is here that the poet works out her ideas on the Greek world, re-creating it in translation and reconfiguring it in the poems. Her contemporaries seldom failed to note the classical background that made even her early literary attempts appealing to 'the cultivated section of the reading public'.[11] James Darmesteter, Robinson's first husband, considered his wife's learning a purifying strain on her poetry: what seemed most feminine in it, its 'heart', he maintained, was counterbalanced

---

[9] A detailed account of the *damnatio* of Euripides in the nineteenth-century is in Ernst Behler, 'A.W. Schlegel and the Nineteenth-Century *Damnatio* of Euripides,' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986): pp. 335-67.

[10] A. Mary F. Robinson to John A. Symonds, 248 f. 26. In this letter she tells him that she has read *Studies of the Greek Poets* 'many times & oft. It is one of my favourite books'.

[11] Eric Robertson (ed.), *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies, with Illustrative Extracts* (London: Cassell, 1883).

by 'the clearness of thought, [...] the purity and clarity of the Grecian atmosphere'.[12] These ideas are echoed in the monumental *Library of the World's Best Literature* (1897): Robinson is here mentioned as a writer of 'culture-verse', who shows a direct debt to the ancient models she has read and studied.[13]

Later in the 1920s, the past had not ceased to fascinate her. The letters she exchanged with the novelist and political writer Maurice Barrès in those years testify to Robinson's lifelong concern with antiquity. In her youth Madame Duclaux, namely Mary Robinson, was not only a poet but also and most importantly a 'Helleniste' and 'Platonicienne'[14] or, in her own words, a woman 'folle de poésie et de Platon'.[15] There is no doubt that she was well-aware of her indebtedness to the ancient masters, to such an extent that, aged sixty-five, she still defined herself as 'grecque dans l'âme'.[16]

The inscription of Greek letters 'at the inner corner of her soul'[17] took place when she first approached the ancient tongue, but the turning point was in 1878, when she began to correspond with Symonds. With him she could talk 'de *omni re scibile*',[18] but above all about Greece: Robinson was eager to learn and he willingly kindled her intense interest for Greek, becoming her 'ladder up to heaven'.[19] *The Crowned Hippolytus* was, as Arthur Symons pointed out, 'a strenuous translation', useful to the writer, and altogether 'a piece of *serious* and earnest work'.[20] Here and elsewhere in contemporary reviews and comments, the idea of seriousness is recurrently associated with Robinson's classicism. This holds true even from her own perspective: if, after *A Handful of Honeysuckle*, she longed to write 'something more serious',[21] in 'Sonnet in Preface of my Second

---

[12] James Darmesteter, *English Studies*, trans. Mary Darmesteter (London: Fisher Unwin, 1896), pp. 172-3.

[13] Charles Dudley Warner (ed.), *Library of the World's Best Literature*, vol. 21 (New York: R.S. Peale and J.A. Hill, 1897), pp. 12, 315-16.

[14] Daniel Halévy, 'Les Trois Mary,' in Mary Duclaux and Maurice Barrès, *Lettres Echangées. Précédé de Les Trois Mary, par Daniel Halévy de l'Institut*, ed. Daniel Halévy (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1959), pp. 24, 19.

[15] A. Mary F. Robinson to Maurice Barrès, 24 April 1922, in Duclaux and Barrès, p. 60.

[16] Robinson to Barrès, 6 October 1922, in Duclaux and Barrès, p. 78.

[17] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 37. Unsurprisingly, Robinson has the expression in Greek.

[18] Robinson to Barrès, 24 April 1922, in Duclaux and Barrès, p. 61.

[19] Robinson to Symonds, 1 December [c. 1879], 248 f.16.

[20] Arthur Symons, 'A. Mary F. Darmesteter,' in *The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 9, *Joanna Baille to Mathilde Blind*, ed. Alfred Miles (London: Hutchinson, 1907), pp. 359-61 (emphasis added).

[21] Robinson to Symonds, 248 ff. 112-13.

Book' the speaker emphasizes the gulf that separates the new collection from the previous attempt in terms of intellectual value:

> How deep a *chasm* is open, how deep and wide,
> Between those songs and the first songs I said
> With tremulous *girlish voice*, but half afraid.
> Now, as a heart-racked mother, I stand aside [...]
> *Not pity*; truth she craves. No less than her
> I scorn to mock my dearth with spurious bloom,
> Or wrong the laurels by a tinsel crown. (CH 81, emphasis added)

The disdain of other people's pity here contrasts with the self-diminishing attitude of the poet a few years earlier: 'You gardeners that scorn my hedgerow flowers, / And mock them with false praise, oh, *pity me*', we read at the end of *A Handful of Honeysuckle*, 'You gardeners that scorn my hedgerow flowers, / Bethink you of your own, and *pity me*' (HH 88, emphasis added). It is also worth noting that the image of the 'chasm' (l. 1) that divides two different ideas of art and poetry is the same Symonds used in *Studies of the Greek Poets*[22] to describe the distance between Euripides and the other two great Attic tragedians, whereas the 'girlish voice' of the poet (l. 3) recalls Elizabeth Barrett Browning's self-same 'girlish voice' when she began to learn Greek.[23] Though there is no evidence that Robinson re-used these images intentionally, it is undeniable that Barrett Browning and Symonds were at the time her models for poetic inspiration and classical learning.[24]

In *The Crowned Hippolytus* the poet aims at a more enduring fame through the 'violets fragrant still from Sappho's hair' and the 'laurel crowns' (HH vi) she has been unable to give in *A Handful of Honeysuckle.*

[22] John A. Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets* (London: Smith, Elder, 1873), p. 199.
[23] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Wine of Cyprus,' in *Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. With Two Prose Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 271.
[24] Symonds, as we have seen, was constantly present in Robinson's life during the years she devoted to Euripides: she kept his picture on her working table and his letters in the drawer below, rereading them from time to time 'as oracle or consolation'. Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 13. As for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by the early 1880s Mary Robinson was well acquainted with her poetry and a friend of her husband. Robert Browning attended the Robinsons' 'at homes' more than once and took a particular interest in the young Mary probably because she reminded him of Elizabeth, as Robinson herself was aware. In the 1880s there were critics who saw her as the new Elizabeth Barrett Browning, especially because of her learning in the Greek tongue. See Robertson, pp. 376-7. Many details about Robinson's admiration for Barrett Browning and intellectual friendship with Robert Browning are in her correspondence with Maurice Barrès who was eager to know more about her relationship with 'les deux Browning que vous devez si bien connaître'. Barrès to Robinson, November 1920, in Duclaux and Barrès, p. 54.

The classical imagery pervades both collections. A poem in the 1878 book is tellingly entitled 'Past and Present' (HH 71): here the latter is the place of unfulfilled hopes, of 'great aims' yet unattained; only 'unfruitful flowers' have come out, doomed to fade as soon as they have blossomed. Before the 'Present plain', the 'unbearable beauty' of the past functions both as an inspiring force and as a disheartening influence. In *The Crowned Hippolytus*, Robinson comes to terms with the 'unbearable beauty' of antiquity in an attempt to render what is 'too magnificent for translation', as Barrett Browning had realized in trying her hand at *Prometheus Bound* in 1831.[25]

Mary Robinson's fascination for Latin and Greek apparently dates back to her childhood: the eldest daughter of an architect, she grew up in a lively household, a well-known *salon* in London. 'The spoilt child of literature'[26] could avail herself of the opportunities that were opening up for women in higher education. In 1878, when Robinson began to study at UCL, the access to all lectures had just been granted to female students. Their number in the new colleges was growing, but women were still a minority: 'I am *the only girl-student* in the Senior Class',[27] Robinson insisted; and then, in another letter to Symonds, 'I am again *the only woman* but we have a new professor who is very kind and treats me just like a boy so I do not feel so shy'.[28] Alfred Goodwin, her Professor of Greek, who had recently started his teaching career at UCL, was a supporter of women's education. In his lectures, while focusing on linguistic analysis of the ancient texts, he would occasionally shift his attention to socio-political issues, including the condition of women in Greece.[29]

2. *'In una selva oscura': Mary Robinson translating Euripides*

Robinson's experience at UCL alerted her to the wider questions at stake in female classical education. It was probably in the Senior Class of Advanced Greek that the idea of translating *Hippolytus* in particular first came to her mind, for here she became aware of some mistranslations

---

[25] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Diary by E.B.B. The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1831-1832*, ed. P. Kelley and R. Hudson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 216.
[26] Symons, p. 359.
[27] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 19.
[28] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 76.
[29] He would be appointed to the Chair of Greek in 1880. More on Alfred Goodwin at UCL in H. Hale Bellot, *UCL, 1826-1926* (London: University of London Press, 1929).

concerning the notoriously misogynistic passages of the tragedy. At home, she then tried to rewrite some excerpts, but, as she told Symonds, 'what I have done sounds so odd and funny that I think I shall have to give it up'.[30] She did not give up on the translation, just as the speaking voice of her poems in *The Crowned Hippolytus*, though lost 'in una selva oscura' (CH 176), does not relinquish his or her mission.

It was Symonds who guided her through the 'selva oscura' of Greek, besides playing a crucial role in Robinson's rethinking of Greek culture in general and of Euripides in particular. In *Studies of the Greek Poets* Symonds defended the dramatist's alleged decadence, reversing its meaning from decline to innovation. In his view, Euripides was on a par with Aeschylus and Sophocles: like Praxiteles in ancient sculpture and Correggio in modern painting, he was a true artist, and a powerful interpreter of the spirit of his time.[31] In a chapter dedicated to fifth-century BC tragedy and Euripides, Symonds rehearsed some widespread arguments against the playwright that were brought forward by a school of 'false criticism'[32] whose chief representative, A.W. Schlegel, had failed to recognize that the tragedian's defects were definitely merits. From the 1870s onward, the aesthetic movement played a role in the campaign for the rehabilitation of Euripides against his own contemporaries, like Aristophanes, but especially against a more recent 'malevolent generation',[33] who was responsible for his dismissal. At the turn of the century, Gilbert Murray carried out this work of recovery, most notably in his translations: the first came out in 1902, as the third volume of a series on Athenian drama for English readers, and it aimed at presenting Euripides as a remarkable poet and philosopher.[34] The scholar contested the alleged immorality of the playwright, along with his misogyny, as Symonds had done before him. In the case of *Hippolytus,* the hero's notorious speech against women was introduced, Murray claimed, to mitigate the force of Phaedra's vengeance and to raise the sympathy of the audience towards her. In this respect, Murray slightly differed from Symonds, who regarded Hippolytus as completely innocent, arguing that Phaedra was left alone in facing 'the consequences of [her] own tempestuous will'.[35]

---

[30] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 19.
[31] Symonds, *Studies*, pp. 208-10.
[32] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 230.
[33] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 211.
[34] Gilbert Murray, *Euripides. Translated into English Rhyming Verse* (London: George Allen, 1902).
[35] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 217.

In his account of Euripides' re-evaluation in late-Victorian England, Thomas Prasch does not mention Symonds, whose *Studie*s, however, attracted some notice at the time and went into three editions.[36] In contemporary reviews, attention was often drawn to his treatment of tragedy and especially of Euripides. For instance, the *British Quarterly Review* noted the author's 'valuable vindication'[37] of a much neglected tragedian, while *The Illustrated Review* welcomed the revaluation of a dramatist so far unjustly depreciated: 'When we get to the dramatist it rejoices us to find Mr Symonds doing full justice to the long-maligned Euripides'.[38] References to the 1873 collection are not infrequent in Symonds' correspondence as well, for the book gave him some popularity: 'In a small way I found myself famous', he remarked, 'I was made to talk about the Greeks'.[39] The following year he was asked to collaborate with the *Fortnightly Review*, at the express request of the editor, John Morley, who 'had been struck by the Greek Poets'.[40] In 1879 he was working on the American edition in which he did not intend to introduce any significant change apart from some additional translations and a wider discussion of Euripides' dramatic art.[41]

In what remains of his correspondence in Margaret Symonds' and Horatio Brown's biographies, only once did he allude to a negative reception of the book, when he observed that 'most of the people who have read it seem disappointed with my mode of treatment'.[42] There were indeed negative reviews of *Studies of the Greek Poets*, often pointing to the immorality of Euripides: the *Saturday Review* strongly disagreed with him about Euripides, whose corruption he should have acknowledged: the plays that Symonds saw as the masterpieces in the tragedian's cor-

---

[36] Thomas Prasch, 'Clashing Greek and Victorian Culture Wars: Euripides vs. Aristophanes in Late-Victorian Discourse,' *Victorian Studies* 54, 3 (2012): pp. 464-73. The essays included in *Studies of the Greek Poets* were originally intended as lectures for the students of Clifton High School and only later were they collected in a volume. More details on the circumstances of the first composition are in Margaret Symonds, *Out of the Past* (London: John Murray, 1925). The second series was published in 1877.

[37] [Review of] *Studies of the Greek Poets*, by John A. Symonds, *The British Quarterly Review* 116 (1873): p. 594.

[38] [Review of] *Studies of the Greek Poets*, by John A. Symonds, *The Illustrated Review* 6, 88 (1873): p. 200.

[39] Horatio Brown, *John Addington Symonds. A Biography* (London: Smith, Elder, 1903), p. 296.

[40] Brown, p. 302

[41] *Letters and Papers of John Addington Symonds,* ed. Horatio Brown (London: Murray, 1923), p. 100.

[42] M. Symonds, p. 118.

pus were instead the worst of his production. What *Hippolytus*, *Medea* and *Bacchae* brought to the fore was not innovation, but 'prostitution of genius', not the spirit of the age, but what was more revolting in it.[43]

In such a context, dealing with Euripides in the 1870s and 1880s could still be seen as daring, especially for a woman. If female translators from Greek were no longer an exception, sometimes their work was regarded as an assault to 'an impregnable literary fortress of ancient construction', as *The Illustrated London News* described the ancient classics: referring to Augusta Webster's English version of Aeschylus, the reviewer suspiciously suggested that the translation might have been written 'with a hidden purpose', namely 'to serve the cause of women'.[44] In choosing to translate Euripides, Robinson aligned herself with the numerous learned ladies who produced 'approved versions'[45] of the old masters, as a reviewer in the *Scotsman* noted, while also incidentally remarking that while 'numerous excellent translations'[46] had seen the light in the last twenty-five years, Euripides remained the least translated of the fifth-century tragedians. At the end of the 1860s, a critic in *The Westminster Review* reminded the reader that the dramatist had been so far the victim of misinterpretation: 'His fate points to a sad moral', he or she pointed out, 'he was misappreciated in his own day and is still misunderstood in ours'.[47]

Overall, Mary Robinson's Euripides was well-received, but barely remembered after a few years. In 1881 some reviewers praised the translator's hard work on 'one of the most elaborate dramas of Euripides';[48] others, however, could not avoid noting its weaknesses. James Davies, one of the most enthusiastic reviewers, unflatteringly concluded by saying that Robinson might one day gather 'the more uncalled wreaths of Greek dramatic poetry',[49] at once deploying one of her recurring images for poetry – the wreath or garland – and implying that for all her cleverness she was not a poet, not *yet* at least. In like manner, the *Saturday Review* insisted on the inexperience of the poet; as for the translation, though not without merit, the reviewer dismissed it as a 'waste of ener-

---

[43] *The Saturday Review*, p. 380.
[44] [Review of] *The Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, by Augusta Webster, *The Illustrated London News* (28 July 1866): p. 95.
[45] [Review of] *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Scotsman* (15 July 1881): p. 3.
[46] *The Scotsman*, p. 3.
[47] 'Belles Lettres,' *The Westminster Review* 89 (1868): p. 608.
[48] James Davies, review of *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Academy* 471 (1881): p. 349.
[49] Davies, p. 349.

gy, and a very uninteresting display of talent'[50] done in a spirit of mere emulation. Some critics also pointed to her treatment of the Greek original and hinted at her unfaithfulness: she had sometimes indulged, the *Athenaeum* claimed, in 'prettifying' the original, that is she had unduly feminized it.[51] These imperfections notwithstanding, the critic admitted that *The Crowned Hippolytus* 'will satisfy the English reader, and bring the student back to his Greek'.[52]

Indeed, Mary Robinson's main concern was precisely to write an English poem in its own right: 'I wanted to make it an English poem, written in a style natural to English readers'.[53] In her letters to Symonds she recalled how she would read the play every day, learning it almost by heart, to the extent that the surrounding landscape as well as her own dreams seemed to turn into a mythological realm. This classicizing perspective would characterize the poet for the rest of her life.[54] Running in her 'head all day',[55] the words from *Hippolytus* inevitably affected her style, which sometimes sounded too 'Euripidesque' and sometimes too far from the master's perfection. The letters she wrote to Symonds testify to Robinson's sense of inadequacy, if not utter despair, because of the play she was trying to re-create in English: 'I am getting into great despair about Hippolytus', she told Symonds, 'the beauty, the tear-wringing pathos, & wisdom vanish or rather are quite left out in my translation like the fragrance in the painted copy of a rose'.[56] With Symonds she also discussed the publication of her poems along with the translation, and eventually decided to bring out a single volume, despite the editor's advice. She thought that Euripides might not sound very attractive to some

---

[50] 'Recent Poetry,' *The Saturday Review* 52, 1343 (1881): p. 117.

[51] [Review of] *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Athenaeum* 2801 (1881): p. 8. Similarly, *The Saturday Review* remarked Robinson's excess of 'pretty affectations' in both *The Crowned Hippolytus* and *A Handful of Honeysuckle*. 'Recent Poetry,' p. 117. In a review of the first collection, the same magazine had criticized the poetess' use of Greek: 'when a lady introduces Greek names into verse she should be careful of her quantities'. 'Some Recent Poets,' *The Saturday Review* 47, 1210 (1879): pp. 21-2.

[52] [Review of] *The Crowned Hippolytus*, p. 8.

[53] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 83.

[54] Several examples can already be found as soon as 1878 in *A Handful of Honeysuckle*. See for instance 'A Ballad of Lost Lovers' (HH 61) or 'A Ballad of Heroes' (HH 76). For later examples see among others 'A Classic Landscape,' in Robinson, *Lyrics*, pp. 102-3.

[55] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 16.

[56] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 66. It is worth noting if just passingly that in a letter from his father to Mary Robinson, dated 1880, Symonds' daughter many years later found some rose petals. A token of affection, possibly of love, it has been suggested, or we might suppose, a further encouragement to go on with the translation. See Newman, p. 155.

of her friends and that her own verse would help promote the selling. However, as Prins has argued, there was more to it than commercial advantage, for the two parts are closely interconnected and, taken together, are the actual embodiment of Robinson's passion for Greek.

3. *'An agonized love': Mary Robinson and the erotics of Greek*

From the point of view of Victorian women, the passion for antiquity and for Greek culture in particular often acquired erotic connotations: Barrett Browning's exciting 'golden hours'[57] spent reading Greek, Jane Harrison's 'hot-cold shiver of delight'[58] and the enthusiasm Janet Case and many other Girtonians experienced in 'think[ing] the thoughts of the Greeks'[59] all testify to the desire for and pleasure of learning. The encounter with Greek letters for women was 'highly charged with eros and pathos'.[60] Robinson pointed to the idea of eros she had learned from Symonds' work, as well as discovering an indefinable desire, or πόθος, pervading his poetry.[61] It is perhaps no coincidence that the power of eros is what two learned women speak about in a *Punch* cartoon of 1876.[62] What is suggested in the ironic representation of two typical sweet girl-graduates – two self-reliant young women, smoking and making fun of Oxford men – is the association between education, classical learning, and a potential sexual threat. In identifying the eros and πόθος in Symonds' treatment of Greek culture, Robinson recognized its disruptive potential: from different perspectives, Greece articulated for both mentor and disciple a 'language of dissent'.[63] *The Crowned Hippolytus* as a whole could be read in these eroticized terms, that is as bringing to life Robinson's narrative of desire that had

> its own predictable *topoi*: an early encounter with the Greek alphabet, a primal scene of falling in love with the language, a pedagogical experience that

---

[57] Barrett Browning, 'Wine of Cyprus,' p. 271.

[58] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Aspects, Aorists, and the Classical Tripos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), pp. 5-6.

[59] [Janet Case], 'Greek Plays at the Universities. By a Graduate of Girton,' *The Woman's World*, 2 (1888): p. 127.

[60] Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, p. xiii.

[61] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 13.

[62] 'St. Valentine's Day at Girton,' *Punch* (26 February 1876).

[63] Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), p. 11.

revolves around the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek, an attempt to translate and incorporate Greek into a body of writing, an idea that the woman writer herself might be the very embodiment of Greek letters.[64]

Through both translation and poems – that, as will be shown, literally incorporate the Greek alphabet – Robinson negotiated her own intellectual identity, between past and present models, ideal and real.

'Ma io perché venirvi? O chi 'l concede?' we read in the epigraph to 'A Pastoral of Parnassus' (CH 153): here the reference is again to the *Divine Comedy* and precisely to *Inferno*, II, in which Dante interrogates Virgil about his mission. Similarly, the speaking voice of Robinson's poem is setting out to ascend Parnassus and trembling with fear, since, a shepherd warns him or her, 'The way is steep' (CH 135). In 1878, Edmund Gosse depicted Mary Robinson among the poetesses that 'smote the lyre with skill'[65] and dared to climb the Parnassian hills. It sounded complimentary, but Robinson, as we have seen, was all but satisfied with her first work. Likewise, in 'A Pastoral of Parnassus', the speaker is incapable of attuning his or her instrument to the music of the past. Once again echoing Dante, 'In una Selva Oscura' (CH 176) is a metaphor for the difficulties of artistic achievement: the moon's look of rebuke for the poet's 'ignorant agony' recalls Symonds' frown from a photograph on Robinson's desk, 'looking kindly anxious for my perplexities'.[66] The difficulties of the poet are further mirrored in the 'perils of the sea', a trope for the unknown, which also recalls the escape odes of *The Crowned Hippolytus*. A similar imagery is to be found in *A Handful of Honeysuckle*: in 'Siren Singing' (HH 32), for instance, the speaker, 'poor and vain', is led by the sirens into an enchanted land, far away across the sea, but eventually does not learn how to sing, for his or her 'low-toned lyre' is still 'over-sweet'. Not much differently, 'In Search of Apollo' (HH 31) evokes the poet's inability to equal the sound of a divine 'sweet lyre'. Throughout Robinson's oeuvre, the contrast between two different symbols of poetic inspiration, the lyre and the reed pipe, points to the underlying tension towards the Past.

A particularly significant poem in *The Crowned Hippolytus*, where all these motives coalesce, is 'On a Reed Pipe' (CH 170). In the first section

---

[64] Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, p. 5.
[65] Gosse's 'A Ballade of Poetesses' (1879) is in Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Immaterial Poetics. A. Mary F. Robinson and the Fin-de-Siècle Poem,' in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem. English Literary Culture at the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 231.
[66] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 13.

the speaker leaves his or her former masters behind, to replace them with a new guide; in so doing, he or she also recognizes the intellectual influences, mainly from the ancient world, that have shaped his or her thought and art. Among these the foremost are Apollo, 'my master from the south / With the laurels round his brow', and Plato,

> one long used to rule
> All I was, or did, or had –
> Plato, that I read at school
> Till my playmates called me mad. (CH 170)

The following stanzas insist on the weakness of the poet, whose instrument is a humble reed pipe as we read, for instance, in the first two lines of the second stanza: 'I have but little strength to blow / The *reed* that is my flute' (CH 171, emphasis added). Here the poetical re-imagining of the relationship with Symonds is evident: he (masculine in the poem) is the 'earthly friend' (CH 171) who has replaced Plato and the others as guardian and mentor of the speaker's soul. 'My soul is new-born & feeble, it is only half-fledged', Robinson told Symonds, 'and if you go there will be no one teach [*sic*] how to fly'.[67] The poem was revised and retitled by the author herself after the end of the exchanges with Symonds. We find it as 'Friendship' in an 1891 volume, and in the previously mentioned collection of 1902. In the new version only the first section survives, a possible hint at the weakening of her mentor's influence. Significantly, the original poem has a subtitle in Greek, 'καλαμόεσσα ἰαχά', which later disappears, from a Chorus of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, again referring to the sound of the reed pipe. The incorporation of Greek into the English text calls further attention to Euripides, with whom the translator was then struggling. Though no longer in Greek letters after 1881, the reed pipe would continue to haunt Robinson's poetical imagination all the way to the 1902 volume. Here, if only the curtailed version of 'Friendship' is included, 'Corydon's *reed pipe*'[68] is reclaimed as the distinctive instrument of the minor poet. The presence of the ancient alphabet also persists over the years, as the visible mark of the imprinting of a woman's literary character through classical learning, after Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*: Mary Robinson's heart and mind are inscribed with Greek letters, like 'the palimpsest of Aurora's soul'.[69]

---

[67] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 16.
[68] Robinson, *Collected Poems*, p. viii (emphasis added).
[69] Prins, 'Ladies' Greek (with the Accents),' p. 595.

Greek literature and letters appear most prominently in 'Two Sisters' (CH 182), an autobiographical ballad dramatizing the speaker and her sister in their childhood, when they would impersonate heroes and heroines from history and myth. While the eight-year-old sister usually played the roles of kings or Amazons, the poet loved to stage 'Revenge and Tragedy' (CH 185) and identified herself with Clytemnestra, the notorious queen of Argos who in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* murdered her husband and ruled in his place. In particular, she saw herself on a par with the tragic heroine because of her audacity and strong will. Though physically weaker than her sister, she 'always showed at hint of fear / γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον κῆρ',[70] (CH 183) while her playmate would start weeping. The incorporation of Aeschylus' words again epitomizes the poet's fascination with the Greek alphabet and language. Among the tragic figures of Athenian drama, Clytemnestra, Cassandra and Electra were Robinson's favourite, as examples of an intensity of feeling she was afraid she lacked: 'Surely people must soon tire of the tinkling of a lyre with so few strings. I cannot write what I do not feel and I feel so little. I would put up with all the misfortunes of Cassandra and Electra if I could change my cold nature for theirs'.[71] In 1888 Robinson dedicated a new collection of poems to her sister Mabel, once again recalling the time they spent together, when 'we had the courage of youth and our opinions'.[72] If 'Two Sisters' is not included in this volume, in which old poems and new ones appear, and though the time of re-enacting Greek tragedy and translating Greek letters seems far away, both ancient drama and alphabet crop up in the epigraphs to the first and third sections of the book, through the voice of Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*, it seems, was still haunting the poet's imagination.

The last part of the 1888 volume is a 'Garden Play', written for Mabel Robinson and Vernon Lee but never performed. To Vernon Lee as well is dedicated 'The Red Clove' (CH 82), the introductory sonnet of the title ballad in the poetry section of *The Crowned Hippolytus*. 'The Red Clove' is the story of Antonio and Daphne, whose relationship re-enacts that of Hip-

[70] The phrase Robinson wrote in Greek refers to Clytemnestra and is found at the onset of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, when the Watchman comments on the Queen ruling over Argos in absence of her husband. In Anna Swanwick's 1865 translation: 'A woman's heart, with manly counsel fraught'. Aeschylus, *The Agamemnon, Choephori, and Eumenides*, trans. Anna Swanwick (London: Bell and Dald, 1865), p. 3.

[71] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 10.

[72] Robinson, *Songs*, p. 5.

polytus and Artemis, thus further underlining the connection between poetry and translation in *The Crowned Hippolytus.* Antonio, we read,

> Loved to dream himself Hippolytus,
> And her white Artemis, the heavenly maid;
> Or, musing on Endymion, feigned that thus
> One night she stooped to kiss him in the shade. (CH 87)

In his devotion to Daphne, Antonio reminds us of Hippolytus, a parallel that he himself makes explicit, besides adding further classical resonances by drawing attention to another mythical couple. The story of Diana and Endymion offers a different version of the goddess, no longer chaste as she was in the tragedy of *Hippolytus*, but a desiring subject, a woman, like Phaedra, mad with love. The connection between Antonio and Hippolytus is further reinforced by the former's respect for his father: like the tragic figure, he is obedient and kind, the representative of an 'ideal of a guileless, tranquil manhood'.[73] In his endurance of pain as well as in his graceful body, 'slender, young Antonio' (CH 84), like Hippolytus, is another model of the 'athletic charm'[74] that Symonds saw in Greek sculpture.

Robinson rewrote 'The Red Clove' in prose in 1898, in a collection of 'charming old world stories' called *A Mediæval Garland.*[75] In a novella entitled 'The Red Carnation' the figure of Daphne resonates with further classical associations, not only because she resembles 'Diana the Huntress' and 'Artemis the white',[76] but also for her Greek profile and mastery of Latin and Greek. Hints at Daphne's learning – if not specifically in the classics – are also in the ballad, where Daphne's father says his daughter 'shall pluck the eternal, perfect rose / That blossoms on Parnassus' (CH 85). Further still, Daphne shares Artemis' purity as well as her desire for the aestheticized Hippolytus-Endymion, while recalling Phaedra in her concern for good reputation. In *Studies of the Greek Poets* Symonds contended that reputation was very important to Euripidean heroines; it was indeed their chief virtue, a 'stern Stoicism'[77] that led them to prefer death rather than dishonour. This is what happens to Phaedra in *Hippolytus.*

---

[73] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 221.
[74] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 222.
[75] A. Mary F. Robinson (Mme James Darmesteter), *A Mediæval Garland*, trans. May Tomlison (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1898).
[76] Robinson, *Mediæval Garland*, p. 233.
[77] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 217.

In tackling this tragedy, Symonds singled out two scenes for translation: first, the hunter-hero's prayer to Artemis, at the beginning of the play; secondly, the young man's death, adding some comments on each scene. In his view, Hippolytus embodied Euripides' luminous beauty, 'radiancy' and 'thrilling splendour',[78] *he* – and not Phaedra – was at the core of the play. In reviewing Mary Robinson's *The Crowned Hippolytus*, James Davies avoided dwelling on the character of Phaedra as Symonds had done before him, subscribing to his idea that 'the passion of Phaedra is secondary to that of the Virgin hero'.[79]

By contrast, Robinson chose to focus precisely on the sickness of Phaedra. Reverence and admiration for old masters and new friends did not prevent the speaker of many of her poems from trying and climbing Parnassus all the same; nor did they prevent Mary Robinson herself from expressing her own interpretation of the drama. Before *The Crowned Hippolytus* came out, she was asked to provide an excerpt of her ongoing translation for publication in a magazine; the scene she selected was what she titled 'The Sickness of Phaedra',[80] as an oblique reply to Symonds' contention in *Studies of the Greek Poets* that 'we do not want to dwell upon the pining sickness of Phaedra'.[81] While she followed her mentor in recognizing the importance of the play within the Euripidean corpus, she took issue with him on the centrality of the female figure. In *The Crowned Hippolytus*, when she came to the scene of the hero's prayer to Artemis, Robinson looked at Symonds' version in *Studies of the Greek Poets* while revising it slightly but significantly, as Prins has demonstrated. In her translation, Hippolytus' homage to the goddess becomes 'more flowing and flowery':[82]

> I bring for thee a plaited wreath of flowers
> From meadow lands *un*trodden an *un*mown
> There *never* shepherd dares to feed his flocks,
> *Nor* iron comes therein; only the bee
> Through that *un*sullied meadow in the spring
> Flies and leaves it pure, and Reverence
> Freshens with rivers' dew the tended flowers

---

[78] Symonds, *Studies*, pp. 230-1.
[79] Davies, p. 349.
[80] A. Mary F. Robinson, 'The Sickness of Phaedra,' *The University Magazine* (December 1879): pp. 716-19.
[81] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 221.
[82] Prins, 'Ladies' Greek (with the Accents),' p. 602.

And only they whose virtue is *un*taught,
They that inherit purity, may pluck
Their bloom and gather it, no baser man.
Yet, o dear mistress, from this pious hand
Take thou a garland for thy golden hair.
For I, of all men, only am thy friend,
To share thy converse and companionship,
Hearing thy voice whose eyes I never see. (CH 6, emphasis added)

Symonds translated the same lines as follows:

Lady, for thee this garland have I woven
O wilding flowers plucked from an unshorn meadow,
Where neither shepherd dares to feed his flock,
Nor ever scythe has swept, but through the mead
Unshorn in spring the bee pursues her labours,
And maiden modesty with running rills
Waters the garden. Sweet queen, take my crown
To deck thy golden hair: my hand is holy.
To me alone of men belongs this honour,
To be with thee and answer when thou speakest,
Yea, for I hear thy voice but do not see thee.[83]

Here the negation is reiterated several times so as to stress the purity of the meadow and of Hippolytus' body and soul. The images she uses recall Symonds' descriptions of Euripides' verse as 'flowing like mountain rivulets, flashing with sunbeams eddying in cool shady places',[84] and keep coming up throughout Robinson's poetry.[85] Significantly, she replaces Symonds' 'maiden modesty', which is echoed in his comments on Hippolytus as a '*maiden* saint' performing a '*maiden* service',[86] with a more general 'Reverence'. Equally significant is that she adds the reference to the man enjoying the goddess' pure companionship, an expression that is not in Symonds' version, but does appear in *Studies of the Greek Poets* among the comments to his own translation. The phrase evidently resonated with Robinson who, besides incorporating it in her book, also quoted it – this time in Greek – in a letter to Symonds.[87] To this

---

[83] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 222.
[84] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 211.
[85] See among other examples, the poem 'Tyrst' (HH 86), in which the poet describes the place where a nightingale sings in terms that are strongly reminiscent of Hippolytus' garden.
[86] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 221 (emphasis added).
[87] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 19. 'It is very good of you to write to me and to take an interest in my life, which is a nice little life enough but very narrow – it is such a delight for me to know you,

ideal of companionship he would return when, writing to both Robinson and Vernon Lee, he reminded them – in Greek again – that 'friends hold things in common'.[88] Hellenism apparently provided a common ground for their intellectual exchange.

As regards Phaedra, it is once again from the correspondence with Symonds that we glimpse how this tragic figure posed a veritable challenge to Robinson as a translator. In *Studies of the Greek Poets,* Symonds ranked Theseus' wife among the best creations of the dramatist, who mainly 'devoted his genius to the delineation of female characters' and represented them as 'active, passionate, and powerful agents in the play of human life'.[89] All the same, in his view, she was overshadowed by the male protagonist, whereas for Robinson she embodied one of her ideals of femininity in antiquity, along with Cassandra, Sappho, Hippolyta and Electra. Hippolytus' mother, the Amazon queen, stood as an example of solidarity among women and unsettling sexuality, besides being suggestive of creative freedom, as hinted in 'Two Sisters'. Not unlike them, Phaedra emerged as a potent symbol of female desire, of the destructive eros that the Girton students had learned from *Antigone* and that Robinson had first discovered through Symonds. When 'The Sickness of Phaedra' appeared in the *University Magazine*, Robinson told him that she had singled out that particular passage because it was the only part that could stand alone as a separate piece.[90] The fact that she felt compelled to justify her choice is a hint of a subtle sense of guilt for having to a certain extent 'betrayed' her mentor.

What she found most appealing about the 'sickness' scene, which she later reworked for the final version (CH 9-23) was probably the centrality of Phaedra's desire, for it is here that the heroine, soon after her first appearance on stage, gives voice to her restlessness, before confessing to her love for her stepson. Crucially, it is at this point that she rethinks Hippolytus' Artemisian space – which is also 'the spatial analogue of Hippolytus' body'[91] – from the point of view of female desire. The 'un-

σοὶ καὶ ξύνειμι καὶ λόγοις σ'ἀμείβομαι κλύων μὲν αὐδήν, ὄμμα δ'οὐχ ὁρῶν τὸ σόν. Hippolytus again, oh dear!'
[88] John A. Symonds, *Letters*, ed. Herbert Schueller and Robert L. Peters, vol. 2 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), p. 931.
[89] Symonds, *Studies*, p. 217.
[90] Robinson to Symonds, 248 f. 92. 'I did not choose it as being best, but as the only part that would detach itself'.
[91] Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 235.

trodden', 'unmown' and 'unsullied' meadow where Hippolytus gathers flowers for the goddess becomes, in Phaedra's imagination, the 'meadow [where] the poplar grows' and where she yearns 'to lie and take my rest' (CH 10). The water which refreshes the grass in the sacred garden turns into the 'clear water' with which Phaedra would like to quench her thirst, whereas the wood that the hunter shares with his chaste companion is redefined as the space of the woman's fantasy of eros and power. In this key episode, Phaedra refigures the sacred garden of Artemis and the woods where she hunts with Hippolytus, into a place of erotic desire.

'The Sickness of Phaedra' is thus a dramatization of female desire for the male body and of the translator for the Greek text itself, whereby the translation becomes part of the erotics of Greek and a performance of the poet's literacy, while also suggesting unmapped territories and daring topics for the woman poet. It is perhaps no coincidence that other female figures from the ancient world that appear in the collection are Venus, whose body – here in white marble – is the site of different juxtaposing aesthetic interpretations ('Before a Bust of Venus', CH 134) and Philumene, whose body, again, in Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Tales* was literally inscribed in Greek letters ('Philumene to Aristides', CH 150). *The Crowned Hippolytus* testifies to Robinson's embodied desire and active commitment to the ancient classics, in an unresolved tension between ambition and modesty, knowing and not-knowing, and always on the margins of scholarly knowledge. Her view of Greece at once relied on her mentor's opinions, whose guidance she humbly sought, and departed from them, looking for new 'meadows lands untrodden and unmown'.

4. Conclusion

This paper has considered Robinson's 1881 work in the wider frame of late-Victorian women's access to ancient Greek culture and language, bringing to light her original contribution to the rehabilitation of Euripides at a turning point in the history of his reception in England. Though not a scholar, she devoted herself to the ancient classics, while departing from 'second-hand scholars who are afraid to think for themselves, or suggest anything new',[92] as J.P. Mahaffy would say, complaining about the current misinterpretation of the tragedian, and a widespread miscon-

---

[92] John P. Mahaffy and John B. Bury (eds), *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London: Macmillan, 1881), p. x.

struction of Greek drama as a whole. These comments are in the Preface to the scholar's critical edition of *The Hippolytus of Euripides*, published in the same year as Mary Robinson's own *Hippolytus.* Here Mahaffy advocated an 'intelligent appreciation'[93] of, rather than a blind reverence for, the ancient texts. Later in the century, writing a history of classical Greek literature, Mahaffy returned to the most common misconceptions about ancient tragedy and Euripides in particular. When he came to *Hippolytus*, he could find only two English translations worth mentioning, namely 'a very faithful poetical version by M.P. Fitzgerald', brought out in 1867, and 'another by Miss Robinson'.[94]

In dealing with *The Crowned Hippolytus* in the context of late-Victorian Hellenism, a gendered perspective has been inevitably brought into play, considering that Hellenism was a gendered field at the time and that current assumptions about femininity impinged upon the reputation and reception of poetesses and translators like Robinson, as Linda Hughes has recently reminded us: 'They were all reviewed as *women* who wrote poetry, and in their daily lives and interactions within literary networks, none escaped visible embodiment as females'.[95] In this perspective, as both a poet and a classicist, Mary Robinson is still much in need of 're-presentation'.[96]

Bibliography

Aeschylus, *The Agamemnon, Choephori, and Eumenides*, trans. Anna Swanwick (London: Bell and Daldy, 1865).
Barrett Browning, Elizabeth, *Casa Guidi Windows* (London: John Lane, 1901).
———, *Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. With Two Prose Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920).
———, *Diary by E.B.B. The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1831-1832*, ed. P. Kelley and R. Hudson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969).
Behler, Ernst, 'A.W. Schlegel and the Nineteenth-Century *Damnatio* of Euripides,' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986): pp. 335-67.

[93] Mahaffy and Bury, p. viii.
[94] John P. Mahaffy, *A History of Classical Greek Literature*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 103.
[95] Linda K. Hughes, 'Introduction,' in Linda K. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 9.
[96] This expression has been used by Lynda Ely, who in 2000 advocated for a thorough reconsideration of Mary Robinson as a late-Victorian cosmopolitan poet. M. Lynda Ely, '"Not a Song to Sell": Re-Presenting A. Mary F. Robinson,' *Victorian Poetry* 38, 1 (2000): pp. 94-108.

'Belles Lettres,' *The Westminster Review* 89 (1868): p. 608.

Bellot, H.H., *UCL, 1826-1926* (London: University of London Press, 1929).

Brown, Horatio, *John Addington Symonds. A Biography* (London: Smith, Elder, 1903).

[Case, Janet], 'Greek Plays at the Universities. By a Graduate of Girton,' *The Woman's World* (London: Cassell, 1888), pp. 121-7.

Comet, Noah, 'Nineteenth-Century Women Writers and the Classical Inheritance: Introduction,' *Women Studies* 40, 4 (2011): pp. 399-403.

Darmesteter, James, *English Studies,* trans. Mary Darmesteter (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896).

Davies, James, review of *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Academy* 471 (1881): p. 349.

Duclaux, Mary and Maurice Barrès, *Lettres Echangées. Précédé de Les Trois Mary, par Daniel Halévy de l'Institut*, ed. Daniel Halévy (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1959).

Ely, M. Lynda, '"Not a Song to Sell": Re-Presenting A. Mary F. Robinson,' *Victorian Poetry* 38, 1 (2000): pp. 94-108.

Evangelista, Stefano, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

Glaser, Ben, 'Polymetrical Dissonance: Tennyson, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Classical Meter,' *Victorian Poetry* 49, 2 (2011): pp. 199-216.

Harrison, Jane E., *Aspects, Aorists, and the Classical Tripos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919).

Hughes, Lynda (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Hurst, Isobel, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Jenkyns, Richard, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Letters and Papers of John Addington Symonds, ed. Horatio Brown (London: Murray, 1923).

Mahaffy, John P., *A History of Classical Greek Literature*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1895).

Mahaffy, John P. and John B. Bury (eds), *The Hippolytus of Euripides* (London: Macmillan, 1881).

'Mr Symonds on the Greek Poets,' *The Examiner* 3429 (1873): p. 1049.

'Mr. Symonds' New Volume,' *The Examiner* 3569 (1876): p. 712.

Murray, Gilbert (ed.), *Euripides. Translated into English Rhyming Verse* (London: George Allen, 1902).

Newman, Sally, '"Bizarre Love Triangle": Tracing Power and Pedagogy in the Letters of John Addington Symonds, A. Mary F. Robinson and Vernon Lee, 1878-1890,' *English Studies* 94, 2 (2013): pp. 154-70.

'Notes and News,' *The Academy* 412 (1880), p. 232.

Olverson, Tracy D., *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Parejo Vadillo, Ana, 'New Women Poets and the Culture of the *Salon* at the Fin de Siècle,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 10, 1 (1999): pp. 22-34.

———, 'Immaterial Poetics. A. Mary F. Robinson and the Fin-de-Siècle Poem,' in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem. English Literary Culture at the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 231-60.

Prasch, Thomas, 'Clashing Greek and Victorian Culture Wars: Euripides vs. Aristophanes in Late-Victorian Discourse,' *Victorian Studies* 54, 3 (2012): pp. 464-73.

Prins, Yopie, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

———, 'Ladies'Greek (with the Accents): A Metrical Translation of Euripides by A. Mary F. Robinson,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, 2 (2006): pp. 591-618.

———, *Ladies' Greek. Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

'Recent Poetry,' *The Saturday Review* 52, 1343 (1881): p. 117.

[Review of] *Studies of the Greek Poets*, by John A. Symonds, *The Illustrated Review* 6, 88 (1873): p. 200.

[Review of] *Studies of the Greek Poets*, by John A. Symonds, *The British Quarterly Review* 116 (1873): p. 594.

[Review of] *Studies of the Greek Poets*, by John A. Symonds, *The Saturday Review* (20 September 1873): p. 380.

[Review of] *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Scotsman* (15 July 1881): p. 3.

[Review of] *The Crowned Hippolytus*, by A. Mary F. Robinson, *The Athenaeum* 2801 (1881): p. 8.

[Review of] *The Prometheus Bound* of Æschylus, by Augusta Webster, *The Illustrated London News* (28 July 1866): p. 95.

Rigg, Patricia, 'A. Mary F. Robinson's *The New Arcadia*: Aestheticism and the Fin-de-Siècle Social Problem Poem,' *Papers on Language and Literature* 51, 2 (2005): pp. 171-93.

Robertson, Eric (ed.), *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies, with Illustrative Extracts* (London: Cassell, 1883).

Robinson, A. Mary F., *A Handful of Honeysuckle* (London: Kegan Paul, 1878).

———, 'The Sickness of Phaedra,' *The University Magazine* (December 1879): pp. 716-19.

———, *The Crowned Hippolytus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881).

———, *Lyrics* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891).

——— (Mme James Darmesteter), *A Mediæval Garland*, trans. May Tomlison (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1898).

——— (Madame Duclaux), *The Collected Poems* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902).

'St. Valentine's Day at Girton,' *Punch* (26 February 1876).

Symonds, John A., *Studies of the Greek Poets* (London: Smith, Elder, 1873).

Symonds, Margaret, *Out of the Past* (London: John Murray, 1925).

Symons, Arthur, 'A. Mary F. Darmesteter,' in *The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 9, *Joanna Baille to Mathilde Blind*, ed. Alfred Miles (London: Hutchinson, 1907), pp. 359-61.

Turner, Frank M., *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

Warner, Charles D. (ed.), *Library of the World's Best Literature*, vol. 21 (New York: R.S. Peale and J.A. Hill, 1897).

Zeitlin, Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

EXPLORING FEMINIZED LANDSCAPES IN VICTORIAN EROTICA: ECOCRITICISM MEETS SOCIOLOGY

Daniela Francesca Virdis and Gabriella Milia

This chapter provides the theoretical tools to explore the primary themes in *Sub-Umbra*, one of the six serialised novels published in the Victorian erotic magazine *The Pearl* (1879-81). Firstly, it covers the strategy of feminizing and sexualizing landscapes and natural scenery. Secondly, it treats the sociological model of gentry masculinity and compares it with the representation of the main character and first-person narrator in the novel, a figure interacting with the gendered physical environment. Ideas for further research on *Sub-Umbra* and Victorian erotica are also offered.

Feminised and Sexualised Landscapes; Gentry Masculinity; The Pearl *(1879-81); Victorian Pornographic Fictional Prose*

1. Introduction: *The Victorian pornographic novel* Sub-Umbra

Of the various licentious magazines flourishing in Victorian Britain, *The Pearl, A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* was probably the most famous.[1] It was published in London from July 1879 to January 1881 in eighteen monthly issues and two Christmas supplements, which contained novels, short stories, poems and parodies of diverse genres. It was printed by William Lazenby (1825?-88?), one of the main British pornographers during the 1870s and 1880s; he may also have been its editor and one of its authors, all of whom were anonymous. As Sigel claims, the readership of erotica was restricted due to their distribution, accessibility and price.[2] In fact, the target audience of *The Pearl* and of all Lazenby's publications consisted of rich, upper-class men. Lazenby and his fellow publishers used to send their catalogues and notices to the members of the upper and wealthy classes (listed in the social register and on the society pages), to officers in the army and to students of exclusive schools.

---

[1] While both authors are responsible for the chapter's design and have co-revised it, Daniela Francesca Virdis is responsible for Sections 2 and 3, and Gabriella Milia for Sections 1 and 4.

[2] Lisa Z. Sigel, 'The Rise of the Overtly Affectionate Family: Incestuous Pornography and Displaced Desire among the Edwardian Middle Class,' in *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800-2000*, ed. Lisa Z. Sigel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 114.

This is because the men in these social groups were the only customers who could afford such an expensive type of publication.[3]

Sub-Umbra, or Sport among the She-Noodles is one of the six serialised novels printed in *The Pearl*, to be more exact in its first eight issues. Since its first seven instalments were printed as the opening text of the magazine, it has a foregrounded position, drawing the readers' attention to it. The very first sentence and paragraph of the text presents the erotic topic and typifies the genre as pornography: 'The merry month of May has always been famous for its propitious influence over the voluptuous senses of the fairer sex'.[4] In the novel, the main character and first-person narrator, nineteen-year-old Walter, tells his story: he visits his uncle's family in the Sussex countryside and seduces his male cousin Frank, his three female cousins (the 'she-noodles' of the title), their three guests and their family friend, and in the end comes back home.

Sub-Umbra, the Latin title of the novel, meaning 'under the shade (of trees)', hints at the countryside setting and the relevant role it will acquire in the plot. This is unusual in the pornographic texts of the period, where the only focal point is predictably realised by information of a licentious type. For instance, the anonymous *Randiana, or Excitable Tales* (1884), also published by Lazenby, does not feature any sizeable landscape descriptions. The equally anonymous *The Romance of Lust* (Lazenby, 1873-76) includes very few essential sketches of natural scenery unrelated to sexual intercourse, and only one longer depiction of the surroundings of a summer house where the protagonist and his lovers often have sex.[5] *Sub-Umbra* apart, several narratives from *The Pearl* are set in a country-house; nevertheless, only two 'rural fuck[s]', whose locations are not portrayed, take place in the magazine (pp. 576, 633).

The emphasis the novel lays on natural scenery is accordingly uncommon in Victorian erotic literature; moreover, such natural scenery is

---

[3] This introductory paragraph is based on Daniela Francesca Virdis, 'Eroticising Female and Male Bodies: A Linguistic Investigation of a Pornographic Novel from the Victorian Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Porn Studies* 2, 1 (2015): pp. 19-34. See also Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips, *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 362, and Daniela Francesca Virdis, 'Sexuality, Masculinities & Co. in the Limericks from the Victorian Erotic Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 23, 1 (2010): pp. 209-34.

[4] Anonymous authors [William Lazenby, N. Douglas et al.], *The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (reprint New York: Ballantine, 1996; first edition London: Lazenby, 1879-81), p. 2. Further references in brackets in the text.

[5] [William Simpson Potter (ed.)? Edward Sellon?], *The Romance of Lust* (reprint Ryde: Olympia Press, 2004; first edition London: Lazenby, 1873-76), pp. 39-40.

explicitly described and conceptualised by applying the strategy of feminization and sexualization. What is also highlighted in the text is the main character's cultural and socioeconomic status as a representative of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and North-American sociological category of gentry masculinity. The combination of these naturalistic and sociological themes in the novel results in the need for the analyst to count on a theoretical framework within which the scrutiny of the narrative can be adequately read. Given that the relation of the text with erotica from a literary and cultural history viewpoint has been recently treated elsewhere, additional frameworks are offered here.[6] Therefore, the research purpose of this chapter is to consider two theoretical tools to explore the themes and the text of *Sub-Umbra*: (a) the practice of feminization and sexualization of the physical environment, together with an ecocritical model provided by a study by Kolodny and a literary model furnished by an imperial novel by Haggard (treated in Section 2);[7] (b) the sociological category of gentry masculinity developed by Connell (covered in Section 3).[8] Section 4 supplies the concluding remarks and ideas for further research on both this novel and Victorian erotica.

2. The metaphor of the land-as-woman

Such naturalistic themes as those found in *Sub-Umbra* are among the primary interests of feminist cultural geography: the association of the natural with the female and sexual pleasure, the metaphors of feminine nature as opposed to masculine culture, the visual and written encodings of feminine nature.[9] From their disciplinary standpoint, human geographers and cultural geographers have also often examined landscapes, broadly conceived, and related ideas in literary and non-literary texts.[10]

---

[6] See Virdis, 'Eroticising Female and Male Bodies;' see also Daniela Francesca Virdis, 'Sexualised Landscapes and Gentry Masculinity in Victorian Scenery: An Ecostylistic Examination of a Pornographic Novel from the Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Journal of Literary Semantics* 48, 2 (2019): pp. 109-28.

[7] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), Chapter 1; H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (London: Cassell, 1885).

[8] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 189-92.

[9] Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), Chapter 5.

[10] To mention just a few, see Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan (eds), *Writing Worlds: Discour-*

The *Sub-Umbra* themes are also among the objects of inquiry of the academic field of ecocriticism, that is to say, its countryside setting, the representation of the landscape as a human, primarily female, body, and particularly the metaphor of nature as a sexualised woman. In this discipline, more precisely,

> nature [is] conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape — trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body).[11]

These issues are further scrutinised by Kolodny in her historical, psychological and ecologically-aware investigation of the American androcentric pastoral impulse in art and literature. This investigation is based on the metaphor of the land represented as a woman. As this scholar writes, this model is a gratifying metaphor of 'regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape'.[12]

Kolodny's study can be held up as a model to read the themes in *Sub-Umbra*, since its plot represents and celebrates a natural feminine realm. In the narrative, nature and the land are gendered as female and metaphorically conceptualised as being especially in harmony with the male figures. Actually, it is Walter's family who owns that land and manages that estate and its resources, and it is the young man who seduces almost all the female characters on it. However, the physical environment is described less as an object of domination or exploitation than as a sexual accomplice and partner ready to encourage and offer gratification. In addition, as in Kolodny's study, in order to give such gratification, the female environment is depicted by indirectly alluding to the archetypal figure of the nurturing mother (although the topic of parent-child incest is absent from the plot). In other words, the sexualised setting is portrayed as a loving and kind host, amenable and friendly, safe and comfortable, as exemplified in the following sequences:

se, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape (London: Routledge, 1992), and Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (eds), *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994).

[11] Kate Soper, 'Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature,' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 141.

[12] Kolodny, p. 6.

passing rapidly down a shady walk [...], we soon arrived at a very convenient spot, and the instinct of love allowed me to guide the willing girls into a rather dark arbour without the least demur on their part. (p. 108)

we at once set off for the scene of our anticipated fun, which was a rough bower covered with flowering honeysuckle and clematis, at the end of a long, shady, private walk, more than half-a-mile from the house. (pp. 213-14)

we soon managed to give the others the slip, and lost ourselves in a dense copse. Sitting down on the soft mossy turf, under a shady little yew tree, we were quite hidden from observation. (p. 276)

In Victorian culture and science, 'nature' was identified as female (by means of the personal pronoun 'she'), whereas the scientist was depicted as male ('he'). A notable example is represented by Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), where the natural world is consistently personified as a feminine, nurturing being. As for poetry, women and nature were usually associated in the nineteenth century: examples range from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) to Browning's 'Women and Roses' (1855).[13] The late Victorian literary and cultural trend of feminising and sexualising the landscape in a pronounced and unequivocal way is especially salient in imperial romances.[14] Among them, Haggard's well-known novel *King Solomon's Mines* has been scrutinised by several literary and cultural studies critics, whose attention was attracted primarily by the conspicuous strategy of the feminization of natural scenery and by the device of the treasure map.[15] This imperial romance is here briefly compared with *Sub-Umbra* and two of the main issues in this chapter are explored by contrast with this popular and extensively-analysed model: (a) the repre-

---

[13] James Eli Adams, 'Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin,' *Victorian Studies* 33, 1 (1989): pp. 7-27. See also Patricia Murphy, 'Ecofeminist Whispers: The Interrogation of "Feminine Nature" in Mathilde Blind's Short Poetry,' *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 11, 1 (2015), http://ncgsjournal.com/issue111/murphy.htm.

[14] For Western European landscape painting as a seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century new visual medium associated with European imperialism, see William John Thomas Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. William John Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 5-34.

[15] Martin Hall, 'The Legend of the Lost City; Or, the Man with Golden Balls,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, 2 (1995): pp. 179-99; Paul Rich, 'Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, 1 (1982): pp. 54-73; Lindy Stiebel, 'Imagining Empire's Margins: Land in Rider Haggard's African Romances,' in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation: ASNEL Papers 5*, ed. Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 125-40. For a psychosexual interpretation of the treasure map, see Anne McClintock, 'Maidens, Maps and Mines: *King Solomon's Mines* and the Reinvention of Patriarchy in Colonial South Africa,' in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Claremont: David Philip, 1990), pp. 113-15.

sentation of two distinct types of masculinity; (b) the resulting distinct gendering and conquering of the physical environment.

The differences between *King Solomon's Mines* and *Sub-Umbra* are mainly due to the fact that their main characters belong to two diverse categories of European-American masculinity. The protagonists of *King Solomon's Mines*, three British adventurers seeking the eponymous diamond mines in southern Africa, personify white military masculinity, the hegemonic category of manliness in the colonial nineteenth century, especially in the late Victorian age. This had its model in the Spanish *conquistadores*: its members did not have any close or stable social connections, habitually used physical force and violence in their search for gold and land, and it was problematic for the imperial state to control them. This category of masculinity, hence, was the most active in the process of imperial frontier expansion, and was intrinsically entangled with war, violence and colonialism: in Connell's terms, 'Empire was a gendered enterprise from the start'.[16] The protagonist of *Sub-Umbra* is, in contrast, an embodiment of gentry masculinity, whose attributes and links with the setting and femininity are considered in Section 3.

King Solomon's Mines has also been defined as a 'famous tale of colonial copulation' and an 'account of sexual conquest and denigration'.[17] The main characters in the narrative employ a treasure map featuring natural scenery with mountains, rivers and their distinctive names in order to travel through southern Africa and seek the eponymous diamond mines; when reversed, the map discloses the shape of a female body. As a result, the drawing 'has been read by some critics as a graphically sexualized map of a woman's body leading the male gazer/imperialist to a kind of Promised Land';[18] the female body is consequently ready to be possessed by the colonial male adventurers.

The narrator's frequent mention of the 'laps' of mountains, the mountains called 'Sheba's Breasts', the triangle of three hills covered in dark heather named 'Three Witches', and the entrances to the two forbidden passages leading to the treasure constitute the most straightforward cases of landscape feminization in the plot. The descriptions of the physical environment in the entire novel represent such feminised landscapes in

---

[16]   Connell, p. 187; see also pp. 185-99.
[17]   Sanya Osha, 'Unravelling the Silences of Black Sexualities,' *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 62 (2004): p. 93.
[18]   Stiebel, p. 135.

erotic terms, as wild and unsubdued, as expressing sexual passion and fulfilment. Rich clarifies that 'In this world, the imagery of the untamed landscape that has not yet been subjected to European penetration becomes richly laced with a conception of primitive licentiousness'.[19] That is to say, although beautiful local women often furnish the three protagonists with non-figurative occasion for dalliance and sexual licence, Haggard's most erotic descriptions concern the landscape of the African colonial paradise.[20]

As mentioned above, the narrative is written in accordance with the conventions of British imperial romance and the male adventure or quest genre. The thrill of risk and danger arising from the unknown and exotic setting is not eliminated but, after dangerous travel and hazardous adventures, the male heroes, through exploration, eventually master this feminised land and its people and animals, thereby defining their masculinity.[21]

Adapting Osha's definitions of *King Solomon's Mines* cited above to *Sub-Umbra*, the pornographic novel can merely be regarded and interpreted as a 'tale of copulation' and an 'account of sexual conquest'.[22] In fact, the elements of colonialism and denigration contained in the definitions are not present in *Sub-Umbra*: Walter's family already owns the countryside he explores, and his female partners also belong to the gentry and are never reluctant or humiliated (see Section 3). Furthermore, the landscape is not left uncultivated or free of human intervention, that is metaphorically dissolute and explicitly yielding to erotic desire. The natural environment has already been controlled and tamed by the people working for its gentry landowners exactly for those landowners' own employment and leisure, here Walter's erotic activities; the unwelcome possibility of hazard and vulnerability has been eradicated and replaced by a pleasant sensation of comfort and safety.

On the one hand, in *King Solomon's Mines* sexual issues and tensions are transferred onto the feminised physical environment, and the quest is for adventure, wealth and, ultimately, an improved social and economic position in the empire. On the other hand, in *Sub-Umbra* the male figure openly addresses and relieves these sexual issues and tensions firstly

---

[19] Rich, p. 59.
[20] Hall, p. 186.
[21] Stiebel, p. 131.
[22] Osha, p. 93.

by explicitly depicting his own and his friends' bodies as eroticised; secondly, by seducing and sometimes being seduced by the female figures. His quest is, accordingly, for such more prosaic and everyday tenets as erotic fulfilment.

In *Sub-Umbra*, the three main sequences on natural scenery represent the following landscapes: Walter's uncle's grounds (Sequence 1; p. 2); a pond and a summer-house nearby (Sequence 2; pp. 73-4); an old sand pit (Sequence 3; p. 215). Several noun phrases and clauses from these sequences offer an instance of the metaphor of the land-as-woman as presented in Kolodny's model and in *King Solomon's Mines*, that is to say, they relate sexuality to the representation of the physical environment. Actually, a number of phrases and clauses literally describing the natural landscape also seem to figuratively allude to human, mainly female, erotic landscapes and to penetration and intercourse:

> Female genitalia:
> Sequence 1: 'arable and pasture land'; 'numerous interesting copses'; 'through which run footpaths and shady walks' (p. 2).
> Sequence 2: 'This lake [...] every side thickly wooded to the very margin, so that even anglers could not get access to the bank, except at the little sloping green sward'; 'The bottom of the pond being gradually shelving, and covered with fine sand at this spot, and a circular space, enclosed with rails, to prevent them getting out of their depth'; 'a very narrow footpath, leading to the house through the dense thicket' (pp. 73-4).
> Sequence 3: 'a Robinson Crusoe's cave'; 'bushes in front of it, so that the entrance was perfectly out of sight'; 'a heap of fine soft sand at the further end' (p. 215).
>
> Penetration and intercourse:
> Sequence 1: 'they may go pleasure hunting for themselves' (p. 2).
> Sequence 2: 'the bathers could undress, and then trip across the lawn to the water'; 'the bathing season' (pp. 73-4).
> Sequence 3: 'Gliding into the cave'; 'we were at once in the dark' (p. 215).

Following the strategy of natural scenery gendering, in this list of literal-metaphorical noun phrases and clauses, sexuality is figuratively connected to the physical environment. This helps to bring to the fore the metaphorical meaning of these apparently non-erotic phrases and clauses, which figuratively provide a representation of female genitalia, and to emphasise the erotic role of the setting in the narrative. Moreover, by means of such a metaphorical interpretation, the descriptive phrases and clauses in the list not only seem to perform the function of anticipating

the sexual actions to come, like other examples from the text; some of them also seem to depict the main stages of those sexual actions, namely penetration and intercourse.

In this metaphorically feminised natural scenery, 'As in the intensely sexualised landscape of *King Solomon's Mines*, desire is projected onto the landscape, which frequently assumes a female form'.[23] The same metaphorical practice of sexualising natural scenery can hence be found in *Sub-Umbra*: Walter transfers his sexual emotions, fantasies and appetite to the physical environment. Nevertheless, in the imperial adventure of white military masculinity, desire is only projected onto the setting and thereby quenched; in the pornographic novel, the sexual appetite of a representative of gentry masculinity is also repeatedly and variously gratified.

3. Gentry masculinity

Because Walter's licentious usage of natural scenery is highlighted in the narrative of *Sub-Umbra*, his gender, social and cultural position as a member of the sociological category of gentry masculinity is explored here. Scrutinising Walter's fictional figure as a member of the landed gentry and as a personification and parody of this male model can be helpful for at least two reasons: (a) to socially and historically contextualise the setting of the novel and its focus on the countryside; (b) to understand the protagonist's masculinity and connections with the other female and male characters. Moreover, given that gentry masculinity belonged to the social elite composing the limited readership of Victorian pornography (see Section 1), this scrutiny can also furnish further information on part of that readership.[24]

Gentry masculinity, Connell writes, was founded on the notion of kinship, and blood relationships formed the basis of social, cultural and even political organization.[25] Those belonging to this category of masculinity were the 'natural' members of such organizations as the govern-

---

[23] Stiebel, p. 135.

[24] For models which are more specifically Victorian but less adequate to the protagonist, see Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Graeme Smart and Amelia Yeates (eds), *Critical Survey* 20, 3 (2008), special issue *Victorian Masculinities*; John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[25] Connell, pp. 189-92.

ment, the local administration, the law, the army and the navy. In fact, Britain's domestic politics and its colonial rule in India and North America in the eighteenth century were dominated by only a few powerful families by means of patronage. The institution of the duel was the link between the two values of military aggressiveness on the one hand and the family ethic and honour on the other; the duel also emphasised the force and violence characteristic of this social and cultural group[26]. With regard to class relations, this group's treatment of and authority over the agricultural workforce was normally cruel and merciless, and power and punishment were exercised by brutal means.

As observed by cultural geographers, the strong relation between the physical environment and gentry masculinity is visually represented in Thomas Gainsborough's double portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews (about 1750).[27] Marxist cultural geographers point out that, as in English landscape painting, the people working Mr Andrews' fields are absent from the portrait's content. Landscape painting is actually a visual manifestation of ideology celebrating gentry capitalist property and the status quo, and suppressing evidence of labour, social conflict and rural transformation in natural scenery.[28] These features of gentry masculinity are underlined in *Sub-Umbra*. Here Walter is a member of the gentry and a landowner or future landowner; his social group and family, by definition, are so wealthy as to have the leisure to spend their spare time in the woods and to own an environment which has been domesticated by the family labourers for the family's own use, profit and enjoyment.

The figure of gentry masculinity depicted by Connell is socially, economically and culturally hegemonic and authoritative; in the novel, how-

[26] See also Bret E. Carroll and Calinda N. Lee, 'Chivalry,' in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004), paragraph 2, https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/masculinities/n43.xml: 'In colonial America, ideals of chivalry were most clearly evident among the southern gentry, who by the early eighteenth century began aspiring to the lifestyle of England's landed aristocracy. Their notions of chivalric guardianship were grounded in their property (land and slaves) and in the racial and gender hierarchies that defined the southern social structure. The ideal southern gentleman and his sons were to protect the honor of their family; the virtue of their mothers, wives, and daughters; and the welfare of their slaves. Sometimes this required the ritualized violent confrontation of the duel'.

[27] Rose, Chapter 5 and Denis Cosgrove, 'Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 10, 1 (1985): p. 45. See the same article for the historical relation, since the Italian Renaissance, between land survey and physical appropriation of space as property on the one hand, and geometry and the measurement of distance, surface and volume on the other hand.

[28] Mitchell, p. 15.

ever, it is parodied by the representation of the protagonist. He has power over the family land, but that power is humorously reduced to skilfully taking advantage of that land and picking out the most appropriate places to have sex. Furthermore, like Connell's model, Walter appears to have strong family ties with his male and female cousins and to capitalise on them; nevertheless, unlike the model, he does not employ them or their acquaintances to advance his political or military career but his erotic interests. His highly sexualised and gendered manliness, founded on gentry masculinity, is built up by making the most of his uncle's family and the natural environment surrounding his uncle's residence. Comically, though, he has a sole aim in mind: the satisfaction of his erotic needs.

One of the privileges of gentry masculinity was sexual freedom and licentiousness, a privilege which was epitomised by the philosophical and anthropological upper-class model of the libertine.[29] Like this figure, Walter's masculinity is focused on the bodily vigour and stamina typical of a healthy young man: this is repeatedly highlighted by his ability to have intercourse with several partners at the same time, or with one immediately after another, and to have multiple orgasms. Moreover, libertine-like, he is portrayed as being familiar with the knacks of a clever sexual partner, such as preserving the knees of his trousers from the green stain of grass during intercourse in the fields and not appearing too late and tired at his relatives' breakfast table after having had sex with one of their guests and their son all night long, tips that he is eager to pass on to his narratee and friends (pp. 5, 38, 143).

In *Sub-Umbra*, however, a few aspects of the libertine and of gender and class relations do not adhere to the model of gentry masculinity; these non-typical behaviours are confirmed by Nelson in a contribution on *The Pearl* discussing

> unfettered sexual expression as a privilege of the upper classes. To associate seduction with 'servant-girls of the lower classes' is to stamp it vulgar and degrading, an activity that the civilized have risen above. To link it, as happens in *The Pearl*, with wealth and power (although not necessarily with masculinity or maturity) makes it an ideal to be emulated. Tellingly, sexual encounters in these narratives are typically consensual and based on mutual desire.[30]

[29] Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [Kindle Edition]).
[30] Claudia Nelson, 'That Other Eden: Adult Education and Youthful Sexuality in *The Pearl*, 1879-1880,' in *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia, and America, 1879-2000*, eds Claudia Nelson and Michelle H. Martin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 24.

Firstly, in the gentry masculinity model, same-class women were the object of domestic domination: their men had legal supremacy over them and the power and right to enforce their obedience. Instead, gentry women in the novel enjoy the same freedom of action and movement as their cousin, brother or hosts and share their pastimes in the country-side; once initiated into the erotic art, they turn out to be nearly as ready and willing as Walter and Frank to appreciate and master it. Secondly, whereas the libertine enjoyed his sexual licence primarily with women of the lower classes, the protagonist does so with his social, economic and cultural peers, particularly with members of his family and closed circle of 'suitable' friends. The depiction of gentry masculinity in the plot therefore consciously lacks the gender and social conflicts inherent in and constitutive of the model. Moreover, if sex with servants is 'vulgar and degrading', the male figures are portrayed as 'civilized', wealthy and powerful young men with refined and sophisticated taste.

4. Conclusions and further research

This chapter on the Victorian erotic novel *Sub-Umbra* has explored its primary naturalistic and sociological topics and the theories to explore them. Firstly, it has treated the strategy of feminising and sexualising the landscape by applying the theoretical model developed by Kolodny and the literary model elaborated by Haggard to *Sub-Umbra* and its narrative. Secondly, the chapter has covered the sociological model of gentry masculinity by comparing the figure of the male gentry member in the novel with the model. Moving from these theoretical models and comparisons, further research on *Sub-Umbra* in particular and Victorian erotica in general may include a closer analysis of the phrases and clauses referring to female genitalia and penetration and intercourse mentioned in Section 2 by means of conceptual metaphor theory.[31] In light of the gentry masculinity model, further research may discuss domestic spaces and landscapes, like homes and gardens, by also utilising Tosh's model of masculinity in the middle-class home in Victorian England.[32]

---

[31] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Bibliography

Adams, James Eli, 'Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin,' *Victorian Studies* 33, 1 (1989): pp. 7-27.

Anonymous author(s) [Potter, William Simpson (ed.)? Sellon, Edward?], *The Romance of Lust* (reprint Ryde: Olympia Press, 2004; first edition, London: Lazenby, 1873-76).

Anonymous authors [Lazenby, William, Douglas, N. et al.], *The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading* (reprint New York: Ballantine, 1996; first edition London: Lazenby, 1879-81).

Barnes, Trevor J. and James S. Duncan (eds), *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Blunt, Alison and Gillian Rose (eds), *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994).

Brulotte, Gaëtan and John Phillips, *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Carroll, Bret E. and Calinda N. Lee, 'Chivalry,' in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004), https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/masculinities/n43.xml.

Connell, R.W., *Masculinities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

Cosgrove, Denis, 'Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 10, 1 (1985): pp. 45-62.

Danahay, Martin A., *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

Haggard, H. Rider, *King Solomon's Mines* (London: Cassell, 1885).

Hall, Martin, 'The Legend of the Lost City; Or, the Man with Golden Balls,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, 2 (1995): pp. 179-99.

Hénaff, Marcel, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [Kindle Edition]).

Kolodny, Annette, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

McClintock, Anne, 'Maidens, Maps and Mines: *King Solomon's Mines* and the Reinvention of Patriarchy in Colonial South Africa,' in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Claremont: David Philip, 1990), pp. 97-124.

Mitchell, William John Thomas, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. William John Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 5-34.

Murphy, Patricia, 'Ecofeminist Whispers: The Interrogation of "Feminine Nature" in Mathilde Blind's Short Poetry,' *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 11, 1 (2015), http://ncgsjournal.com/issue111/murphy.htm.

Nelson, Claudia, 'That Other Eden: Adult Education and Youthful Sexuality in *The Pearl*, 1879-1880,' in *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia, and America, 1879-2000*, eds Claudia Nelson and Michelle H. Martin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 15-32.

Osha, Sanya, 'Unravelling the Silences of Black Sexualities,' *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 62 (2004): pp. 92-8.

Rich, Paul, 'Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, 1 (1982): pp. 54-73.

Rose, Gillian, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

Sigel, Lisa Z., 'The Rise of the Overtly Affectionate Family: Incestuous Pornography and Displaced Desire among the Edwardian Middle Class,' in *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800-2000*, ed. Lisa Z. Sigel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 100-24.

Smart, Graeme and Amelia Yeates (eds), *Critical Survey* 20, 3 (2008), special issue *Victorian Masculinities*.

Soper, Kate, 'Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature,' in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 139-43.

Stiebel, Lindy, 'Imagining Empire's Margins: Land in Rider Haggard's African Romances,' in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation: ASNEL Papers 5*, ed. Lisenotte Glage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 125-40.

Tosh, John, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Virdis, Daniela Francesca, 'Eroticising Female and Male Bodies: A Linguistic Investigation of a Pornographic Novel from the Victorian Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Porn Studies* 2, 1 (2015): pp. 19-34.

———, 'Sexualised Landscapes and Gentry Masculinity in Victorian Scenery: An Ecostylistic Examination of a Pornographic Novel from the Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Journal of Literary Semantics* 48, 2 (2019): pp. 109-28.

———, 'Sexuality, Masculinities & Co. in the Limericks from the Victorian Erotic Magazine *The Pearl*,' *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 23, 1 (2010): pp. 209-34.

MASHING UP JANE AUSTEN'S CLASSICS: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES & MANSFIELD PARK AND MUMMIES

Francesca Guidotti

Drawing on the remix culture techniques and on fan fiction modes of engagement, mash-up literature declaredly transforms masterpieces of world's literature into something new and unexpected 'you'd actually want to read', which is necessarily a way of thinking out of the box. Literary mashups, resulting from the combined action of independent publishers and imaginative contemporary writers, arouse interest in readers as well as critics. Such direct mashups as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and *Mansfield Park and Mummies* (2009) include significant portions of Austen's original novels, with a parodic touch of horror added by co-authors Seth Grahame-Smith and Vera Nazarian. Even though the two books follow different approaches – Nazarian being a passionate Janeite, while Grahame-Smith a former detractor of Austen – and may be regarded either as irreverent reshaping, respectful revival, or both, they turn out to be uncannily consistent with the narrative project of the literary classics they draw from. These mashups heavily rely on Austen's nonreferential aesthetic, since the simultaneous denying and disclosing of crucial historical issues leave gaps in the text to be filled by far-fetched fantasy. As well as providing comic relief, zombies and mummies give shape to the authors' and the readers' anxieties. An analysis of the first chapter of the two mashups, with a focus on style, irony and characterization, will show how the distinctive features of the novel of manners are preserved and updated, to the benefit of a contemporary audience. At the same time, our reading will bring out the gaps that have been so incongruously filled.

Mashup Literature; Pride and Prejudice and Zombies; Mansfield Park and Mummies; Jane Austen; Seth Grahame-Smith; Vera Nazarian

1. *The novel as mashup*

The very recent phenomenon of mashup literature explicitly addresses the issue of 'thinking out of the box' as it creatively deals with both the enduring appeal and the restyling of literary classics. Originally pertaining to the jargon of web design and, above all, of the music and film industry,[1] the term 'mashup' refers to the blending of two or more sourc-

---

[1] Michael Serazio, 'The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music,' *Popular Music and Society* 31, 1 (2008): pp. 79-94.

es into a newly conceived and partly self-standing object. According to Landow, the practice of mashups has always been 'central to our understanding of both media and transmediality',[2] as can be seen in the transition from 'ancient Greek literature, based upon orality, [to] Latin scribal culture', and, eventually, to English printed texts; all the more so now, in the context of contemporary so-called convergence culture, 'where old and new media collide'.[3]

A product of remix culture, now largely brought out of the fringe and into the mainstream, mashups assert their right to quote, remake and re-assemble pre-existing works.[4] They draw on fan culture for their modes of engagement with popular texts, and for their reception practices.[5] With increasing interest, contemporary readers turn to fan fiction 'to explore the range of different uses writers can make of the same materials', as well as 'to see how familiar stories will be retold and what new elements will be introduced'.[6] When the corrosive attitude underlying mix and match techniques is applied productively to literary texts, a genre shift is likely to take place, as is the case of the so called 'monster mashups' *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*[7] and *Mansfield Park and Mummies,*[8] both of which add a touch of horror to the original Austen classics.

Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) is considered the first 'novel as mashup'.[9] It arose from an idea of Jason Rekulak, the editor of the independent Philadelphia-based publisher Quirk Books, founded in 2002 with the mission statement of issuing '25 strikingly un-conventional books per year', stories meant to be

[2] George P. Landow, 'We Have Always Had Mashups, or Mashing Up Transmediality,' *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy* 1 (2015): p. 67.
[3] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
[4] Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 56.
[5] Eckart Voigts-Virchow, 'Pride and Promiscuity and Zombies, or: Miss Austen Mashed Up in the Affinity Spaces of Participatory Culture,' in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 34-56.
[6] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 177.
[7] Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009).
[8] Jane Austen and Vera Nazarian, *Mansfield Park and Mummies: Monster Mayhem, Matrimony, Ancient Curses, True Love, and Other Dire Delights* (Winnetka: Norilana Books, 2009).
[9] Carolyn Kellogg coined the term in her 'Review: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith,' (*Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 2009, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-zombies4-2009apr04-story.html).

'bold, unprecedented, beautifully designed, and affordable'.[10] In imitation of YouTube mashup videos, Rekulak mixed and matched a list of 'popular fanboy characters like ninjas, pirates, zombies, and monkeys with a list of public domain book[s]'[11] until he came to the title *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which he presented to Seth Grahame-Smith, 'a then-32-year-old aspiring screenwriter [who] had already written several books for Quirk',[12] including *How to Survive a Horror Movie* (2007). The writer took on this challenging task and re-read the Jane Austen novel, which he had not touched since he was about fourteen. Like many 14-year-old boys, he had not particularly cared for Elizabeth Bennet's love life and Regency mannerisms, nor for Austen's 19th-century prose, on his first readthrough. But as he 'combed through the text, [he] genuinely began to understand the power and appeal of Austen's work. [He] pasted the text of the original *Pride & Prejudice* into a document on his computer, and began adding in scenes and details — with his font coloured red, of course — to flesh out this alternate history world full of "Unmentionables" and ninja swords'.[13]

Mashup literature therefore stems from a far-sighted publishing industry, capable of imagining new formats and of predicting their profitability, from daring young contemporary writers, ready to provide their critical interpretation of the classics while reshaping them, and from a varied audience, used to re-reading – and sometimes to re-writing – the tradition, in accordance with the practices of the postmodern media circus and with the toolkit of fan culture.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies has gained immense popularity, and its unexpected persistence on *The New York Times* bestseller list for more

---

[10] Quirk books website, https://www.quirkbooks.com/page/about. Quirk Books, now distributed by Penguin Random House, has so far been able to turn out a number of bestsellers, including Ian Doescher's *Shakespeare's Star Wars* pop series (2013-20) – George Lucas's epics retold in the style of the Bard (metre, and stage directions included) – and Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine* series, which Tim Burton adapted into a film in 2016. As regards Austen, Ben H. Winters, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009) was published just a few months after Grahame-Smith's novel; a prequel and a sequel to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Steve Hockensmith were written, respectively, in 2010 (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies Dawn of the Dreadfuls*) and in 2011 (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dreadfully Ever After*).
[11] Camilla Nelson, 'Jane Austen … Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem,' *Adaptation* 6, 3 (2013): p. 339.
[12] Tom Dunn, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*': part 1 of 3, https://www.quirkbooks.com/post/pride-prejudice-zombies-part-1-3.
[13] Dunn, online.

than 50 weeks, along with its film remediation in 2016,[14] sparked a lively scholarly debate. Most reviewers praised Grahame-Smith's prowess in preserving the original, while accentuating both the intrinsic comicality and the problematic nature of the source text.[15] It was recognized that 'the authors of these mashups are simply responding to something already present in Austen; making blatant what she so elegantly obscured'.[16] Therefore, 'the greater achievement' of a mashup was said to 'lie in the satisfying desire it awakens to read the remix and the original side by side'.[17] Grahame-Smith also had to 'face [...] the wrath of Austen fans on blogs',[18] who occasionally accused him of misinterpretation. Some claimed that he 'wrote the book [...] for teenage[rs]',[19] attempting 'to make Austen safe for audiences – read "boys" – raised on "Mortal Kombat" and "Evil Dead"'.[20] The author made no secret of it; in the back-cover of the mashup he acknowledged that he meant to 'transform [...] a masterpiece of world's literature into something you'd actually want to read'. Therefore, in stating that the mashup is designed both for those who like and for those who dislike Austen, positive and negative reviews have all their share of truth.

Many other mashups have been issued following the success of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies.* Published mainly by Quirk, Penguin, Norilana Books, and Total-E-Bound Publishing, these include some romantic and erotic expansions of Austen's novels – peeping through the keyhole, with no parodic intention at all. Interestingly, Austen's works, with their celebrated characterization and dramatic irony, are still the most frequent prey to these transformative aggressions. Various explanations have been put forth. In the first place, Austen's full-length novels are now all in the public domain, which makes it possible to avoid legal action or the payment of royalties to the copyright holder – a crucial issue since direct mashups

---

[14] In 2010 the book was also adapted into a graphic novel by Tony Lee (London: Titan Books).

[15] Nelson, pp. 342-3.

[16] Macy Halford, 'Jane Austen Does the Monster Mash,' *The New Yorker* (4 April 2009), https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/jane-austen-does-the-monster-mash.

[17] Lisa Schwarzbaum, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies,*' *Entertainment Weekly* (25 March 2009), https://ew.com/article/2009/03/25/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies/.

[18] Nelson, p. 341.

[19] Vic Sanborn, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*: Review of a High Concept Parody,' *Jane Austen's World* (4 April 2009), https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2009/04/04/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies-a-review-of-a-high-concept-parody/.

[20] Jennifer Schuessler, 'I Was a Regency Zombie,' *The New York Times* (21 February 2009), https://janeausteninvermont.blog/page/98/?archives-list.

include between 60 and 85 percent of the original text.[21] Also, Austen's rewritings boast a long and encouraging tradition, from Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) to Waterstones' *Austen Project* (2013-16), not to mention an exceptionally vibrant fanfiction online community.[22] The huge marketability of such adaptations 'draws attention to the diverse ways in which the cultural values attached to Austen's work are constantly being altered by the commercial demands of the media industry'.[23] Austen 2.0 belongs, so to speak, to 'intertextual "universes" composed of quotation, pastiche, parody, [and marked by] very little critical distance'.[24]

These explanations, however, account only in part for the preference granted to Austen by so many literary remixes stoked by the siren call of aesthetic contemporaneity. There is something more specific in Austen's masterly style that encourages such daring rewritings, something that makes the risk of impudent genre crossing worth taking. Monsters gain admittance because, in Austen's Regency fiction, there is room for them, there are gaps waiting to be filled. D.A. Miller maintains that Austen's style is 'the result of rigorous selection, exclusion, reduction',[25] and Anne Toner adds that this is 'observed most frequently in her descriptive omissions and evasions of broader socio-historical reference'.[26] Austen's narrative contains hints to crucial historical issues never directly addressed

---

[21] This is the case of all 'direct mashups', such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Mansfield Park and Mummies*. The most popular monster and romance mashups belong to this category, which is therefore often identified with the very idea of mashup literature, not without reason. Strictly speaking, a mashup is made by the incongruous mixture of two or more recognizable sources, one of which, in this specific case, reproduces a large part of the text of one of Austen's novels. Mashup literature may then be considered a very specific phenomenon, different from all other forms of rewritings. Yet, broadly speaking, the label has also been applied to several other categories. They include 'variation mashups' which, at one point, depart from the source novel's narrative to envisage an alternative development. 'Prequel' and 'sequel mashups' include no sections of the original text, as they relate what happened before and after a 'direct mashup'. Other mashups are not based on fictional texts, as in Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* (2010, adapted into a film in 2012), which mixes historical figures and real events with horror formulas. See Amanda Riter, *The Evolution of Mashup Literature: Identifying the Genre through Jane Austen's Novels* (PhD diss., De Montfort University Leicester, 2017).

[22] Maddalena Pennacchia Punzi, *Adattamento, appropriazione, condivisione di un classico:* Pride and Prejudice *di Jane Austen* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2018); Hanne Birk and Marion Gymnich (eds), *Pride and Prejudice 2.0: Interpretations, Adaptations and Transformations of Jane Austen's Classic* (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2015).

[23] Nelson, p. 341.

[24] Voigts-Virchow, p. 37.

[25] D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 34.

[26] Anne Toner, *Jane Austen's Style: Narrative Economy and the Novel's Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 30.

in the text – in *Pride and Prejudice* the presence of the militia alludes to the French Revolution and to the Napoleonic wars, in *Mansfield Park* the plantations in Antigua recall the public and private debate on slavery and slave trade. Such issues are subjected to 'the dynamic of denying and disclosing', typical of the figure of apophasis, 'which occurs when a speaker *tells* what they claim *not* to be telling'.[27] In Mary Poovey's words this can be termed Austen's 'nonreferential aesthetic', a way of 'simultaneously [registering] and [deflecting] attention away from historical realities',[28] which engenders anxiety in an audience 'exposed to the possibility of a discussion of the most serious political and moral concerns',[29] yet forced to recognize that such a discussion has to take place outside the text.

Present-day readers may not be able to identify what is lacking in Austen's novels but are, nevertheless, intuitively aware of the presence of some textual gaps and, in most cases, ready to welcome new hole-filling inclusions. The omission of circumlocuted history can then lead to the incorporation of straightforward fantasy – two things apparently unrelated, though surprisingly interconnected, on a deeper level. Mashups, in fact, can be seen as strangely consistent with Austen's original plan; they come to the reader's aid by providing comic relief – in line with Austen's ironic stance – as well as adding a touch of enjoyable escapism, while at the same time indirectly drawing attention to some crucial aspects of the Regency novels, including the eluded historical problems. But then, which features of the original texts are retained and which are reshaped? Do mashups really help us gain an alternative perspective? Do they shed light on any of Austen's less obvious implications or subtle undertones? To answer these questions we shall examine the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Mansfield Park and Mummies*, where the narrator forms and upholds a pact with the ideal reader.

2. Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

The cover image shows the 'zombification' of the *Portrait of Marcia Fox* by William Beechey, also featuring in the 1983 Penguin edition of Austen's

---

[27] Toner, *Jane Austen's Style*, p. 83.

[28] Mary Poovey, 'From Politics to Silence: Jane Austen's Nonreferential Aesthetic,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 252.

[29] Toner, *Jane Austen's Style*, p. 82.

Emma [fig. 1]. The celebrated incipit of Austen's masterpiece is likewise 'zombified': the opening words, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'[30] now become '*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains*'.[31] At a first glance, both sentences look plausible and straightforward, but they are not; they are ironic in so far as they contradict the reader's experience and expectations.[32] In Regency England the number of women far exceeded that of eligible men: 'odd women' were starting to become a social issue. It is therefore the spinster, and not the bachelor, who 'is in want' of a spouse, as will become apparent from the rest of *Pride and Prejudice*. As Isobel Armstrong puts it:
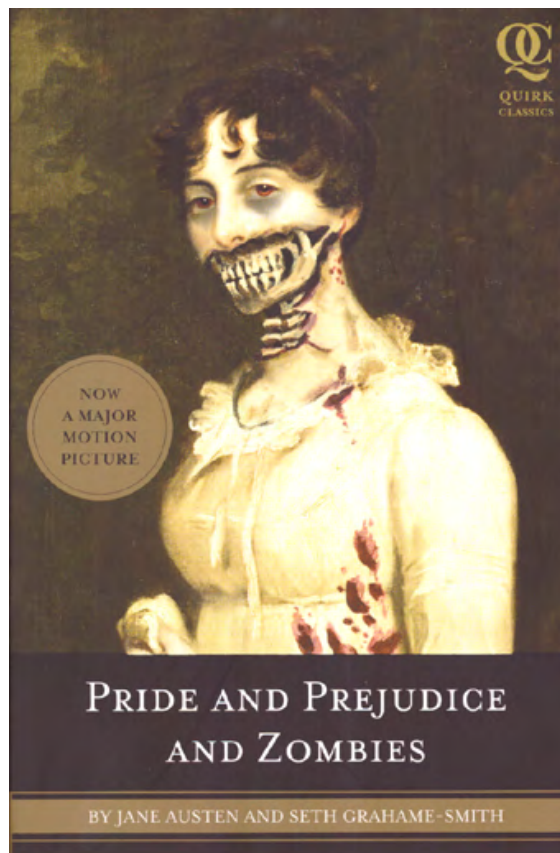
> It seems that the feminine is an intrinsically disruptive category in this novel. [...] It signals excess: the awkwardly Malthusian Mrs. Bennet who can produce only five daughters and not a single son is one form of excess. [...] Too many women are in pursuit of too few men: Miss Bingley, Miss De Bourgh and Elizabeth of Darcy; Jane and Georgiana Darcy of Bingley; Lydia, Miss Bingley (and even Elizabeth for a while) of Wickham.[33]

The reference to zombies is equally misleading for a present-day readership. Readers may be familiar with the idea of zombies eating brains, which has been circulating since Dan O'Bannon's movie *The Return of*

---

[30] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 1.

[31] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 11. All changes and additions to Austen's original texts are italicized.

[32] The contradictory implications of this epigrammatic 'mock aphorism' have been widely discussed among scholars. See Miller, pp. 5-6; William Deresiewicz, 'Community and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*,' in *Jane Austen*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase, 2009), p. 113.

[33] Isobel Armstrong, 'Introduction,' in Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. xxiv.

the Living Dead (1985), but they must surely be aware that zombies are mindless, unthinking, instinctive creatures: brainless beings, hungry for human flesh and bodily organs. Single men are paradoxically equalled to zombies in metaphorical terms, as both are marked by greed and, so to speak, mindlessness; or rather, these attributes are indirectly applied to women, here evoked *in absentia.*

Zombies give shape to present-day anxieties,[34] as well as to the reader's unease with the unfilled gaps in the original text. As in the case of mummies in the *Mansfield Park* mashup, they are not just an incongruous intrusion; for some reasons they are strangely compatible with the original project, as well as responsible for its irreverent actualization. Grahame-Smith playfully claimed that zombies were part of Austen's unconscious plan for the novel:

> When you take a look at the original book, it's almost as if, subconsciously, Jane Austen is laying out the perfect groundwork for an ultraviolent bone-crushing zombie massacre to take place. For instance, there's a regiment of soldiers camped out near the Bennet household. In the book, they're just there for characters to flirt with. But it's not that big a leap to say, Okay, they're there because the countryside has been overrun with what they call the 'unmentionable men'.[35]

As Raymond Williams puts it, 'it is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic wars: the real current of history?'.[36] Other scholars, instead, maintain that 'contemporary readers would have understood from the presence of the army that this was a novel of the post-revolutionary period set during the Napoleonic Wars'.[37] The stormy relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy in some ways foreshadows the French revolutionary conflicts and the final marriage 'is effectively a political agreement between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, embodying a mutual adjustment in which power on the one hand and critique on the other are softened and aestheticized into a harmonious relationship'.[38] The happy union between characters of dif-

---

[34]   Nelson (pp. 338-54) relates zombies to contemporary anxieties about class and race.

[35]   Seth Grahame-Smith, 'Interview', cit. in Ann Marie Adams, 'A Quirk-y Mash-Up of "Two Kinds of Romance" Or, The Unlikely Reanimation of the "Gothick Story" in "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies",' *CEA Critic* 73, 1 (2010): p. 37.

[36]   Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 132.

[37]   Armstrong, 'Introduction,' p. ix.

[38]   Armstrong, 'Introduction,' p. viii.

ferent classes can then be interpreted, figuratively, as a counteragent for revolutionary strife, which has induced critics to propose that Austen was probably consonant with Edmund Burke's famous condemnation of the French Revolution and with his promotion of conservative politics – although she wrote nothing explicit on the subject.[39]

If *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a 'conservative and "anti-Jacobin" novel',[40] the mashup is even more so: greedy zombies are a degraded version of the Third Estate, symbolic villains with no property of their own, constantly and insatiably hungry. These zombies are presented as a mass underclass against whom people must fight; however, 'only the wealthy are able to build dojos, employ armies of ninjas, and devote their time training for combat'.[41] Class concern, a central theme in Austen, can then be put forward as a motivation for speaking of zombies. In the words of Grahame-Smith, 'people in Austen's books are kind of [...] zombies. They live in [a] bubble of extreme wealth and privilege,[42] and they're so preoccupied with the little trivial nothings of their lives'.[43] The zombie menace contributes to update Austen's characterization in ways that are both consistent with an unsophisticated reader's taste and, partly, with the original project, as is manifest right from the start. The first chapter relates mainly the exchanges between Mr and Mrs Bennet, who have utterly contrasting dispositions, as well as divergent world views:

> Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, *and self-discipline*, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. *And when she was nervous – as she was nearly all the time since the first outbreak of the strange plague in her youth – she sought some solace in the comfort of the traditions which now seemed mere trifles to others.*[44]

[39] Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) shaped subsequent conservative thinking. See Mary Spongberg, 'Jane Austen, the 1790s, and the French Revolution,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson, Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 271-81; Chris Danta, 'Revolution at a Distance: Jane Austen and Personalised History,' in *The French Revolution and the British Novel in the Romantic Period*, ed. A.D. Cousins, Dani Napton, Stephanie Russo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 137-51; Dani Napton and A.D. Cousins, 'Counter-Revolutionary Transformations of Charles I in Burke, Austen and Scott,' *Journal of English Studies* 14 (2016): pp. 137-54.
[40] Armstrong, 'Introduction,' p. vii.
[41] Nelson, p. 344.
[42] Speaking of 'extreme wealth and privilege' is even excessive and may therefore sound ironic.
[43] Dunn.
[44] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 12.

Mr Bennet is no longer the apathetic English country gentleman, driven to sarcasm and exasperation by his frivolous wife and difficult daughters; a catching, witty fellow, who turns out to be a weak father, woefully inadequate at coping with critical moments. In the mashup he becomes a man of action, hardened by the trials of war to the point of sounding rude whenever his wife fantasizes about love and marriages, manners and social duties: '*Woman, I am attending to my musket. Prattle on if you must, but leave me to the defense of my estate!*'.[45] On the other hand, Mrs Bennet's fondness for social conventions and her devotion to the cause of marrying her daughters are now driven by escapism. Her hysterical nervous fits are explained as the outbursts of a long-suffering person, prostrated by the zombie menace. So the couple's contending opinions can be confirmed: '*The business of Mr. Bennet's life was to keep his daughters alive.* The business of Mrs Bennet's was to get them married'.[46]

The five daughters, so often described by their father as 'silly' and invariably defended by their mother, undergo a similar change. Mr Bennet would like them to withdraw from social life in order to fight the undead, as Elizabeth will very effectively do, having '*something more of the killer instinct than her sisters*'[47] – which of course explains her father's predilection. As is usual with fan fiction, the mashup 'shift[s] the balance between plot action and characterization, placing emphasis upon moments that define the character relationships rather than using such moments as background or motivation for the dominant plot'[48] – a development much in line with Austen's narrative approach.[49]

The distinctive features of the novel of manners are preserved and updated, to the benefit of a contemporary audience. In a parodic interplay with Austen's novel, new meanings are ascribed to words that convey the ideas of property and propriety, typical of the original his-

---

[45] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 11.
[46] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 13.
[47] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 12.
[48] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 69.
[49] The treatment Austen reserved for plot and characterization is partly similar to that of fan fiction. Scholars have sometimes described her characters as 'flat', 'types' or even 'caricatures'. See A. Walton Litz, 'A Development of Self: Character and Personality in Jane Austen's Fiction,' in *Jane Austen's Achievement. Papers Delivered at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 64-78; Rachel M. Brownstein, 'Character and Caricature: Jane Austen and James Gillray,' *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 37 (2015): pp. 81-105.

torical context.[50] So, for instance, when Mrs Bennet tells her husband that 'Netherfield Park is *occupied again*',[51] we wonder whether it has been taken by a 'horde of the living dead'[52] or by a wealthy bachelor, as is the case. Readers may or may not be aware of the ironical treatment reserved to old-fashioned social habits, much in line with Mr. Bennet's remarks about their unsubstantial conventionality. An overall look at the changes is quite revealing: the short opening chapter becomes even shorter in the mashup; dialogue is even more fast-paced, and characterization is clear-cut from the beginning. When set side-by-side to Austen's original, everything becomes even quicker, shorter, clearer, but then again *Pride and Prejudice* was already 'an experiment in brevity, a work of contraction'.[53] In its 'zombified' version, the mashup retains and emphasizes many of the features which made *Pride and Prejudice* the most celebrated of Austen's novels, including a perfect romantic comedy heroine who annihilates the zombies with her deadly martial arts moves, but must in the end recognize that love is the '*only force more powerful than any warrior*'.[54]

3. Mansfield Park and Mummies: Monster Mayhem, Matrimony, Ancient Curses, True Love, and Other Dire Delights

Vera Nazarian, a Russian-born American writer of fantasy and science fiction, wrote *Mansfield Park and Mummies* in open reaction to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*:[55]

> When that zombies parody of *Pride and Prejudice* came out, I was actually fired up. The idea was great but the execution sloppy. I knew I could absolutely do better, because I was [...] a true fan of classic literature [...], and I admired and loved the spirit of Austen, with every intention of retaining it in my mashup. [...] My primary goal [...] is to remain absolutely true to Austen in style and tone, while adding in the period-appropriate fantasy elements and enhancing

---

[50] Edward Neill, *The Politics of Jane Austen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 51-69.
[51] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 11.
[52] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 11.
[53] Toner, *Jane Austen's Style*, p. 31.
[54] Austen and Grahame-Smith, p. 321.
[55] Nazarian, twice nominated for a Nebula Award, is also the independent publisher of Norilana Books. She has written and published several works of fiction, including three novels in the Norilana's 'Supernatural Jane Austen Series': *Mansfield Park and Mummies* (2009), *Northanger Abbey and Angels and Dragons* (2010) and *Pride and Platypus: Mr. Darcy's Dreadful Secret* (2012). Nazarian's novels sometimes react to erotic mashups by inserting 'scholarly footnotes', a sort of humorous admonishments to prurient readers.

and ramping up the already funny elements with a sense of sudden joyful mayhem.[56]

The choice of *Mansfield Park*, certainly not the easiest of Austen's novels, is noteworthy: Nazarian consciously opted for a work that, unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, had long been neglected and underrated by the general public, but which she liked the best.[57] The two books have in fact been compared and contrasted in a number of studies, which underline how their heroines – Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price – could hardly be more different.[58] According to Nazarian, Elizabeth corresponds to the 'feisty' heroine that 'modern readers tend to prefer': a 'sassy, outgoing, aggressive, and assertive [sort of] female super hero',[59] even more so in Grahame-Smith's mashup. Fanny is instead

> not flashy, and her strength is quiet, humble, unpresuming. She is not so much prissy or prudish […] as simply unwilling to compromise her beliefs […]. It's just that her *cause* is not as 'trendy' or *appealing* to our modern standards. Fanny stands up for spiritual and moral integrity, while Elizabeth for personal freedom and choices.[60]

Fanny has been described as 'almost totally passive', 'a girl who triumphs by doing nothing [, who] sits, […] waits, […] endures' and in the end is rewarded 'not so much for her vitality as for her extraordinary immobility'.[61]

In a novel about 'rest and restlessness, stability and change – the moving and the immovable'[62], a revived mummy is quite apt and to the point. This is not, however, the only monster in the mashup: a werewolf and a vampire are listed among the 'Other Dire Delights' mentioned in its subtitle. These horrid intrusions are all, to some extent, consistent with the

---

[56] Emily C.A. Snyde, 'Teatime Ten: Vera Nazarian' (20 September 2011), http://emilycasnyder. blogspot.com/2011/09/teatime-ten-vera-nazarian.htm.

[57] Sanborn.

[58] Barbara K. Seeber, '*Mansfield Park/Pride and Prejudice*,' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15, 2 (2003): pp. 324-26; Yuko Ikeda, 'From "Liveliness" to "Tranquillity": A Lexical Approach to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*,' in *Stylistic Studies of Literature*, ed. Masahiro Hori, Tomoji Tabata, Sadahiro Kumamoto (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 33-51; Julia Prewitt Brown, 'Questions of Interiority: From *Pride and Prejudice* to *Mansfield Park*,' in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's* Mansfield Park, ed. Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2014), pp. 116-22.

[59] Sanborn.

[60] Sanborn.

[61] Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (London: Palgrave, 2007), p. 143.

[62] Tanner, p. 145.

original project. Maybe Austen was preparing the ground for them when she expressed her dissatisfaction with *Pride and Prejudice* in the famous letter she wrote to her sister Cassandra at the time she was completing *Mansfield Park*: 'The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story'.[63] Yet Nancy Armstrong rightly maintains that, in that letter, Austen 'came no closer to identifying that missing element than expressing a regret that she hadn't included something external to the plot or even to the novel itself'.[64]

The title of the mashup heralds an incongruous juxtaposition, plainly exposed in the book cover illustration, drawn by Nazarian herself: in the foreground, two Regency women, taken from George Goodwin Kilburne's *Miss Pinkerton's Academy*; in the background, the images of Nefertari and Ra, with hieroglyphs, as painted on the Luxor tomb of the Ancient Egyptian queen [fig. 2]. Every monster in the mashup seems to offer an explanation for some of the characters' traits: Lady Bertram's unnatural placidity is allegedly caused by the mummy's magic spell; aunt Norris – a human being with an inner wolfish self – cannot of course avoid hypocrisy; Mary Crawford behaves quite predictably like a selfish and heartless vampire. And Fanny – the reincarnation of a deceased pharaoh's bride whom he longs to be reunited with, once restored to life – has to make a choice between two incompatible worlds, and several

---

[63] Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813, https://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/auslet22.html.

[64] Nancy Armstrong, 'The Gothic Austen,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 246. According to Toner, in the letter 'Austen […] comments on […] practical matters', such as 'the value or otherwise of matter extraneous to the story' (*Jane Austen's Style*, p. 2).

irreconcilable models of masculinity. As Nazarian points out: 'the new inserted storyline must enhance the development of the existing characters. [...] To properly work on a deeper cohesion level, every appearance of these new elements has to be a logical and organic extension of the main plot'.[65]

Mummies also work as an open reference to Egyptomania.[66] In the aftermath of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, and on the eve of the opening of the Suez Canal, many antiquities had been brought to Europe and were displayed in public events, such as mummy unwrapping parties. That was also the time when the question of the race of ancient Egyptians was raised, with some scientists and archaeologists maintaining that the founders of such an impressive civilization must necessarily be the white descendants of a European Nubian population, while others asserted that they were an indigenous black offspring of the African continent. The mashup is set against the background of these historical issues, shedding more light on Austen's ambiguously Eurocentric narrative set around the year 1807, when the slave trade in the British Empire was officially abolished and the debate on slavery was a hot topic indeed.[67]

In volume II, chapter III, Fanny reports that when she addressed Sir Thomas – an absentee plantation owner just returned from Antigua – asking about the slave trade, her inquiry fell into 'dead silence'.[68] According to Toner, 'that the subject is reported rather than dramatized makes the scene doubly reflective on the subject of closure and negation [as the] reasons for the 'dead silence' are left enigmatically unexplained'.[69] This is one more instance of nonreferential aesthetic, a new blatant historical

---

[65] Sanborn.

[66] For a discussion of Egyptomania as a Romantic, Regency and Victorian phenomenon, see James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994). Nazarian insists that zombies are not consistent with the original historical context, whereas mummies are: 'During the nineteenth century, Egyptology was "all the rage", and archaeology was just taking off in Britain and Europe. Unlike the more anachronistic and jarring silliness of other "creature" monsters, mummies actually made perfect historical sense and fit right in' (Sanborn).

[67] Scholars maintain that the action takes place between 1803 and 1809. See Moira Ferguson, '*Mansfield Park*: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender,' *Oxford Literary Review, Neocolonialism* 13 (1991): pp. 118-39; Joseph Lew, '"That Abolitionist Traffic": *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 498-510; George E. Boulukos, 'The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39, 3 (2006), pp. 361-83.

[68] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 136.

[69] Toner, *Jane Austen's Style*, p. 81.

omission to interpret, or rather a gap to fill. Edward Said claimed that Austen was heavily involved in the 'domestic imperialist culture' and described her as 'white, privileged, insensitive, complicit',[70] while other scholars see things the other way round, considering Fanny – as well as the author – 'unmistakably a friend of the abolition'.[71]

There is an indirect connection between slaves and mummies since the arguments concerning the race of the ancient Egyptians were later resumed in the course of the debate over slavery in the United States, Nazarian's adopted country. The mighty pharaoh's mummy who, risen from the grave, bewitches the minds and ensnares the senses of an entire English household – possibly a symbol of reverse imperialism – is utterly powerless in the presence of Fanny, whom he leaves free to choose another partner.[72] The issue of race, then, is strictly intertwined with that of gender, as anticipated by the first chapter of the mashup.

As is typical of Austen's irony, the opening of *Mansfield Park* is marked by parallels and contrasts, which the mashup incorporates and further develops:

> *About three thousand years ago, an Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, with infinite riches of his kingdom surrounding him, had the bad luck to die, be embalmed, mummified and then sealed up in his great tomb among the sands of Lower Egypt, and to be thereby raised to the rank of eternity and, quite possibly, deity.*
> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds *and nary a kingdom or sand granule in sight,* had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income.[73]

The incipit of *Mansfield Park*, sometimes described as Austen's most serious novel,[74] lacks the levity of *Pride and Prejudice*, although it explicitly addresses similar social issues. Fanny's arrival at Sir Thomas and

[70] Edward Said, 'Jane Austen and Empire,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 492, 493.

[71] Brian Southam, 'The Silence of the Bertrams,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 498.

[72] As will be made clear, this is something more than just drawing a parallel between the condition of women and that of slaves. The problem here is not just female oppression, as in some other of Austen's novels. See Vivien Jones, 'Feminisms,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 284.

[73] Austen and Nazarian, p. 7.

[74] Lionel Trilling, 'Mansfield Park,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 423.

Lady Bertram's estate is preceded by the report of what had happened, thirty years before, to the previous generation of women in her family, starting from the luckiest girl, Maria, who had married a wealthy baronet, also willing, in the mashup, to finance her expensive tastes in Egyptology. The added reference to ancient Egypt emphasizes the humorous detachment already implicit in the retrospective tone of the narrator: a third-person omniscient voice which questions the desirability of the social advancement the story ironically eulogizes. The prominence given to the term 'rank' in the two texts is symptomatic in this respect, for the 'rank of eternity' is compared to that of 'a baronet's lady', which suggests an analogy between marriage and death, along with that between marriage and deity. In terms that are reminiscent of the mythological contentions between Horus and Seth, the mummy's younger brothers are then set side by side with Miss Maria's sisters, who are less fortunate than she is: Mrs. Norris, married to a man of God, soon discovers that a satisfactory income is far more desirable than divine favour. Mrs. Price – Fanny's mother – who openly defies social norms and family expectations by wedding a penniless drunken soldier and subsequently giving birth to no less than nine children, is later forced to beg for her sisters' forgiveness and financial support. They are, of course, responsible for their own actions and choices, but destiny plays its part too.

A sentence in the mashup recalls the famous first words of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'But *whether three thousand or merely thirty years ago,* there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty *(and decidedly unmummified)* women to deserve them'.[75] This sentence endows gender issues with new bodily and vital connotations: women are healthy, lively, energetic precisely in so far as they lack a class-defining status; this makes them apt to challenge the fossilized status quo. Nothing can be more unlike a mummified carcass than a 'robust living female',[76] as Fanny's story will later show. Somehow in between 'the physical and intellectual immobility of Lady Bertram and the restless energy of the Crawfords, Tom and Maria Bertram, and Mrs. Norris', Fanny will appear as 'the person who is mobile but who moves in such a way as to foster group harmony rather than to satisfy personal desires'.[77]

---

[75] Austen and Nazarian, p. 7.
[76] Austen and Nazarian, p. 9.
[77] David Monaghan, 'Reinventing Fanny Price: Patricia Rozema's Thoroughly Modern *Mansfield Park*,' *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40, 3 (2007): p. 90.

A satire of public and private philanthropy is then implicit, as in the following passage where Mrs. Norris' feigned activism prompts her to a dramatic outburst about the disastrous consequences of her sister's behaviour:

> Mrs. Norris had a spirit of activity, *not to mention a vaguely wolfish streak,* which could not be satisfied till she had written a long and angry letter to Fanny, to point out the folly of her conduct, and threaten her with all its possible ill consequences – *palsy, the poor house, rabid creature bites, the cut complete.*[78]

Mrs Norris, a lycanthropic personification of hypocrisy, refers to poor houses as a menace instead of as a source of charitable relief. In a chapter which describes Fanny's abrupt separation from her overburdened and destitute family as a solicitous act of kindness, opportunism and self-interest are always to the fore.[79]

In the mashup, Lady Bertram's ridiculous Egyptomania provides ample opportunities to unscrupulous profiteers. For instance, in her self-concerned reconciliation letter, Mrs Price casually mentions that her eldest boy longs 'to be out in the world, *sailing the seas or perchance digging up Egypt*',[80] and Mrs Norris, wishing to be dispensed from the burden of maintaining her niece, invites the Bertrams to 'give [the] girl an education, *by all means, then send her off to harvest Egypt if it pleases—*'.[81] It is by setting it against this background that Fanny's disinterested attachment and her devotion to common concern can be more clearly brought out.

In conclusion, we may say that the first chapter of *Mansfield Park* conjures up elusively ideological tangles which are crucial for the subsequent development of the story and therefore admit no substantial shortening. The opening paragraphs define Austen's work as a novel of manners dealing with social customs, values, and codes which present-day readers may perceive as distant in space and time.[82] In writing the mashup, Nazarian knew that the original horizon of expectations was not to be eluded, and yet the popular appeal could be enhanced by resorting to a

---

[78] Austen and Nazarian, p. 9.
[79] As Nazarian puts it, 'Fanny is genuinely perceptive, and able to 'read' the true character and motives of others' (Sanborn).
[80] Austen and Nazarian, p. 10.
[81] Austen and Nazarian, p. 11.
[82] The style of *Mansfield Park* is no longer marked by brevity, also because of the pervasive influence of Samuel Richardson, which Jocelyn Harris discusses in *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 44-5.

hybrid form, capable of addressing a wide variety of readers. She was therefore forced to anticipate a subplot which, at a later time, would be reconnected to the main narrative, but which, for the time being, might look incongruous. Hence the warning: *'But, speaking of mummies, dear Reader, we are getting somewhat ahead of ourselves—'*,[83] *'but oh, mustn't get ahead of ourselves'*.[84] Such intrusions, or asides, break the narrative flow to address the readers directly; they take the audience's expectations into due account, as they promise that the action missing so far will soon materialize. In the terms of narratology, these are instances of prolepsis, a flash forward. The intrusions work as an anticipation of things to come: readers may either decide to skip the first chapter, if they find it tedious or ill-suited to their tastes, or hopefully go ahead, knowing that mummies and mysteries will soon abound. Prolepsis emphasizes the novelties introduced in the mashup while confirming its substantial consistency with the original Austen classic.

The narrator's intrusions make use of the rhetorical device of apophasis since these statements bring up the ancient Egyptian theme while, at the same time, denying that it should ever be mentioned. This is much in line with Austen's style, which is permeated by 'silence, reticence and omission' and full of apophatic utterances.[85] At the level of both form and content, Austen's narration constantly seems to pass by, or take no notice of, aspects that will later prove crucial to interpretation. Pretended ellipses are a major constituent of these classics, uniquely marked by 'political silences, omitting, or submerging, an engagement with the most momentous or fraught political contexts of the day'.[86] Monster mashups heavily rely on that. Far from simply averting attention from what is omitted, they point at the gaps that have been so incongruously filled. And this, of course, means thinking 'outside the box', as mashups invariably do.[87]

---

[83] Austen and Nazarian, p. 8.

[84] Austen and Nazarian, p. 9.

[85] Anne Toner, 'Apophatic Austen: Speaking about Silence in Austen's Fiction,' *XVII-XVIII Revue de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 73 (2016), https://journals.opendition.org/1718/739.

[86] Toner, 'Apophatic Austen'.

[87] When asked to give some advice to contemporary writers, Nazarian said: 'Be persistent and don't be afraid to think outside the box' (Lazette Gifford, 'An Interview with Vera Nazarian', *Vision: A Resource for Writers* 2002, http://www.fmwriters.com/Visionback/issue8/Interview.htm).

Bibliography

Adams, Ann Marie, 'A Quirk-y Mash-Up of "Two Kinds of Romance" Or, The Unlikely Reanimation of the "Gothick Story" in "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies",' *CEA Critic* 73, 1 (2010): pp. 34-50.

Armstrong, Nancy, 'The Gothic Austen,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 237-47.

Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

———, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998).

Austen, Jane and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009).

Austen, Jane and Vera Nazarian, *Mansfield Park and Mummies: Monster Mayhem, Matrimony, Ancient Curses, True Love, and Other Dire Delights* (Winnetka: Norilana Books, 2009).

Birk, Hanne and Marion Gymnich (eds), *Pride and Prejudice 2.0: Interpretations, Adaptations and Transformations of Jane Austen's Classic* (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2015).

Boulukos, George E., 'The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39, 3 (2006): pp. 361-83.

Brown, Julia Prewitt, 'Questions of Interiority: From *Pride and Prejudice* to *Mansfield Park*,' in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's* Mansfield Park, ed. Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2014), pp. 116-22.

Brownstein, Rachel M., 'Character and Caricature: Jane Austen and James Gillray,' *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 37 (2015): pp. 81-105.

Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Curl, James Stevens, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

Danta, Chris, 'Revolution at a Distance: Jane Austen and Personalised History,' in *The French Revolution and the British Novel in the Romantic Period*, ed. A.D. Cousins, Dani Napton, Stephanie Russo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 137-51.

Deresiewicz, William, 'Community and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*,' in *Jane Austen*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase, 2009), pp. 113-44.

Doescher, Ian, *William Shakespeare's Star Wars* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2013).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Empire Striketh Back: Star Wars Part the Fifth* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2014).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Jedi Doth Return: Star Wars Part the Sixth* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2014).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Phantom of Menace: Star Wars Part the First* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2015).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Clone Army Attacketh: Star Wars Part the Second* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2015).

———, *William Shakespeare's Tragedy of the Sith's Revenge: Star Wars Part the Third* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2015).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Force Doth Awaken: Star Wars Part the Seventh* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2017).

———, *William Shakespeare's Jedi the Last: Star Wars Part the Eighth* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2018).

———, *William Shakespeare's The Merry Rise of Skywalker: Star Wars Part the Ninth* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2020).

Dunn, Tom, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*', https://www.quirkbooks.com/post/pride-prejudice-zombies-part-1-3.

Ferguson, Moira, '*Mansfield Park*: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender,' *Oxford Literary Review, Neocolonialism* 13 (1991), pp. 118-39.

Gifford, Lazette, 'An Interview with Vera Nazarian,' *Vision: A Resource for Writers* 2002), http://www.fmwriters.com/Visionback/issue8/Interview.htm.

Halford, Macy, 'Jane Austen Does the Monster Mash,' *The New Yorker* (4 April 2009), https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/jane-austen-does-the-monster-mash.

Harris, Jocelyn, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Hockensmith, Steve, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies Dawn of the Dreadfuls* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2010).

———, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dreadfully Ever After* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011).

Ikeda, Yuko, 'From "Liveliness" to "Tranquillity": A Lexical Approach to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*,' in *Stylistic Studies of Literature*, ed. Masahiro Hori, Tomoji Tabata, Sadahiro Kumamoto (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 33-51.

Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

———, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge 2012).

Jones, Vivien, 'Feminisms,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 282-303.

Kellogg, Carolyn, 'Review: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith', *Los Angeles Times* (4 April 2009), https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-zombies4-2009apr04-story.html.

Landow, George P., 'We Have Always Had Mashups, or Mashing Up Trans-

mediality,' *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy* 1 (2015): pp. 67-83.

Lee, Tony, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (London: Titan Books, 2010).

Lessig, Lawrence, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

Lew, Joseph, '"That Abolitionist Traffic": *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 498-510.

Litz, A. Walton, 'A Development of Self: Character and Personality in Jane Austen's Fiction,' in *Jane Austen's Achievement. Papers Delivered at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 64-78.

Miller, D.A., *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Monaghan, David, 'Reinventing Fanny Price: Patricia Rozema's Thoroughly Modern *Mansfield Park*,' *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40, 3 (2007): pp. 85-101.

Napton, Dani and Cousins, A.D., 'Counter-Revolutionary Transformations of Charles I in Burke, Austen and Scott,' *Journal of English Studies* 14 (2016), pp. 137-54.

Nazarian, Vera, *Northanger Abbey and Angels and Dragons* (Winnetka: Norilana Books, 2010).

———, *Pride and Platypus: Mr. Darcy's Dreadful Secret* (Winnetka: Norilana Books, 2012).

Neill, Edward, *The Politics of Jane Austen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

Nelson, Camilla, 'Jane Austen... Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem,' *Adaptation* 6, 3 (2013): pp. 338-54.

Pennacchia Punzi, Maddalena, *Adattamento, appropriazione, condivisione di un classico:* Pride and Prejudice *di Jane Austen* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2018).

Poovey, Mary, 'From Politics to Silence: Jane Austen's Nonreferential Aesthetic,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 251-60.

Riggs, Ransom, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011).

———, *Hollow City: The Second Novel of Miss Peregrine's Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2014).

———, *Library of Souls: The Third Novel of Miss Peregrine's Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia, Quirk Books, 2015).

Riter, Amanda, *The Evolution of Mashup Literature: Identifying the Genre through Jane Austen's Novels* (PhD diss., De Montfort University Leicester, 2017).

Said, Edward, 'Jane Austen and Empire,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 490-93.

Sanborn, Vic, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*: Review of a High Concept Parody,' *Jane Austen's World* (4 April 2009), https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2009/04/04/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies-a-review-of-a-high-concept-parody/.

Schuessler, Jennifer, 'I Was a Regency Zombie,' *The New York Times* (21 February 2009), https://janeausteninvermont.blog/page/98/?archives-list.

Schwarzbaum, Lisa, '*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies,*' *Entertainment Weekly* (25 March 2009), https://ew.com/article/2009/03/25/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies/.

Seeber, Barbara K., '*Mansfield Park/Pride and Prejudice,*' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15, 2 (2003), pp. 324-26.

Serazio, Michael, 'The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music,' *Popular Music and Society* 31, 1 (2008): pp. 79-94.

Snyde, Emily C.A., 'Teatime Ten: Vera Nazarian,' (20 September 2011), http://emilycasnyder.blogspot.com/2011/09/teatime-ten-vera-nazarian.htm.

Southam, Brian, 'The Silence of the Bertrams,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 493-98.

Spongberg, Mary, 'Jane Austen, the 1790s, and the French Revolution,' in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson, Clara Tuite (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 271-81.

Tanner, Tony, *Jane Austen* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

Toner, Anne, 'Apophatic Austen: Speaking about Silence in Austen's Fiction,' *XVII-XVIII Revue de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 73 (2016), https://journals.openedition.org/1718/739.

Toner, Anne, *Jane Austen's Style: Narrative Economy and the Novel's Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Trilling, Lionel, 'Mansfield Park,' in Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 423-34.

Voigts-Virchow Eckart, 'Pride and Promiscuity and Zombies, or: Miss Austen Mashed Up in the Affinity Spaces of Participatory Culture,' in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 34-56.

Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Winters, Ben H., *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009).

Filmography

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter, directed by Timur Bekmambetov (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2012).

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, directed by Tim Burton (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2016).

PPZ - Pride + Prejudice + Zombies, directed by Burr Steers (Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2016).

The Return of the Living Dead, directed by Dan O'Bannon (Los Angeles: Orion Pictures, 1985).

II.
TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MODERNISM

CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE: THE GOLDEN AGE OF DETECTIVE FICTION AS LOWBROW MODERNISM

Debora A. Sarnelli

This essay investigates how both the Golden Age of detective fiction and literary Modernism offer diverse narrative responses to the deep social and historical changes occurring in the aftermath of the Great War. They both developed out of a desire to break away from the conventions of previously established literature. Just as modernist literature rose in response to the Victorian plot structures that dominated the previous century, the whodunit distinguishes itself, in some respects, from the detective literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, showing features that critics regarded as distinctly modernist. Among them, the unreliable narrator, the decline of the detective from a superhero to a feminised ironic figure, multiple perspectives, the feeling of loss of control over daily experiences, the ephemerality of human relationships, the unhomely and the defamiliarization of the knowable are also the prime markers of the Golden Age. Although the whodunit never mentions the fragmentation and the precarious stability of the interwar years, the uncertainties of an elusive epoch are embedded within the novels. The contradictions of a slippery reality coexist with the nostalgia for a past where the self was cohesive and reality was fully knowable and understandable. The utopian universe the whodunit depicts, where order and stability are temporarily resumed in the last chapter, becomes an escape from the anxieties of that period. The happy conclusion, however, is revealed as an illusion; it provides a provisional and fragile relief from post-war fragmented modernity.

Golden Age; Modernism; Interwar Fiction; Genre Fiction; Popular Literature

The phrase 'the Golden Age' refers to a type of detective fiction in vogue during the interbellum period. Howard Haycraft is generally regarded as the first writer to use the expression, dating the Golden Age from 1918 to 1930.[1] In his history of the detective story, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, Julian Symons devotes two chapters to the Golden Age, which he identifies with the 1920s and 1930s.[2] Though critics commonly regard the outbreak of World War II as its end, several writers continued writing in the Golden Age style after 1939. The Golden Age

---

[1] Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Appleton, 1941).
[2] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), pp. 104, 123.

whodunit asserted its supremacy among the other detective subgenres in the years when literary experimentalism was shaping the modernist movement. Although the years between the two World Wars were not so golden from a political and historical point of view, they proved to be fruitful for both the production of detective fiction and literary Modernism. However, they have frequently been viewed as situated on either side of that cultural chasm that Andreas Huyssen has categorized as the Great Divide: while Modernism has been regarded as an elite cultural movement, the Golden Age has been often perceived as culturally conservative and formulaic, a simple commercial exercise meant for a much broader reading public.

In recent decades, the Great Divide scholars placed between high Modernism and popular culture perceived as Modernism's other, has started to weaken. As Huyssen asserts in *After the Great Divide*, 'boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred'.[3] In the wake of several studies on the engagement of Modernism with popular culture, this article aims at investigating the affinities between the Golden Age – in particular through a selection of Agatha Christie's novels – and the modernist literary movement, considering that they both contributed to the rich novelistic production of the interwar years.

Both the whodunit and the modernist novel break away from the conventions of the previous literary tradition. Just as modernist literature rose in response to the Victorian plot structures that dominated the previous century, the whodunit distinguishes itself, in some respects, from the detective literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, showing features that critics regarded as distinctly modernist. Among them, the unreliable narrator, multiple perspectives, the feeling of loss of control over daily experiences, the ephemerality of human relationships and the defamiliarization of the knowable are also the prime markers of the Golden Age. In her ground-breaking study of Christie as a 'popular modernist', Alison Light writes of how Golden Age detective fiction, commonly associated with the old-fashioned and the nostalgia,

> began life as a modernising, de-sacramentalising form, emancipating itself from the literary lumber of the past. In popular fiction as much as in high culture, older models were to be self-consciously redeployed, parodied, pastiched, pilloried. We might expect the literature of crime in particular, which

---

[3] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. IX.

had formerly been the place of violence and male heroics, to be particularly traumatised by war.[4]

It is in this context that Christie started writing. When she published *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920 – the novel was completed in 1916 but she struggled to find a publisher – she presented to her readers a radically new form of detective fiction: a longer plot with a subplot, multiple suspects, a domestic setting and a new type of detective. Despite some evident debts towards the previous detective tradition, Christie already sounded a modern note in this first detective novel. Modernity and innovation in Christie lie in her use of irony and of comedy, which mocks the previous genre conventions and lightens the mood of the novels. With Christie, the genre acquires a comic trait. Her debut novel shapes both the detective and the sidekick as comic figures. The first description of Hercule Poirot is very meaningful in terms of the portrayal of the character. He makes his debut as a 'quaint dandified little man', 'five feet four inches' in height, and with a pair of waxed moustaches 'stiff and military'[5] looking. His manners reinforce his foreignness. He greets Hastings kissing him warmly, he makes up funny phrases and gets mad at himself when missing a clue. When describing Hastings, the words that recur are confused, agitated and excited.[6] Hastings is left in the dark as to what Poirot is up to. The discrepancy between the two is strengthened by their divergent behaviours: eccentricity, order, neatness belong to Poirot, while insecurity, blindness and an inability to understand facts characterize Hastings. However, while Poirot accompanies Christie throughout her entire career, Hastings – ironically portrayed as a heedless sidekick – is elegantly removed in later novels. Their Holmes-Watson relationship breaks in *Murder on the Links* (1923). The duo splits and Poirot is left alone to deal with future murder cases. Christie banishes Hastings to Argentina and employs other characters as narrators.

Poirot, an ageing Belgian bourgeois, discloses a mix of exotic and comic traits. He represents the modernist detective, the anti-hero who is socially and geographically an outsider within the British society he helps. While Holmes is portrayed as a superhero, the embodiment of masculinity and bravery, Poirot reveals feminine traits and a buffoonish

---

[4] Alison Light, *Forever England. Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 66.
[5] Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 20.
[6] Christie, *Styles*, p. 34.

exterior. According to Stephen Knight,[7] Poirot's feminine traits are best represented in his attention to domestic detail. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* – Christie's first successful novel published in 1926 – the narrator Dr Sheppard provides a ridiculous sketch of Poirot, a 'strange little man' with 'an egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches and a pair of watchful eyes',[8] who is comically throwing vegetable marrows over the garden wall. His excessive manners and his strong Belgian accent accentuate the gap between himself and the social class he finds himself in. The narrative voice in *Murder in Mesopotamia* – the British nurse Amy Leatheran – is shocked by Poirot's foreignness ('I hadn't expected him to be quite as foreign as he was'),[9] and emphasizes his comic figure by ironically comparing him to a 'hairdresser in a comic play'.[10] Sally Munt notes the comic connotation of Poirot's name, defining him 'a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercule and a poirot – a clown'.[11] His role as an outsider constitutes a powerful disguise. He may look ridiculous, naïve and silly, but this is a mask that hides his vigorous reasoning powers. Whereas Sherlock Holmes belongs to the social class he protects – although he is an antisocial detective – Christie shapes a detective who also geographically epitomizes a stranger and, in many respects, an outsider. He is a Belgian refugee repeatedly mistaken for French and an experienced traveller. He travels from the centre to the periphery of the Empire, between the domestic domain – Great Britain – and the world. With the figure of Poirot, Christie destabilizes the Victorian obsession with domesticity and the private, which had emerged out of both colonialism and the fear of the stranger. Poirot embodies a parody of masculinity and a parody of Englishness.

Although in many ways different from Poirot, Miss Marple, a 'white-haired' provincial spinster 'with a gentle, appealing manner',[12] also embodies anti-heroic qualities and experiences marginalization. Despite her belonging to British society, Miss Marple's age, gender, social and marital status place her in a marginal position within St Mary Mead. For the

---

[7] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 117-19.

[8] Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 19.

[9] Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 97.

[10] Christie, *Mesopotamia*, p. 94.

[11] Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 8.

[12] Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 514.

villagers she is a 'nasty old cat'[13] and the local police constantly exclude her from their investigations. She relies on gossip as her personal investigative method and combines it with traditionally feminine domestic activities, like gardening and knitting. As the vicar declares in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930): 'There is no detective in England equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands'.[14] Miss Marple is a liminal figure, both an outsider and an insider.

Interbellum fiction, both modernist and detective, centres on anti-heroism, as the tremendous loss of human lives during the Great War had proved the failure of the infallible masculine hero, feeding that sense of discontinuity between pre-war and post-war constructions of masculinity. The war had produced a crisis of the Victorian and Edwardian expectations of manliness. Literary characters have little, or better, nothing heroic. They possess human vulnerabilities and embody the common person. While in the Golden Age anti-heroic qualities are reinforced through comic traits, the modernist anti-hero, symbol of a fragmented reality, possesses human insecurities and embodies the impossibility of social belonging.

Likewise, narrative unreliability is a technique that smooths the gap between Modernism and the Golden Age. Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* is often quoted as a classic example of unreliable narration, and one of the first English modernist novels. John Dowell recollects the tragic story of the friendship between himself, his wife and an English couple. Unlike the Victorian omniscient narrator, Dowell uses digressions, postponements, reversals, forgets details, repeats and contradicts himself and withholds information: 'I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way'.[15] The use of expressions such as 'I suppose', 'I don't know', 'I think', 'I mean', 'I don't think', reinforces the ambiguity of his narrative. According to Paola Pugliatti, Dowell narrates the events as if he were at a psychoanalytic session therapy, imagining himself talking to a silent listener.[16] His story seems to recollect the confession of a murderer.

Omissions and gaps are equally employed by the narrator of *The Murder or Roger Ackroyd*. The novel, a classic example of unreliable narration,

---

[13] Christie, *Vicarage*, p. 519.
[14] Christie, *Vicarage*, pp. 527-8.
[15] Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2010), p. 134.
[16] Paola Pugliatti, '*The Good Soldier* e la riflessione sul romanzo,' in *Scrittura e sperimentazione in Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini, Vita Fortunati (Firenze: Alinea, 1994), pp. 114-16.

recreates a game between the narrator and the reader based on deception and a clever use of language. The story is told by Dr Sheppard who functions as the Watson of the story (Poirot appoints him as his sidekick). Readers trust him for his social status (the social position he holds as the only doctor in the small village he inhabits) and for his privileged role as the narrator. Sheppard manipulates words to conceal his involvement in the murder: 'Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts'.[17] He never lies to the reader, he just leaves gaps. He omits what he considers unnecessary and disguises the truth through a sharp selection of words: 'I paused a moment to choose my words carefully'.[18] This is evident since Sheppard's recollection of the night of the murder: 'The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread'.[19] The solution to the mystery is contained in that ten-minute gap when the murder was committed. Readers rely on Sheppard's narration since they assume that this apparently omniscient voice is as uninformed as they are, that he will serve as a guide throughout the story, accompanying them towards the truth.

By using a homodiegetic narrator, a character above suspicions, as the criminal, Christie queries and parodies genre conventions and, at the same time, suggests that nothing is what it seems. She constructs identities as mere illusions; consequently, nobody can be trusted, thus emphasizing how fragile human relationships can be. Christie's whodunits, as Moretti notes, 'have only one message: the criminal can be anyone: the narrator, the detective, the entire group of suspects, the most suspicious, the least suspicious, the most doting of lovers, the most infamous of scoundrels'.[20] Emphasis is laid on the deceptiveness of what outwardly seems the truth. Facts and roles need to be questioned as nothing can be taken for granted. Christie shapes a world characterized by a dangerous domesticity in which the criminal is an insider and murders are driven by selfishness. The security of the home (but also the tranquillity of the village) is continuously questioned as it appears a safe place only from the outside. What it discloses is a set of family secrets and relationships

[17] Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 169.
[18] Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 79.
[19] Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 44
[20] Franco Moretti, 'Clues,' in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of the Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller (London: NLB, 1983), p. 144.

lived to fit social conventions. Domesticity's promises of safety and bliss shake and fail.

The device of multiple perspectives is commonly associated with modernist writing. It is recurrent in Woolf's oeuvre. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the narration is characterized by continuous changes in perspective: the author renders an event from different points of view simultaneously. The accent is on subjectivity: what counts is the set of emotions that an object stirs in the characters, the meanings they attach to a specific event. For Woolf, the external event acquires importance in so far as it triggers the characters' memories and feelings. The scene of the skywriting plane is particularly significant. Each character views the letters differently. To Septimus 'the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky' have a greater implication; they appear to him as signs 'of unimaginable beauty'.[21] The same device returns in *To the Lighthouse*. Each character is presented through multiple perspectives and the accent is laid on how the events are experienced by the characters rather than on the single event itself. Mrs Ramsay, for example, is represented as a tyrant, a heroine, sometimes she is described as stubborn, sometimes as lovable and beautiful.

Multiple perspectives are equally fundamental in detective fiction. In *Cards on the Table* (1936), the four suspects recollect the night of Mr Shaitana's murder in radically different ways. Even the four descriptions of the living room – the crime scene – do not match. In this way, the reader is confronted with the multifaceted aspects of reality. In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Christie opens the novel presenting the characters in their homes, before the trip to Egypt. The narrator disappears and then the narrative offers the characters' different viewpoints – where each one of them reveals her/his opinion about Egypt and the upcoming cruise along the Nile, hinting at potential plot developments. The device recurs in *Sad Cypress* (1940), narrated from three different perspectives: an account from Elinor Carlisle's viewpoint; Poirot's personal account of his investigation; and, thirdly, a sequence in court, from Elinor's confused perspective. Multiple perspectives in the Golden Age allow the reader more agency in reconstructing the events. The reader acquires an active role: by analysing the clues and the opposite viewpoints, the reader is invited to enter the text at the side of the great detectives. While in the Holmes

---

[21] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 23.

stories the reader is merely the receiver and observer of his adventures, here the whodunit becomes a reader-centred genre.

Multiple perspectives aim also at disorienting readers, who are presented with dissimilar points of view that need to be reassembled by gathering information from different sources. Readers learn that no version is definitive and that truth is an unstable entity, essentially fleeting, evanescent and temporal. Multiple perspectives force them to consider the characters' assumptions, and to question their language, as deceptiveness characterizes also their dialogues. Lies are often mixed with real evidence to hide burning truths, non-existent alibis and frightful secrets. For Jon Thompson, Christie's use of language, apparently simple, is a modernist feature, 'capable of bearing any number of different interpretations'.[22] The readers, he claims, can never be confident till the end of the novel 'as to the signifieds of her signifiers'.[23] This linguistic ambiguity stems from the fact that readers do not fully know the context in which the event takes place, and from the impossibility to fully understand what the characters think, as they often hide skeletons in the closet. For Thompson, Christie's fiction is characterized by what he defines 'cracks in the façade'.[24] Appearances are deceptive, like language itself, which accompanies and reinforces the characters' disguise. Likewise, identities are continuously questioned and presented as something unstable that cannot be contained within fixed definitions.

The process of reconstructing the truth, that is the detection itself, evolves around the criminal deed that happened in the story of the crime. The temporal duality that Tzvetan Todorov recognizes as a staple of the classic detective novel,[25] constructs the process towards the truth as an intertwining of both narrative progression and retrogression. The story of the crime happens prior to the detection and is absent from the present, while the story of the investigation happens in the present and consists in uncovering the first story. An interplay between what happened (the story of the crime) and how it happened (the story of the investigation) characterizes the narration. This temporal duality reinforces the relation that Golden Age has with time. Although psychological time, so much

---

[22]   Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 126.
[23]   Thompson, p. 126.
[24]   Thompson, p. 133.
[25]   Tzvetan Todorov, 'Typology of Detective Fiction,' in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 44.

in vogue in modernist literature, is absent in Christie's novels, where external time is much more important due to the nature itself of the genre, temporality is fundamental in organizing the events of the narration, considering that the final truth can be understood only in retrospect. The linear construction of the plot is somehow missing as the detective, and the reader, must return to the hidden first story to acquire knowledge, through deciphering signs and clues, assigning various signifieds to the signifiers. In his work *The Pursuit of Crime*, Dennis Porter has defined this structure as 'backwards construction', since the genre is 'committed to an act of recovery, moving forward to move back'.[26] The conclusion is nothing but the disclosure of what happened in the story preceding the investigation. The beginning becomes the end as the present (in which the investigation occurs) leads to the revelation of the past. The narrative ends with the action that commenced the story. In Golden Age fiction present and past intertwine.

The story of the crime could be misleading, as the murderer often contaminates it through the manipulation of clues. In *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) the window in the victim's berth is left open to disorient Poirot and make him believe that the murderer is an outsider. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) initially all the clues seem to lead to the belief that the murderer has come from outside, maybe one of those locals working in the archaeological excavation. In *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) and in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the trick of the unfastened window is repeated, suggesting burglars entering the houses. However, the destabilizing factor of the whodunit lies in the assumption that the murderer as an Other is no longer possible. The murderer is not simply one of us; the murderer could be, potentially, all of us, as the disturbing finale of *Murder on the Orient Express* insinuates.

The development of the Golden Age and its coincident high modernist movement intersects with the social context in which it took shape. The main social and historical changes that gave life to Modernism influenced popular forms. Golden Age detective fiction reacted to the post-World War I world in a less serious way. For instance, the decline of the detective from a superhero to a more ironic figure is a reaction to post-war fragmented modernity. The dramatic consequences of the Great War destroyed the beliefs on which the British Empire was erected. As a

---

[26] Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 29.

consequence, social and historical changes required a different typology of character prepared to face a totally diverse society and attitude to life. Christie's novels rejected the heroic, as she preferred to enrich her narratives with the parodic element so appreciated by her readership. As Light and Rowland argue, Poirot was part of the attempt, following World War I in Western culture, to find a new form of masculinity against the heroic virility that was in vogue before and during the Great War, that heroic virility which had proved a failure.[27] Personal flaws and weaknesses do not constitute obstacles for the detective's success. On the contrary, they highlight his/her human nature. Both Poirot and Miss Marple are too old and comic to be heroic. Their vulnerabilities become their strength. Weaknesses make them look foolish, but human.

Although the whodunit barely mentions the fragmentation and the precarious stability of the interwar years, the uncertainties of an elusive period are embedded within the novels. The contradictions of a slippery and shattered reality coexist with the nostalgia for a past where the self was seen as cohesive and reality was fully knowable and understandable. This nostalgic feeling can be interpreted as a denial of the precariousness of the interwar years. The fictional utopian universe of the whodunit, where order and stability are restored temporarily in the last chapter, becomes an escape from the anxieties of that period and, at the same time, a reassurance that everything will fall into its proper places. As Colin Watson has argued, the happy conclusion provides 'relief from the unpleasant feeling of having been let down'[28] by the Victorian promise of improvement and progress. When analysing the pastoral element and the nostalgia in Christie's fiction, Thompson argues that they serve as 'an implicit criticism of industrial modernism',[29] since she employs pastoral and nostalgia for the Edwardian past to provide a critique of the interwar political realities.

Although the narrative structure of detective fiction demands a clear-cut solution providing an explanation of the enigma based on the clues scattered in the narrative, the happy-ending finale provides a false relief, as the incongruities the mystery uncovers and the consequent loss of a family member or friend cannot be erased. The criminal is expelled from

---

[27] Light, p. 73. Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 19.
[28] Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 84.
[29] Thompson, p. 123.

his/her social class, but the results of his/her actions remain. The deceptiveness that the crime has brought to light winks at the social anxieties at the heart of the interwar years. The solution of the enigma is a victory for the detective but not for humankind. The uncanny discovery that the murderer belongs to the family circle discloses the fragility of human relationships.

Modernism involves instability and uncertainty. It is characterized by heightened individualism, existential insecurity, and an instability of family lives and interpersonal relationships. This precariousness is a staple in detective fiction. Destabilizing family situations prepare the stage for betrayals, deception and violence. The family is revealed to be crooked and its importance weakened. Similarly, human relationships are crooked. The modernist feature of detective fiction lies in the discovery that the comforting certainties of the past and the belief in traditional values are mere deception. Family crisis and the fragility of human relationships exemplify Christie's interbellum detective fiction. As Light has maintained, Christie participates in 'a modernist spirit' since she can be considered 'an iconoclast whose monitoring of the plots of family life aims to upset the Victorian image of home, sweet home'.[30] For Peter Childs, modernist writing immerses the readership 'in an unfamiliar world with little of the orienting preambles and descriptions provided by most realist writers'.[31] That 'unfamiliar world' as one of the first features of Modernism, is also evident in Christie's fiction, where the threats come from within the homely. The unpredictability of reality and the impossibility of social belonging characterize both Modernism and the Golden Age. In this regard, Light's remarks are worth recalling, as she maintains that Christie's novels are concerned with social trouble and contradictions:

> Misleading, then, to take the fiction at face value, and imagine that Agatha Christie never addresses any sense of social disturbance: on one level her writing speaks to nothing else. Far from suggesting a world in which every person knows their place, and in which values are firm and fixed, the fiction explores the difficulty of social belonging in a modern world in which the very idea of social status has something theatrical and impermanent about it.[32]

---

[30] Light, p. 61.
[31] Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.
[32] Light, p. 97.

The whodunit shapes a solipsistic world characterized by deceptiveness. Every character pretends to be someone else and withholds important information. In the end when the masks fall, the truth appears to be fragmented and imperfect. Reality shows itself for what it really is: a tricky world of strangers. The interaction with strangers 'is both a feature of modern life and a staple of mystery fiction'.[33] The experience of modernity increases the possibility of encountering strangers, and, as a consequence, the suspiciousness towards the other. In the whodunit, the defamiliarization of everyday life, the uncanny feeling that the knowable has become unknowable, that friends and family members are strangers to each other can be interpreted as modernist features.

Several high modernists were attracted by detective fiction. T.S. Eliot's fascination for detective stories proves that lowbrow crime and highbrow Modernism do not exclude each other. As his biographer Peter Ackroyd recollects, 'detective fiction was [Eliot's] passion – he could quote long passages of Sherlock Holmes from memory [...] and in later years he liked to discuss with friends the work of Georges Simenon and Raymond Chandler'.[34] In his 1927 essay 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens', he celebrated Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* as 'the first, and greatest of English detective novels'.[35] For Eliot, the rise of British detective fiction – that is somehow different from the genre invented by Poe – is mostly due to Collins, who enriched the genre with a real human element, abandoning the scientific knowledge of Auguste Dupin. Eliot praised Sergeant Cuff, the detective of *The Moonstone*, for his ability to make mistakes. He is 'the ancestor of the healthy generation of amiable, efficient, professional but fallible inspectors of fiction among whom we live today',[36] the archetype of British fictional detectives, with the only exception of Sherlock Holmes. With Sergeant Cuff the detective acquires human features and becomes fallible. Furthermore, Eliot stresses that the separation between high culture and low culture is undeniably recent and that highbrow fiction is unlikely to endure, since it has evolved into a literature with-

---

[33] Gordon Kelly, *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. XII.
[34] Quoted in Theo D'haen, 'Murder and Modernism, T.S. Eliot and Interbellum Detective Writing,' in *Crime, Detecçao es Castigo: Estudos sobre Literatura Policial*, ed. G. Vilas-Boas and Maria de Lurdes Sampaio (Porto: Granito, 2002), p. 125.
[35] T.S. Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens,' in *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, 1932), p. 377.
[36] Eliot, p. 377.

out excitements. Eliot equally appreciated contemporary writers of the Golden Age. He reviewed, between 1927 and 1929, twenty-four detective novels and several short story collections in *The Criterion*, the journal he founded and edited, welcoming both British and American writers.[37] In his reviews, he frequently used *The Moonstone* as a measure to evaluate newly published works. In *The Criterion* he also codified the genre through a set of five rules, warning against a superhuman detective and convoluted plots. Although published before Van Dine and Ronal Knox's famous commandments, Eliot's rules are far less popular.

Eliot's engagement with popular culture and detective fiction is discussed by David Chinitz in his *T.S Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. Chinitz questions the received critical notion of Eliot as the major representative of High Culture in order to reveal a more intricate figure. According to Chinitz, a better knowledge of Eliot's attitude towards popular culture will certainly help an analysis of his oeuvre. As he clarifies, Eliot devoted thirty years of his life to bridging rather than supporting the cultural divide. He acknowledges Eliot's engagement with popular culture, from jazz (he produces several examples of the way Eliot built poems around jazz rhythms) to radio plays, from the detective novel to ballads. Chinitz, moreover, recollects Eliot's reviews of detective novels in *The Criterion* and how he made little secret of his appreciation for detective stories, recalling two episodes of his life: a conversation he had with the composer Igor Stravinsky, confessing that 'he had read no serious prose fiction since 1927', and an interview for the London *Sunday Times* in 1950: 'I never read contemporary fiction – with one exception: the works of Simenon concerned with Inspector Maigret'.[38] Other highbrow writers concealed their fascination for the detective genre by using pen names to defend their professional reputations. For instance, the art critic Willard Huntington Wright served as the editor for the highbrow magazine *The Smart Set* for several years before becoming a detective fiction writer. He wrote twelve successful Philo Vance novels under the name of S.S. Van Dine. In September 1928, he published a mock autobiographical sketch 'I used to be a highbrow but look at me now' in the *American Magazine*, and his identity was revealed.

Similarly, Gertrude Stein, hostess of a Parisian Literary Salon and a

---

[37] D'haen, p. 125.
[38] David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 56.

leading figure of Modernism, shared Eliot's dedication to detective fiction. Stein, an avid reader of detective stories, wrote her first and only detective novel, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, in 1933, published posthumously in 1948. The novel is based on the mysterious death of a hotelier's wife in the French village where Stein and Alice Toklas were on holiday. Stein, who had known this woman for several years, saw several mysterious incongruities in the event. This episode spurred her to write the novel where the figure of the detective is absent and a narrator often incapable of presenting the facts controls the narrative. The lack of the process of deduction, of the detective's charisma and the fragmentation at the base of the narration reinforce the modernity of the novel. With *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* Stein blurs the boundaries between mainstream literature and the popular forms. Through the combination of typical elements of the detective genre, such as the village, the country house, the apparent peaceful setting, the family party, with modernist features, such as the narrator's inability to provide a conclusion to the story, Stein contaminates avant-garde modernist narrative. *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor,* a hybrid detective story, escapes the limitations imposed by both Modernism and detective fiction.

Stein's fascination for the detective genre is also evident from some of her essays: 'Why I Like Detective Stories'; 'American Crimes and How They Matter'; 'Subject Cases: The Back-ground of a Detective Story'. In 1937, Stein wrote a piece for *Harper's Bazaar* called 'Why I Like Detective Stories'. In it, she noted that 'detective stories are what I can read'[39] and lamented their scarcity, noting that 'if you want to read one a day well not one a day but one every other day, say three a week and if you are willing to read over and over a lot of them even then there are not enough to go around'.[40] The phrase that seals the end of the essay serves as an invitation, from a detective-fiction addict, to produce more detective stories: 'Anyway I do like detective stories and will there please will there be more of them'.[41] The phrase seems to echo W.H. Auden's confession that he too read detective stories, 'an addiction like tobacco or alcohol'.[42]

---

[39] Gertrude Stein, 'Why I Like Detective Stories,' in *How Writing is Written: Volume II of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), p. 146.
[40] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 148.
[41] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 150.
[42] W.H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict,' *Harper's Magazine* (1948): p. 406.

Stein's admiration for the hard-boiled writer Dashiell Hammett is well known, but she also praised the less notable British writer Edgar Wallace; she appreciated the ways Wallace 'rightly uses the old melodrama machinery and he makes it alive again'.[43] Detective fiction, for Stein, engages with the possibility of giving new life to old methods and forms: 'it is much better to make an old thing alive than to invent a new one'. Writers like Wallace modernize 'the old melodrama machinery' she identifies with 'the Sherlock Holmes super-detective' type of fiction. In the Holmes stories, she laments, the narrative is constructed merely around the infallible super-human detective, in which 'the crime and the criminal is nothing but something for the unreal hero to conquer'.[44] By contrast, this super-detective's uniqueness disappears in melodramatic detective fictions like Wallace's, where, she asserts, the triad hero, heroine and villain is fundamental for the construction and success of the story.

Similarly, Stein's discussion about the incoherence of the 'super-detective' fiction involves the motives of murder. According to Stein, English detective novels are better than American ones because 'they are more long winded which is better and money is more real in them which is very much better.'[45] Money is fundamental in detective fiction because it makes the story much more realistic. By contrast, those stories dealing with drugs and conspiracy appear far-fetched to a readership more used to everyday issues like money. For Stein, English detective stories are 'so much more soothing'.[46] Combining the trivial details and clues for the disclosure of the final mystery encourages an active reading experience that, according to Stein, may endure also in everyday experiences. She herself admitted that she liked detecting: 'I like detecting there are so many things to detect, why did somebody say what they said, why did somebody cut out a paragraph in the proof I was correcting, why did the young man we were to meet at the station and whom we have never seen before not turn up'.[47]

Stein believed that the main problem with detective stories lies in their very name. In 'American Crimes and How They Matter', published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1935, she suggests that detective stories should

---

[43] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 149.
[44] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 149.
[45] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 146.
[46] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 147.
[47] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 147.

be called crime stories, in order to focus the reader's attention on the crime and its mystery and not on the detective as puzzle-solver: 'they call them detective stories instead of crime stories and that is in a way the trouble with them they are detective stories instead of crime stories in real life they are crime stories instead of detective stories'.[48] It is the recollection of a night spent strolling around with a Chicago homicide detective that spurs the reflection on the difference between detective stories and real-life crimes. Several times, real-life crimes remain unresolved and, for Stein, this is the most appealing attribute of true crimes: 'this thing about detective stories and the difference between them and the story of a real crime [...] in the real crime it is more interesting if you do not know the answer at all'.[49] Detective stories, on the contrary, provide a final solution that sanctions the detective's victory. Therefore, for Stein, detective fiction should avoid offering clear-cut solutions to the enigmas to become more intriguing (her *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* presents an open-ended finale) and, moreover, it should redefine itself as crime fiction.

In 'What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them?' (1936), Stein deals, once again, with the case of the detective story, that she defines the pure product of the human mind at work and 'the only really modern novel form that has come into existence'.[50] Continuing in the wake of what had been stated in 'American Crimes and How They Matter', Stein reaffirms the substantial difference between detective stories and real crimes. In real life people are attracted to crime, while in fiction it is the investigation that captures the readers' attention:

> There is another very curious thing about detective stories. In real life people are interested in the crime more than they are in detection, it is the crime that is the thing the shock the thrill the horror but in the story it is the detection that holds the interest and that is natural enough because the necessity as far as action is concerned is the dead man.[51]

For Stein, the crime that marks the beginning of the narrative (the story of the crime, according to Todorov), defamiliarizes everyday certainties, turning the homely into unhomely. The 'dead man' destabilizes beliefs, perceptions and human relationships. It is the defamiliarization

---

[48]   Stein, 'American Crimes and How They Matter,' in *How Writing is Written*, p. 101.
[49]   Stein, 'American Crimes,' p. 103.
[50]   Stein, 'What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them?,' in *Gertrude Stein: Selections,* ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 312.
[51]   Stein, 'What Are Master-Pieces,' p. 312.

of the knowable and familiar that Stein regards as a modernist feature of detective fiction. For Stein, through the reading of detective stories 'your mind was free to enjoy yourself'[52] as everything, including the trivial details, becomes fundamental for the final solution and invites the reader to play. It is, however, the concluding solution that Stein considers useless but never banal, as already acknowledged in 'American Crimes and How They Matter'. The disclosure of the enigma with its straightforward ending brings the world back to a temporal state of normality where everything is knowable and understandable.

Stein discovers similarities between detective and modernist fiction. The fragmentary nature of information, the presence of red herrings that deviate the reader from the solution, the ephemerality of identities and the unhomely, offer a modernist reading of the whodunit. Moreover, she attributes other modernist features to the detective novel such as its reversal of the usual linear progression of plot and its many narrative experiments, for example with the narrative voice. By approaching a genre often condemned for its formulaic structure and lack of originality, Stein challenges and at the same time crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between high and low art, proving that Modernism and detective fiction are not mutually exclusive. By encouraging a critical discussion about detective fiction, Stein removes the Great Divide between high and popular culture that Huyssen claims Modernism was resisting: 'Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture'.[53]

Hence, several prominent modernists recognized parallels between detective fiction and Modernism. Their appreciation for and their engagement with the popular form of detective fiction, reveal how Modernism and mystery fiction can inspire each other in unique and productive ways. In conclusion, the Golden Age and Modernism, by offering diverse narrative responses to a new type of modernity arisen after World War I, emerge as different but, in some respects, interrelated forms of literary production. The many affinities between the two – from the common desire to think out of the box of literary tradition and the evanescence of identities, to the employment of the same narrative strategies as the unreliable narrator and multiple perspectives – reveal how volatile the confines between high and low literature can be.

[52] Stein, 'Why I Like,' p. 147.
[53] Huyssen, p. vii.

Bibliography

Auden, W.H., 'The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict,' *Harper's Magazine* (1948): pp. 406-12.

Childs, Peter, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Christie, Agatha, *Cards on the Table* (1936) (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

———, *Death on the Nile* (1937) (London: HarperCollins, 2014).

———, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) (London: HarperCollins, 2016).

———, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

———, *Sad Cypress* (1940) (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

———, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

———, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) (London: HarperCollins, 2013).

———, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) (London: HarperCollins, 1995).

———, *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) (London: HarperCollins, 2017).

Chinitz, David E., *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

D'haen, Theo, 'Murder and Modernism. T.S. Eliot and Interbellum Detective Writing,' in *Crime, Detecçao es Castigo: Estudos sobre Literatura Policial*, ed. G. Vilas-Boas and Maria de Lurdes Sampaio (Porto: Granito, 2002), pp. 125-38.

Eliot, T.S., 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens,' in *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, 1932), pp. 373-82.

Ford, Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2010).

Haycraft, Howard, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Appleton Century, 1941).

Huyssen, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

Kelly, Gordon, *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

Knight, Stephen, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980).

Light, Alison, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Moretti, Franco, 'Clues,' in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of the Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller (London: NLB, 1983), pp. 130-56.

Munt, Sally R., *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1981).

Pugliatti, Paola, '*The Good Soldier* e la Riflessione sul Romanzo,' in *Scrittura e Sperimentazione in Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini, Vita Fortunati (Firenze: Alinea, 1994), pp. 111-23.

Rowland, Susan, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

Stein, Gertrude, 'American Crimes and How They Matter,' in *How Writing is Written: Volume II of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), pp. 100–5.

———, 'What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them?,' in *Gertrude Stein: Selections,* ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 308–18.

———, 'Why I Like Detective Stories,' in *How Writing*, pp. 146–50.

Symons, Julian, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: Warner Books, 1992).

Thompson, Jon, *Fiction, Crime and Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Todorov, Tzvetan, 'Typology of Detective Fiction,' in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 42-52.

Watson, Colin, *Snobbery with Violence* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

———, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1994).

WAS SHE REALLY A SNOB?
VIRGINIA WOOLF, THE 'BATTLE OF THE BROWS'
AND POPULAR PRINT CULTURE

Annalisa Federici

Like many modernists, Virginia Woolf has long been depicted as an elitist removed from the material interests of literature, focusing instead on more sophisticated artistic commitments – a view apparently corroborated by her explicit identification as a 'highbrow' intellectual and her disdainful attitude towards those standing 'betwixt and between' the 'high' and the 'low'. However, an attentive analysis of her 1932 essay 'Middlebrow' reveals the subtly ironic tone of her seemingly disparaging comments, a reading also sustained by the fact that whereas Woolf often denounced popular culture, she was also eager to communicate with the common reader, and remained severely critical of the middlebrow even while contributing to middlebrow magazines. This essay aims to question the 'official' image of Woolf by analysing her frequent forays into the domain between highbrow and lowbrow culture over the 1920s and 1930s, a time when the canon of modernist writing had not yet been fixed and the 'great divide' between high and low was still to be established. Although Woolf's attitude toward such literary intermediaries ranged from suspicion to downright disdain, these boundary-crossings include, for instance, the essays she contributed to mass-circulation popular magazines like the British *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, which granted her visibility and financial reward. Such pieces definitely situate Woolf at the centre of relatively popular, but also prestigious, literary journalism, thus showing that the sophisticated author was nonetheless eager to participate in the new middlebrow culture and reach ordinary as well as professional readers, without compromising her high intellectual ideals. Exactly as *Vogue* commodified aesthetic value through the mass popularization of elite art, the 'Six Essays on London Life' certainly facilitated *Good Housekeeping*'s marketing of Woolf's high-quality work as a cultural commodity. The homogeneity between these articles and the rest of Woolf's literary production strengthens the notion that writing for middlebrow magazines did not in the least affect her style as a highbrow intellectual.

Virginia Woolf; Middlebrow; Essays; Vogue; Good Housekeeping

Over the last few decades, literary and cultural studies have revealed the importance of reassessing high modernism with reference to its intersections with mass or popular culture. Several critics have challenged the assumption that modernist writers scorned popular appeal, refused

to advertise themselves and sought refuge from the commercial sphere, thus forcing readers to rethink preconceived notions of the relationship between high art and the marketplace. This recent proliferation of works – mostly focusing on male authors – demonstrates that, far from being opposed to the economy of production and consumption, canonical modernists such as Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Beckett were thoroughly preoccupied with marketplace concerns and entertained 'multiple, conflicting, often productive if always ambivalent relations with emergent mass culture'.[1] Moreover, besides exposing the limits of the argument that modernist writers manifested contempt for popular forms, such examples clearly problematize the unequivocal gendering of mass culture as feminine[2] on the one hand, and the canonical representation of female modernists like Virginia Woolf on the other, thus highlighting interesting boundary-crossings between 'high' and 'low'. As Jane Garrity notes, 'for a writer like Woolf, whose allegiances were divided between her upper-class affiliation, her desire to make a living at journalism, and her identification with women as a subordinated group, the relation of mass culture to femininity is necessarily more ambivalent and vexed than it is for her male counterparts'.[3]

Like many modernists, Woolf has long been depicted as an elitist removed from the material interests of literature, focusing instead on more sophisticated artistic commitments – a view apparently corroborated by her explicit identification as a 'highbrow' intellectual and her disdainful attitude towards those standing 'betwixt and between' the 'high' and the 'low'. However, Woolf's ambivalent responses to mass print culture have come under increased scrutiny in recent years, as the popular per-

[1] Patrick Collier, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 2. See also Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt (eds.), *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Ian Willison, Warwick Gould and Warren Chernaik (eds.), *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); John Xiros Cooper, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (eds.), *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[2] For a general discussion of the notion (originating from the long-standing exclusion of women from the realm of high art and particularly gaining ground during the nineteenth century) that mass culture is somehow associated with the feminine sphere while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men, see Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other,' in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44-62.

[3] Jane Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry, and 1920s British *Vogue*', in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 189.

ception of high modernist writers operating beyond the constraints of the literary market has been steadily deconstructed. In particular, the appearance of her non-fiction in the periodical press – ranging from prestigious and highbrow journals such as the *Nation and Athenaeum* and *Criterion*, to more popular magazines like the British *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* – specifically positions her texts and herself at a 'site of cultural contestation'[4] in which the status of both author and text slides between the high art of literary modernism and the less qualified work of journalism. Moreover, in line with the contested view of modernism as wholly dismissive of or antagonistic to mass culture, Leila Brosnan suggests that 'in writing both high modernist literature and journalism that she characterized as low, but which in the main was written for a cultured audience, Virginia Woolf as a case study highlights the confusion of boundaries between high and low culture that is present within modernism'.[5] In particular, an attentive analysis of her 1932 essay 'Middlebrow' (originally conceived as a letter to the editor of *The New Statesman*) reveals the subtly ironic tone of her seemingly disparaging comments, a reading also sustained by the fact that whereas Woolf often denounced popular culture, she was also eager to communicate with the common reader, and remained severely critical of the middlebrow even while contributing to middlebrow magazines. If it is true, on the one hand, that analogous ambivalent positions also characterized her response to certain literary genres (biography, for instance) or new artforms (photography), on the other hand it is noteworthy that Woolf deliberately used the literary press (publishing enterprises and magazines) to venture into territories she would hardly be associated with, thus traversing and challenging the cultural boundaries of the literary market.

In response to scholars who have traditionally viewed Woolf as a writer of highbrow texts published by the Hogarth Press and respectable periodicals for an elite readership, much research still has to be conducted on the interactions between Woolf and mainstream culture, allowing a more comprehensive interrogation of this multifaceted issue than has previously been possible. This essay aims to question the 'official' image of Woolf by analysing her frequent forays into the domain between

---

[4] Brenda Silver, 'What's Woolf Got to Do with It? Or, the Perils of Popularity', *Modern Fiction Studies* 38 (1992): p. 22.
[5] Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 71-2.

highbrow and lowbrow culture over the 1920s and 1930s, a time when the canon of modernist writing had not yet been fixed and the 'great divide' between high and low was still to be established. Although Woolf's attitude toward such literary intermediaries ranged from suspicion to downright disdain, these boundary-crossings include, for instance, the essays she contributed to mass-circulation, popular magazines, which undoubtedly represented lucrative publishing outlets. These pieces have long been disregarded as non-canonical, incidental commissions undertaken purely for money, despite Woolf's frequent declarations that not only did she not cater to the fashion readership, but that in fact her writing for *Vogue*, for instance, was of equal calibre to the articles she published in the more exclusive *Times Literary Supplement* or *Nation and Athenaeum*.[6]

Though resisting both the notion of modernist writers as an elite of intellectuals aloof from the public, and an identification of the popular exclusively with the world of commodities and entertainment, Melba Cuddy-Keane maintains that 'to write about Virginia Woolf as a democratic highbrow is to invoke controversy'.[7] If, as the critic reminds us, 'the "brow" words came into currency at the beginning of the twentieth century, moving quickly from innocent description to emotionally charged slogans of battle',[8] it is well-known that Woolf herself appropriated the

---

[6] In a letter to Jacques Raverat dated 24 January 1925, Woolf wrote: 'I've been engaged in a great wrangle with an old American called Pearsall Smith on the ethics of writing articles at high rates for fashion papers like Vogue. He says it demeans one. He says one must write only for the Lit. Supplement and the Nation and Robert Bridges and prestige and posterity and to set a high example. I say Bunkum. Ladies' clothes and aristocrats playing golf don't affect my style; and they would do his a world of good. Oh these Americans! How they always muddle everything up! What he wants is prestige: what I want, money'. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 154. A few days later, she commented to Pearsall Smith himself that 'Todd lets you write what you like, and it's your own fault if you conform to the stays and the petticoats' (Nicolson and Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective*, p. 158). As Nicola Luckhurst contends in *Bloomsbury in Vogue* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1998), Woolf's debate with Logan Pearsall Smith, apparently concerning the ethics of accepting lucrative commissions to write popular journalism, was actually a quarrel with the American critic's stiff objection to her crossing the boundary between high and low culture. According to Brosnan, 'contrary to Pearsall Smith's reservations that writing for *Vogue* would taint Virginia Woolf's style and compromise her integrity, writing for *Vogue* offered her more freedom of expression than did her work for the *Times Literary Supplement*' (Brosnan, p. 57).
[7] Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 13.
[8] Cuddy-Keane, p. 18. Louise Kane remarks that 'the terms "highbrow", "lowbrow" and "middlebrow" were not used or understood in the early twentieth-century to the same degree that they are now'. Louise Kane, '"*To-day* Has Never Been 'Highbrow'": Middlebrow, Modernism and

terminology in the essay published posthumously as 'Middlebrow'. At that time, the 'Battle of the Brows' was hotly debated not only on the radio, but also in periodicals and books. The specific occasion of Woolf's intervention was a clash between J.B. Priestley and Harold Nicolson in a series of talks on the BBC under the general title 'To an Unnamed Listener'. These broadcasts became a subject for subsequent comment in the *New Statesman*, prompting Woolf's response and involvement in what she called 'the Battle of the Brows [which] troubles, I am told, the evening air'.[9] The author vigorously defended her status as a highbrow (defined as 'the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea')[10] and apparently directed her scorn not, as we might expect, at the lowbrow – whom she respected as 'a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life'[11] – but rather at the middlebrows. Struggling to pin down the concept, Woolf remarks: 'but what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between'.[12] The middlebrows are described as profoundly hypocritical individuals, as 'go-betweens'[13] who pretend to be interested in art and culture, while they are in fact driven by social ambition. In other words, the middlebrows imitate intellectual sophistication, and think that buying cultural products or learning how to be cultivated will allow them to increase their social status. Considering Woolf's willingness to maintain fruitful contacts with middlebrow publishing venues and institutions, her disparaging comments in this essay inevitably sound ironic.

the Many Faces of *To-day*', in *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880-1930*, ed. Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 73. Lise Jaillant focuses on middlebrow as a term appearing in the 1920s in the satirical magazine *Punch*, designating 'someone with high intellectual and aesthetic aspirations, but who lacked the cultural capital necessary to understand high art'. Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), p. 5. On the so-called 'Battle of the Brows' see Erica Brown and Mary Grover (eds.), *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[9] Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow,' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 196.

[10] Woolf, 'Middlebrow,' p. 196.

[11] Woolf, 'Middlebrow,' p. 197.

[12] Woolf, 'Middlebrow,' p. 198.

[13] Woolf, 'Middlebrow,' p. 198.

Despite the fact that Woolf regarded literary journalism as 'a beastly business',[14] the author's aim was to make money by her contributions; therefore, she vigorously pursued publications that would reward her labour financially, allowing her to attain the intellectual and economic liberty necessary to receive acclaim as a professional, serious writer. The British *Vogue*, for instance, was one such remunerative venue where work presumed to be timeless, unique and of high aesthetic value was juxtaposed with the somewhat degraded status of mass-produced objects; it can therefore be considered a clear example of the argument that modernism and mass culture represent indeed dialectically interdependent phenomena. The British edition of the magazine, launched in July 1916, was a fascinating cultural hybrid mainly addressing a sophisticated female readership with an interest in modern trends in art and literature as well as in fashion, homemaking and cosmetics. Although it appealed, out of necessity, to a mass market, in reality *Vogue* attended to an elite audience, and ultimately treated fashion and culture as equally deserving serious and sustained consideration. Under Dorothy Todd's editorship (1922-26), in particular, the periodical notably changed from a mere fashion paper to a journal of high modernism and the avant-garde by putting together literary reviews of, and work by, modernist authors such as Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stein[15] and ads for commodities like corsets, chin straps and antiperspirants. This kind of juxtaposition 'weaves a complex dialectic between high culture and fashion',[16] significantly disrupting the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow. According to Alice Wood, 'through such inclusion of and commentary on modernist writers, 1920s *Vogue* fuelled its readers' interest in highbrow and exper-

---

[14] Nicolson and Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective*, p. 38.

[15] Jane Garrity notes that 'although *Vogue* does not in every case praise the modernist emphasis on narrative complexity and obscurity [...] for the most part the magazine is overwhelmingly pro-modernist throughout the 1920s' ('Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry', pp. 189-90). Applying her analysis to Woolf's intellectual entourage, Garrity posits that 'despite the lingering view of the Bloomsbury Group as signifiers of high culture's "intellectual elite" – an association premised upon an elision of the marketplace – their splashy appearance in *Vogue* documents that Bloomsbury was not isolated from the mass culture of the 1920s. [...] the magazine was a veritable homage to the world of Bloomsbury, publishing book and cultural reviews by, and about, a diverse range of critics and artists associated with the Group', which could be considered 'the key vehicle through which the magazine attempted to disseminate cultural elitism to its affluent readership' ('Selling Culture to the "Civilized": Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity', *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (1999): pp. 29-30).

[16] Aurelea Mahood, 'Fashioning Readers: The *avant garde* and British *Vogue*, 1920-9', *Women: A Cultural Review* 13 (2002): p. 38.

imental literature'.[17] In particular, in the four years of her editorship, Dorothy Todd turned the magazine's focus increasingly to contemporary art and letters, thus moulding 'the anticipated female readership of *Vogue* into a sophisticated community of middlebrow observers and consumers of avant-garde writing'.[18] Moreover, Todd's aim was to create personalities out of the writers and artists who contributed to, or were featured in, her magazine. Although many of these contributors were already famous, it was mainly the way she presented them to her readers that was peculiar, fashioning literary celebrities for an audience who would not necessarily have been exposed to them. During her lifetime, Garrity has argued, Woolf was implicated in the culture of celebrity and the logic of commodity exchange through the reviews and pictures of her that appeared in the British *Vogue*, as well as her literary contributions to the magazine. In this regard, she contends that the periodical 'provides a compelling example of how high culture utilizes mass cultural forms to disseminate its values';[19] moreover, 'Woolf's appearance in the magazine invites us to consider what happens when a female avatar of High Modernism intersects with feminized mass culture, enabling us to ask: how does a figure like Woolf maintain her cultural capital despite her appearance in a mass-circulation woman's periodical?'[20]

In emphasizing the relationship between Woolf's highbrow essayism and middlebrow consumer culture, however, I do not mean to trivialize her writing as middlebrow, but rather seek to participate in the substantial body of recent scholarship on the close connection between modernist elitism and artistic autonomy on the one hand, and popular culture or the literary marketplace on the other, by showing how *Vogue* commodified aesthetic value through the mass popularization of elite art, and ultimately helped to construct and circulate an image of Woolf as a literary icon and a marker of high culture. The truth is that, although generally contemptuous of 'popularity', at times dismissing *Vogue*'s commercialism as 'vulgar' and 'shameless',[21] Woolf never participated in a full-scale repudiation of mass culture. Quite the contrary, she renounced

---

[17] Alice Wood, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow in British Women's Magazines, 1916-1930,' in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, ed. Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 45.
[18] Wood, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow,' p. 45.
[19] Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry,' p. 190.
[20] Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry,' p. 193.
[21] Nicolson and Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective*, p. 158.

the stereotypes of high modernism by contributing to magazines that were undoubtedly at the centre of middlebrow consumer culture. The author's relationship with publishing venues like the British *Vogue* was indeed quite contradictory, as shown by the caustic remarks, disseminated in her letters, concerning both the journal and its editor, as well as the commercial terms she used to describe her commitment to popular print culture: 'I shall sell my soul to Todd; but this is the first step to being free'.[22] The highly remunerative activity of writing short pieces for *Vogue* granted her the opportunity to achieve the intellectual and economic independence she always aspired to as a woman writer.

Woolf's contribution to the British edition of *Vogue* amounts to five articles: 'Indiscretions' (November 1924), 'George Moore' (June 1925), 'The Tale of Genji' (July 1925), 'The Life of John Mytton' (March 1926), 'A Professor of Life' (May 1926).[23] Read collectively, these essays do not differ in content or style from other, more canonical examples of Woolf's witty and brilliant criticism; quite the contrary, they reveal her usual concerns with the relationship between life and letters, her ongoing interest in the literature of the present and the past, or they record, when in the form of reviews, her acute response to recent publications. It is remarkable, moreover, that they also contain images the author frequently employed to describe her own sensibility and creative process, thus establishing a degree of continuity between her fiction and non-fiction, between the great achievements of her high art and the minor intellectual effort of literary journalism, which she mainly pursued for money. For example, commenting on George Moore's 'personal' style and tendency to write novels about himself, and with her own view of living and writing as mutually determining conditions clearly in mind, Woolf muses: 'but are not all novels about the writer's self, we might ask? It is only as he sees people that we can see them; his fortunes colour and his oddities shape his vision until what we see is not the thing itself, but the thing seen and the seer inextricably mixed'.[24] Such reflections on literary composition resonate with her own aesthetic principles, which she would express, for instance, through Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*: the artist's quest for a 'device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the

---

[22] Nicolson and Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective*, p. 250.
[23] 'Flying Over London' appeared posthumously in *Vogue* in March 1950.
[24] Virginia Woolf, 'George Moore,' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 338.

same, one with the object one adored',[25] or the idea of artistic creation as a moment of vision – 'yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision'.[26] In 'George Moore', furthermore, Woolf goes on to claim that 'the great novelist feels, sees, believes with such intensity of conviction that he hurls his belief outside himself and it flies off and lives an independent life of its own',[27] thus echoing her conception – ultimately outlined in 'A Sketch of the Past' – of the compositional process as the transcription of intense and revelatory 'moments of being', when her senses are highly receptive and her mind establishes, in a sudden illumination, a fortuitous connection between the myriad impressions deriving from the external world and the flow of consciousness. In this autobiographical essay, the writer's mind is described as projecting itself, and the experienced revelation, on to the outer world; the outcome of this projection is precisely the creative impulse, deriving from the desire to manifest such an experience by means of language.

To quote another revealing example, in her review of *The Tale of the Genji* by Lady Murasaki, recently translated from the Japanese by Arthur Waley, Woolf observes that the eleventh-century author

> lived, indeed, in one of those seasons which are most propitious for the artist, and, in particular, for an artist of her own sex. The accent of life did not fall upon war; the interests of men did not centre upon politics. Relieved from the violent pressure of these two forces, life expressed itself chiefly in the intricacies of behaviour, […] in poems that break the surface of silence with silver fins, in dance and painting.[28]

This passage clearly discloses aspects of Woolf's writing practice and the preoccupations she voiced in both fictional and private texts. The characteristically Woolfian expression *to break the surface of silence with silver fins* on the one hand echoes Rachel Vinrace's lament in *The Voyage Out* that life is nothing but 'the short season between two silences',[29] on the other anticipates Bernard's description of the revelations of companionate intimacy in *The Waves* as that moment when he 'sank into one of those silences which are now and again broken by a few words, as if

[25] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930), p. 82.
[26] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 320.
[27] Woolf, 'George Moore,' p. 338.
[28] Virginia Woolf, 'The Tale of Genji,' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, 1986), pp. 265-6.
[29] Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), p. 82.

a fin rose in the wastes of silence; and then the fin, the thought, sinks back into the depths, spreading round it a little ripple of satisfaction'.[30] Most significantly, the expression calls to mind Woolf's recurring vision, recorded in her diaries, of a 'fin in the waste of waters',[31] a widely recognized metaphor for the author's artistic quest.

Finally, bearing in mind Todd's commitment to publicizing modernist art and literature alongside the latest trends in clothing, it may also be instructive to interpret *Vogue* as an extraordinarily eclectic document which broadly considered the place of fashion in contemporary culture, and as a forum for discussion where new styles and ideas, not necessarily fully developed, could be contemplated. This is the case, for instance, with Woolf's early reflections on the subject of the androgynous mind in 'Indiscretions', an article exploring the thoughts that govern a female reader when confronted with a piece of literature, advancing the theory – later developed in *A Room of One's Own* – that writing must necessarily be sexless in order to be appreciated by either gender. In sum, the essays published in *Vogue* definitely situate Woolf at the centre of relatively popular, but prestigious, literary journalism, thus showing that the elitist and sophisticated writer was nonetheless eager to participate in the new middlebrow culture and reach ordinary as well as professional readers, without compromising her high intellectual ideals.

What I would like to suggest here is that Woolf tied herself to middlebrow culture for such practical reasons as visibility and financial reward, while also retaining her distinctive highbrow style. Unsurprisingly, moreover, she decided to do so by choosing publishing venues which represent compelling examples of how high culture often employed mass cultural forms like fashion papers to publicize its values. It seems interesting, then, to consider *Vogue* as a platform that provided modernist writers and artists with a means to acquire prominence and promote themselves to a wider readership. The magazine's portrayal of Woolf as a signifier for high modernism was ultimately dependent upon a discourse illustrating the extent to which popular markers of femininity like fashionable clothes and accessories coalesced with the middlebrow commodification of the female modernist icon. In this regard, it is instructive that, in addition to the publication of her high-quality criticism alongside

---

[30]   Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960), pp. 193-4.
[31]   Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (eds.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 10.

laudatory reviews of her novels and essays, Woolf's showcasing in *Vogue* also took place through the visual medium of photography which was particularly congenial to her, considering her familiarity and fascination with the newborn art, as well as the frequent adaptation of photographic techniques in her fiction. Two pictures of Woolf appeared in *Vogue* at the time of her writing for the magazine, thus contributing to an intermedial portrayal of her as a writer of unparalleled distinction and prestige. The first, taken by Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor, was accompanied by a caption paying tribute to Woolf in *Vogue*'s regular feature 'We Nominate for the Hall of Fame' from May 1924. This feature, which traditionally included notable figures across the arts and the sciences, praised Woolf for her intellectual lineage as the daughter of the late Sir Leslie Stephen and sister of Vanessa Bell, for her achievement in running the Hogarth Press, for being a distinguished author of admirable fiction and criticism, and most of all for representing 'the most brilliant novelist of the younger generation',[32] a quality apparently contrasting with her own decision to be portrayed in a Victorian gown formerly belonging to her mother. The second *Vogue* portrait, again taken at the famous Beck and Macgregor studio and appearing in the May 1925 issue, is much more in line with the depiction of the 1920s female and displays a significant change in the way Woolf wished to present and promote herself. The picture accompanied a review of *The Common Reader* by Edwin Muir, praising her as 'one of the most distinguished novelists' and 'finest critics of our time', whose work is 'obviously of permanent interest'.[33] Remarkably, such commendation was no longer based upon the author's pedigree or shared business with her husband, but accredited her innovative work as of lasting importance and value for the development of literature. It seems evident, therefore, that the essays Woolf wrote for *Vogue*, and the way she was promoted through the verbal as well as the visual medium, worked to consolidate and publicize her image as a modernist of serious imprint. Not only was such a portrait in line with the intended amalgamation of fashion with culture which Dorothy Todd was advocating during her editorship of *Vogue*; it also ultimately distanced Woolf from the periodical's central preoccupation with beauty, fashion and female consumption.

---

[32] Quoted in Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry', p. 200. This photograph appeared again two years later, in the May 1926 issue, together with 'A Professor of Life', the only essay Woolf published in *Vogue* to be accompanied by her own image.
[33] Quoted in Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry,' p. 205.

Furthermore, other ventures contribute to our picturing Woolf as a highbrow intellectual who made frequent incursions into middle-brow territory. The 'Six Essays on London Life' ('The Docks of London', December 1931; 'Oxford Street Tide', January 1932; 'Great Men's Houses', March 1932; 'Abbeys and Cathedrals', May 1932; 'This Is the House of Commons', October 1932; 'Portrait of a Londoner', December 1932), apparently commissioned by *Good Housekeeping* as a series, certainly facilitated the popular magazine's marketing of Woolf's high-quality work as a cultural commodity. This periodical targeted a readership of middle-class housewives, educating them in the management of the family budget, providing meal plans, and suggesting the best products for dressing and running a household. Showing a versatility analogous to *Vogue*'s, *Good Housekeeping* paid attention to contemporary political and social issues as they affected women, and showed equal interest in domestic matters and fashion as well as fiction. As for Woolf's engagement with the periodical, Alice Wood has described the six articles (referred to as *The London Scene* since their collective publication under this title in 1975)[34] as 'a later example of Woolf's journalistic cultural boundary crossing'.[35]

By publishing her essays on London in a popular magazine and endowing them with great aesthetic value, Woolf certainly stood on both sides of the 'great divide' between high and low culture. However, I posit that the underlying critical assumption according to which the author was somewhat forced to trivialize her writing for the sake of the middle-class, middlebrow readership of similar publications is ultimately called into question. To mention a few examples, Sonita Sarker contends that these essays represent a 'restrictive frame' for Woolf's writing because they were addressed to a 'primarily North American and European bourgeois readership'.[36] Similarly, Jeanette McVicker considers *Good*

[34] Woolf's first five *Good Housekeeping* essays were collected in an American edition as *The London Scene: Five Essays by Virginia Woolf* (New York: Frank Hallman, 1975), reprinted by The Hogarth Press in 1982. The series was published again in Great Britain, with the addition of the previously omitted sixth essay, as *The London Scene* (London: Snowbooks, 2004). For an in-depth analysis of these short pieces see Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf's* Good Housekeeping *Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2019). All quotations included in the present study are from the Harper Collins edition of 2006.
[35] Alice Wood, 'Made to Measure: Virginia Woolf in *Good Housekeeping* Magazine', *Prose Studies* 32 (2010): p. 12.
[36] Sonita Sarker, 'Locating a Native Englishness in Virginia Woolf's *The London Scene*,' *NWSA Journal* 13 (2001): p. 6.

Housekeeping 'an unlikely place of publication'[37] for Woolf, but nonetheless recognizes that the magazine offered a promising audience for her cultural criticism. As a matter of fact, the way Woolf was commissioned to write for *Good Housekeeping* as a renowned literary figure connected with the elitist world of Bloomsbury, and advertised as a distinguished author in a periodical which cultivated the celebrity status of writers, shows that, in apparent contradiction, mass-market venues did actually foreground, rather than demean, her reputation as a highbrow intellectual. To quote a revealing example, Woolf was featured in an article by Mary Craik in the 'Ladies of Letters' series of April 1932, where she was praised as the daughter of the eminent Leslie Stephen, the author of experimental – and not easily accessible – visionary fiction, and most of all of brilliant criticism. If this portrait appears to be in line with the intellectualism of such celebrity-focused columns, Woolf's critical pieces for *Good Housekeeping* complement her depiction in the magazine as a literary figure standing midway between the elite and the popular. In particular, by figuring the spectator persona of her visual essays as a *flâneuse* in the modern city, Woolf subtly contradicted, and at the same time perpetuated, the archetypal image of herself as a privileged aesthete aloof from the masses.[38] Setting the point of view in predominantly urban, public spaces subverts the traditional characterization of Woolf as a recluse intellectual, while also maintaining a certain distance between the narrator and the London crowds through her role as a detached observer. Such portrayal ultimately seems to confirm Woolf's elite status by emphasizing her possession of the private income and ample leisure time needed to wander the streets of London without purpose. In a way analogous to *Vogue*'s complex interplay between the promotional highlighting of Woolf's prestigious work and the celebration of commodity, the *Good Housekeeping* essays play with her reputation in the magazine as an exceptionally talented, out-of-reach celebrity writer.

An attentive analysis of these descriptive sketches, framed as a fictional walking tour of industrialized London, reveals interesting stylistic analogies with Woolf's short fiction. Originally presented as 'a gallery

---

[37] Jeanette McVicker, '"Six Essays on London Life": A History of Dispersal' Part 1, *Woolf Studies Annual* 9 (2003): p. 143.

[38] For an analysis of these essays in terms of class and gender, see Susan Squier, '"The London Scene": Gender and Class in Virginia Woolf's London,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 29 (1983): pp. 488-500.

of scenes made vividly alive by the brilliant pen of Virginia Woolf' (as the editorial header accompanying 'The Docks of London' reads), or as a 'word picture' (in the case of 'Oxford Street Tide'), these essays manifest, ever since their earliest conception, the ambiguous position they occupy within Woolf's canon. While, on the one hand, a few references in the diary and letters imply that the author did not enjoy or take seriously their writing (an apparent indifference suggesting that her own engagement with the commission was chiefly financial),[39] on the other hand their identification with impressionistic scenes or brilliant descriptive sketches denotes a degree of continuity with Woolf's usual way of referring to her compositional process as 'scene making', or with her own conceiving the short stories she wrote as 'sketches', 'little pieces', or veritable studies in perception. As short compositions standing half-way through the essay form and the short story, in the manner of other examples of generic boundary-crossings like 'The Moment: Summer's Night', Woolf's *Good Housekeeping* essays speak of her usual tendency to blur the line between fictional and non-fictional prose. Furthermore, it is now widely acknowledged that the visual was a fundamental component of Woolf's pictorial aesthetics, undoubtedly nurtured by her interest in the arts of painting, photography and cinema. In this perspective, the *Good Housekeeping* essays, as verbal portraits of London accompanied by photographs and illustrations, can be read as iconotexts or word pictures in movement in the broader context of early cinema programmes. Moreover, though usually associated with illustrated papers, guidebooks and travelogues, Woolf's peculiar style and urban aesthetics in these vibrant essays also reinterpret, as Christine Reynier has pointed out[40], the Victorian and early twentieth-century tradition of the London sketch, and certainly bear a more striking resemblance to the dynamic, roving camera eye than to the static art of photography. As the editorial captions and the illustrations accompanying these publications clearly show[41], the visual component is

---

[39] In a letter to Ethel Smyth dated 22 March 1931, Woolf wrote: 'I'm being bored to death by my London articles – pure brilliant description – six of them – and not a thought for fear of clouding the brilliancy'. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 301.

[40] Reynier, p. 20.

[41] For a brief but punctual analysis of these materials, see Leslie Hankins, 'Moving Picture This: Virginia Woolf in the British *Good Housekeeping*!? or *Moving* Picture This: Woolf's London Essays and the Cinema,' in *Virginia Woolf and Her Female Contemporaries*, ed. Julie Vandivere and Megan Hicks (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2016), pp. 76-85, a study to which I am particularly indebted not only for providing a transcription of the captions, but also for highlighting

constantly foregrounded in both the pieces and the paratextual elements supplementing them, which undoubtedly contributed to making Woolf's sophisticated work appealing to a large, middlebrow readership.

In the editorial header for 'The Docks of London', for instance, the 'glamour of London' is said to be rendered through a 'finely etched word picture', drawn by the 'brilliant pen' of a brilliant writer.[42] Very appropriately, the essay is accompanied by exquisite etchings depicting a riverscape with the shape of Greenwich Hospital dominating in the background, together with masts, cranes, docks and ships crowding along the river. As with several of Woolf's short stories ('Kew Gardens', 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection'), the style she employs is vibrant and dynamic – 'made alive', as the caption has it – and the perspective constantly shifting, which makes both this essay and the whole collection a moving picture of a swarming urban setting, rather than a static gallery of scenes. The spectator persona first watches a 'great sailing ship pass away on the horizon',[43] then observes how 'from a launch in midstream one can see [the ships] swimming up the river',[44] and again shifts perspective when they anchor:

> Drawn by some irresistible current, they come from the storms and calms of the sea, its silence and loneliness to their allotted anchorage. The engines stop; the sails are furled [...]. A curious change takes place. They have no longer the proper perspective of sea and sky behind them, and no longer the proper space in which to stretch their limbs. They lie captive, like soaring and winged creatures who have got themselves caught by the leg and lie tethered on dry land.[45]

It is noteworthy that, in this passage, descriptive and visionary language merge: observing a real scene triggers a genuine flight of the mind as in 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'An Unwritten Novel'. In this essay celebrating rhythm and movement, the spectator/narrator, far from adopting a static perspective, travels along the pulsing, animated river and exalts the unsteadiness and energy of the scene, alternating between the squalor of the docks and the fascination of the exotic places the ships come from, in an aesthetically pleasing rhythm:

the connection between the writing technique employed in these articles and the cinematic form.

[42] Quoted in Hankins, p. 78.

[43] Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 5.

[44] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 6.

[45] Woolf, *The London Scene*, pp. 6-7.

> Indefatigable cranes are now at work, dipping and swinging, swinging and dipping. [...] Rhythmically, dexterously, with an order that has some aesthetic delight in it, barrel is laid by barrel, case by case, cask by cask [...] in endless array down the aisles and arcades of the immense low-ceiled, entirely plain and unornamented warehouses.[46]

As the narrator bluntly puts it, 'the temper of the Docks is severely utilitarian'.[47] The images of piles, heaps and rows disseminated in this essay present a mass of products stacked up and ready to be exchanged, while the use of comparatives suggests that such products are continually accumulating. However, in highlighting the fact that 'beauty begins to steal in'[48] and there may be aesthetic delight in the logic of production and consumption, Woolf presents what are generally perceived as two opposing value systems – the socio-economic and the literary one – as mutually related. What is particularly remarkable about the visual and dynamic language of 'The Docks of London' is the use of terms showing Woolf's engagement with commodity culture and the marketplace ('for all is business';[49] 'merchandise';[50] 'mercantile value';[51] 'commodity';[52] 'the whole machine of production and distribution'[53]) something which is reiterated in 'Oxford Street Tide', where the narrator hails consumerism from beginning to end. Pamela Caughie maintains that 'the two essays must be read together in order to grasp Woolf's point. The utilitarian temper of the docks [...] prepares for the "blatant and raucous" buying and selling on Oxford Street by providing the products to be sold here',[54] a view confirmed by the fact that the opening paragraph of 'Oxford Street Tide' discloses the connection between the two parts of the city.

The editorial header for this second piece in the series once again merges visual (and of course dynamic, rather than static) language and promotional language, presenting Woolf as a renowned and sophisticated celebrity author, willing to reach the vast and variegated audience

---

[46] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 10.
[47] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 11.
[48] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 13.
[49] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 6.
[50] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 11.
[51] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 11.
[52] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 12.
[53] Woolf, *The London Scene*, pp. 14-15.
[54] Pamela Caughie, 'Purpose and Play in Woolf's *London Scene* Essays,' *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): p. 394.

of a magazine like *Good Housekeeping*: 'all the colour and fascination of London's most garish, impermanent, rolling ribbon of a street are in this brilliant word picture: and in the beautiful precision of its language and thought it reveals the name of its distinguished author – VIRGINIA WOOLF'.[55] With vivid images, a lavish use of adjectives and a lively rhythm, Woolf's art of description is here at its most skilful and remarkable. In contrast with the eerily still illustrations accompanying it, this essay, too, displays the language of modern commodity and throbs with movement: 'those who buy and those who sell have suffered the same city change'.[56] Active verbs fill Woolf's description of the urban setting with its abundance and diversity of goods on display, the incessant movement of the crowds and the perpetual whirl of trade. Everything flows in Oxford Street:

> The buying and selling is too blatant and raucous. But as one saunters towards the sunset – and what with artificial light and mounds of silk and gleaming omnibuses, a perpetual sunset seems to brood over the Marble Arch – the garishness and gaudiness of the great rolling ribbon of Oxford Street has its fascination. It is like the pebbly bed of a river whose stones are for ever washed by a bright stream. Everything glitters and twinkles.[57]

Woolf's evocative and sensuous language resonates, on the one hand, with some of her fictional scenes (in *Mrs Dalloway* or *The Years*, for instance) in which the urban landscape pulsates with movement, sights and sounds, and on the other with her non-fictional prose, where she often analyses how her creative impulse originates from the impressions received by her acutely perceptive mind while walking the streets of London. In this essay it is the mind of the narrator/observer which is impressed – in the photographic sense of the term – with the kaleidoscopic sights that Oxford Street provides:

> The mind becomes a glutinous slab that takes impressions and Oxford Street rolls off upon it a perpetual ribbon of changing sights, sounds and movement. Parcels slap and hit; motor omnibuses graze the kerb; the blare of a whole brass band in full tongue dwindles to a thin reed of sound. Buses, vans, cars, barrows stream past like the fragments of a picture puzzle.[58]

---

[55] Quoted in Hankins, p. 79.
[56] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 19.
[57] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 20.
[58] Woolf, *The London Scene*, pp. 21-2.

The image of the 'glutinous slab that takes impressions' clearly alludes to the photographic process Woolf has been familiar with since her childhood and which, for example, she masterfully adopts as a narrative method in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection'. Furthermore, if the shifting perspectives and kinetic succession of fragmentary street scenes recall the cinematic technique she employs in her visual short stories (especially 'Kew Gardens'), Kathryn Simpson suggests an interesting analogy between 'Oxford Street Tide' and 'Street Haunting': both essays, set in Oxford Street, display narrative as well as descriptive elements, and 'engage with the excitements of commodity spectacle in a way that offers insights into the aesthetics of Woolf's writing'.[59] Particularly in the former, the 'sense of continual flux and flow is overwhelming. The modern city itself, its fashions, commodities and physicality, is subject to perpetual change'.[60]

Leslie Hankins describes 'Abbeys and Cathedrals' too as a piece characterized by shifting spaces and changing perspectives; this essay 'throbs with moving pictures', despite being accompanied by static illustrations that 'seem particularly at odds with the vibrant energy' of its style.[61] In the critic's opinion, since 'any illustrations may be doomed to fail to meet the challenge – perhaps impossible – of capturing the kinetic energy of Woolf's prose in any two-dimensional format',[62] it is the dynamic art of the motion pictures, rather than the static art of photography, which best equals Woolf's technique in the *Good Housekeeping* articles. As with the previous essay in the series, 'Great Men's Houses', here the observer's perspective shifts quickly from past to present, from the interior (the space of the dead) to the exterior (the space of the living), to focus on and acclaim the bustle of London life. Maintaining these contrasts, Woolf's cinematic technique first zooms out for a wide view of the area surrounding St. Paul's ('where Shakespeare and Jonson once fronted each other and had their talk out, a million Mr. Smiths and Miss Browns scuttle and hurry, swing off omnibuses, dive into tubes'),[63] then zooms quickly into St Mary-le-Bow and eases back again ('one leaves the church marvelling at the spacious days when unknown citizens could

[59] Kathryn Simpson, *Gifts, Markets and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 15.
[60] Simpson, p. 21.
[61] Hankins, p. 83.
[62] Hankins, p. 84.
[63] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 44.

occupy so much room with their bones […] when we – behold how we jostle and skip and circumvent each other in the street, how sharply we cut corners, how nimbly we skip beneath motor cars'),[64] finally focussing on the cathedral alluded to in the title:

> suddenly we run against the enormous walls of St. Paul's. Here it is again, looming over us, mountainous, immense, greyer, colder, quieter than before. And directly we enter we undergo that pause and expansion and release from hurry and effort which it is in the power of St. Paul's, more than any other building in the world, to bestow.[65]

On the contrary, Westminster Abbey seems to show no distinction between interior and exterior as far as the sense of bustling energy and movement is concerned:

> No contrast could be greater than that between St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey. Far from being spacious and serene, the abbey is narrow and pointed, worn, restless and animated. One feels as if one had stepped from the democratic helter skelter, the hubbub and hum-drum of the street, into a brilliant assembly […]. Lights and shadows are changing and conflicting every moment. Blue, gold and violet pass, dappling, quickening, fading. The grey stone, ancient as it is, changes like a live thing under the incessant ripple of changing light.[66]

Finally, analogous images and dichotomies (motion/steadiness, interior/exterior, past/present) recur in 'This Is the House of Commons'. The spectator persona's observations revolve around a series of comparisons and contrasts:

> Outside the House of Commons stand the statues of great statesmen, black and sleek and shiny as sea lions that have just risen from the water. And inside the Houses of Parliament, in those windy, echoing halls, where people are for ever passing and repassing, […] nodding and laughing and running messages and hurrying through swing doors with papers and attache cases and all the other emblems of business and haste – here, too, are statues – Gladstone, Granville, Lord John Russell – white statues, gazing from white eyes at the old scenes of stir and bustle in which, not so very long ago, they played their part. […] It is an untidy, informal-looking assembly. Sheets of white paper seem to be always fluttering to the floor. People are always coming in and out incessantly. […] The swing doors are perpetually swinging.[67]

---

[64] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 45.
[65] Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 45.
[66] Woolf, *The London Scene*, pp. 47-8.
[67] Woolf, *The London Scene*, pp. 55-7.

These stylistic analogies with the other *London Scene* articles attest to Woolf's enduring fascination with other forms of artistic expression such as painting, photography and cinema, as well as her usual tendency to inhabit liminal spaces and blur the line between fictional and non-fictional prose. Recent scholarship has paid attention to the diversity of Woolf's essays and to the ways she experimented with style, often crossing generic boundaries to create more elastic, hybrid forms.[68] Although she experienced the writing of fiction and non-fiction very differently, and saw the two forms as the result of distinct kinds of artistic gift, her writing practice clearly shows how her essays and fiction interconnect, overlap and cross-fertilize. The homogeneity between the *Good House-keeping* articles and the rest of Woolf's literary production confirms the notion (also expressed in her caustic remarks to Jacques Raverat) that writing for middlebrow magazines did not in the least affect her style as a highbrow intellectual, a view also corroborated by the fact that most of them entered the canon by being reprinted and included in subsequent collections of essays. Furthermore, exactly as their appearance in popular periodicals created a complex interplay between high modernist aesthetics and decadent, 'throwaway' consumer culture, the posthumous publication of these essays in book form, along with more mainstream pieces of criticism, brought them to the attention of readers and scholars, and contributed to the portrayal of a multifaceted artist who never lowered her high aesthetic standards.

As this essay has tried to show, Woolf's engagement with middlebrow institutions such as widely circulated periodicals and other publishing enterprises, far from diminishing her prestige or trivializing her writing, ultimately proved extremely challenging, since it helped to shape an image of herself as a renowned author who was eager to address a wide range of readers for essentially remunerative reasons, without compromising her high aesthetic ideals. This allows us to resituate Woolf in the context of the 'Battle of the Brows' raging in the 1920s and 1930s, and to read in a different light both her scornful attitude towards the 'middlebrow' in the essay of the same title, and her apparently contradictory commitment to popular print culture aimed at a mass audience.

---

[68] See for instance Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), a study suggesting that Woolf's essays blend fact and fiction, as well as Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

Bibliography

Ardis, Ann and Patrick Collier (eds.), *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Brosnan, Leila, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

Brown, Erica and Mary Grover (eds.), *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Caughie, Pamela, 'Purpose and Play in Woolf's *London Scene* Essays,' *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): pp. 389-408.

———, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

Collier, Patrick, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

Cooper, John Xiros, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Cuddy-Keane, Melba, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Dettmar, Kevin and Stephen Watt (eds.), *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

Garrity, Jane, 'Selling Culture to the "Civilized": Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity,' *Modernism/Modernity* 6, 2 (1999): pp. 29-58.

———, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry, and 1920s British *Vogue*,' in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 185-218.

Gualtieri, Elena, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

Hankins, Leslie, 'Picture This: Virginia Woolf in the British *Good Housekeeping*!? or *Moving* Picture This: Woolf's London Essays and the Cinema,' in *Virginia Woolf and Her Female Contemporaries*, ed. Julie Vandivere and Megan Hicks (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2016), pp. 76-85.

Huyssen, Andreas, 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other,' in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44-62.

Jaillant, Lise, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

Kane, Louise, '"*To-day* Has Never Been 'Highbrow'": Middlebrow, Modernism and the Many Faces of *To-day*,' in *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880-1930*, ed. Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 57-76.

Luckhurst, Nicola, *Bloomsbury in Vogue* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1998).

Mahood, Aurelea, 'Fashioning Readers: The *avant garde* and British *Vogue*, 1920-9,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 13, 1 (2002): pp. 37-47.

McVicker, Jeanette, '"Six Essays on London Life": A History of Dispersal' Part I, *Woolf Studies Annual* 9 (2003): pp. 143-65.

Nicolson, Nigel and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977).

——— (eds.), *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978).

Olivier Bell, Anne and Andrew McNeillie (eds.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

Rainey, Lawrence, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Reynier, Christine, *Virginia Woolf's* Good Housekeeping *Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Sarker, Sonita, 'Locating a Native Englishness in Virginia Woolf's *The London Scene*,' *NWSA Journal* 13, 2 (2001): pp. 1-30.

Silver, Brenda, 'What's Woolf Got to Do with It? Or, the Perils of Popularity,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, 1 (1992): pp. 20-60.

Simpson, Kathryn, *Gifts, Markets and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Squier, Susan, '"The London Scene": Gender and Class in Virginia Woolf's London,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 29, 4 (1983): pp. 488-500.

Willison, Ian, Warwick Gould and Warren Chernaik (eds.), *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

Wood, Alice, 'Made to Measure: Virginia Woolf in *Good Housekeeping* Magazine,' *Prose Studies* 32, 1 (2010): pp. 12-24.

———, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow in British Women's Magazines, 1916-1930,' in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, ed. Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 39-59.

Woolf, Virginia, *The Voyage Out* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920).

———, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930).

———, *The Waves* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960).

———, 'George Moore,' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 338-41.

———, 'Middlebrow,' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 196-203.

———, 'The Tale of Genji,' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York and London: Harcourt, 1986), pp. 264-9.

———, *The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

QUESTIONING THE CANON AND RE-WRITING/RE-RIGHTING THE FEMALE COLONIZED SUBJECT: MARY SEACOLE'S WONDERFUL ADVENTURES *AND GEORGE B. SHAW'S* THE ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK GIRL IN HER SEARCH FOR GOD

Ester Gendusa

Albeit different in terms of formal solutions and conception, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* (1857) and G.B. Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932) share an oppositional aesthetics which, in both cases, helps undermine any prevailing representation of the colonial Other. Indeed, Seacole's and Shaw's works manipulate the trope of travel in such a way as to overcome traditional conceptions of the literary canon as well as hegemonic visions of subjectivities. In *Wonderful Adventures* Seacole's recasting of the trope of travel becomes instrumental in delineating a transnational view of literature, which, in turn, becomes the vehicle for a renewed female black subject, able to converse with different cultural contexts, such as the British and the Crimean one. Less than a century later, in 1932, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw published his prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, which testified to the revolution represented by Modernism due to its being a real watershed in terms of forms and thematic motifs. In the story, the leading character, a mission-educated young black woman, sets off for a voyage across the forest in order to find God. The journey becomes the occasion for the girl to speculate on both religious and philosophical issues and, simultaneously, to openly attack the Edwardian colonial paradigm. This is primarily because in the story, in the context of an irony-pervaded reconfiguration of identity models, the 'farthest' pole of the white/black binary couple is de-homogenized, de-pathologized and given something more than a voice: a speculative faculty. It is my contention that Seacole's and Shaw's works are to be seen as oppositional literary products in which a renewed trope of travel, together with genre porosity, helps deconstruct Western hegemonic value systems and interrupt circuits of 'racialized' knowledge, thus creating symbolic possibilities of political transformation. Indeed, deconstructing the traditional racist association of Blackness with corporality and morally connoted deviance, Seacole and Shaw activate an imaginative reconfiguration of both ethnic difference and British identity whereby the colonial Other *par excellence* – the black woman – is almost re-cast into a New Woman.

Mary Seacole; G.B. Shaw; Black New Woman; (Trans)national British Identity; Genre Permeability

Albeit different in terms of authorial conception and formal solutions, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures*, published in 1857, and George Bernard Shaw's 1932 prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* share an oppositional aesthetics which helps undermine hegemonic representations of the female colonial (read: colonized) Other. Indeed, Seacole's and Shaw's works – written in two different phases of British imperialism – manipulate the trope of travel in such a way as to overcome contemporary prevailing visions of racial difference.[1] This essay thus aims to investigate the productive interplay between the odeporic formal solution and the thematic motif of identity self-fashioning in both texts, contextualizing it in the light of theoretical perspectives elaborated within gender and (post-)colonial studies. Drawing on the intertwined analytic categories of gender and 'race', it shall also explore the ways in which the two works – authored by two writers originally coming from the 'peripheries' of the empire – contribute to deconstructing traditional conceptions of the white/black divide.[2]

Wonderful Adventures was written three years after Seacole had been in the Crimean war,[3] serving as a pioneering mixed-race nurse both in the British Hotel she had opened in Balaclava and on the battlefields. The work recasts the trope of travel through a literary operation which becomes instrumental in delineating, within British odeporic literature, a multi-layered 'transnational turn' whose beginning can be traced back to the second half of the eighteenth century. Suffice it to think of Ignatius Sancho's epistolary work as well as Olaudah Equiano's and Mary Prince's autobiographical slave narratives, to name only a few.[4] These authors had

---

[1] The present essay is part of a larger project on Shaw's tale: a critical edition including a revised Italian translation of the work.

[2] That Ireland, Shaw's native country, played a complex role within the British Empire and that, for this reason, it cannot be straightforwardly assimilated to a sister kingdom with respect to England is a much debated question among historians. A large number of scholars agree on its ambiguous political positioning during the imperial era. For a recent comprehensive study, see Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[3] The Crimean War was fought from 1853 to 1856. The main reason why England took part in the war was to limit Russia's influence in Eastern Europe as well as in the Asian continent so that it could not jeopardize British power in India.

[4] Ignatius Sancho (1729?-80) was born to slave parents on a ship transporting slaves in the context of the Middle Passage. After being sold by his initial owner, he lived most of his life in London, where, thanks to the Montagu family's help, he achieved a highly respectable social status and greatly influenced the British abolitionist cause. He is the author of a correspondence published posthumously, *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782). Olaudah Equiano (1745?-97), a former slave of Nigerian origins, supported the abolitionist movement too and wrote *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*

a wide cultural influence, not limited to the literary field: Sergio Guerra identifies them with the first '*black intellectuals*' who lived in England.[5]

As a development of those early examples of Black British literature,[6] Seacole's *Adventures* problematizes and even interrupts the prevailing representational circuits of nineteenth-century white British writers' travel narrative. Travel writing itself is a complex literary category which often resists simplistic classifications. This is even more so in the case of women's travel accounts for their multi-layered transgressing of conventions and distinguishing emphasis on transcultural relationships. One of the reasons for this specificity resides in nineteenth-century women's peculiar attitude to travel. As Susan Bassnett suggests, 'women travellers are therefore categorised as doubly different: they differ from other, more orthodox, socially conformist women, and from male travellers who use the journey as a means of discovering more about their own masculinity'.[7]

Seacole's work, in particular, becomes the vehicle for a renewed model of the female traveller, as she delineates an autobiographical black female subject able to interact successfully with different cultural contexts, such as the Creole, the British and the Crimean. Far from being symbolically located within the axis of Nature and metonymically confined to the colonial territory, black subjectivity dismantles the Manichaean categori-

---

(1789), considered one of the first accounts of the complex trajectory from slavery to freedom to be published in England. Finally, Mary Prince (1788-1833), an abolitionist herself, born into slavery in Bermuda, is known as the author of the *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831), the first autobiography by a black woman in England.

[5] Sergio Guerra, *Figli della diaspora* (Fano: Aras, 2014), p. 23 (emphasis in the original).

[6] At the inception of the twenty-first century, seminal critical publications, mainly published in Great Britain, have contributed to casting light onto a tradition of literary works falling under the label of 'Black British literature'. However divisive and problematic the phrase 'Black British' may be, works such as Lyn Innes's *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (2002), Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), *A Black British Canon?* (2006), edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, and *'Black' British Aesthetics Today* (2007), edited by R. Victoria Arana, have helped delineate a multi-faceted and varied literary output by British writers with African, Asian and Caribbean origins. Although their thematic preoccupations and formal strategies may be extremely varied, it is undeniable that they all aim to transform the representation of British identity in terms of plurality. Against this backdrop the adjective 'Black' comes to be generally appropriated as a political signifier of cultural resistance to forms of marginalization and under-representation within mainstream circuits. In addition to the publications mentioned above, including Guerra (2015), for an overview of the major phases in the development of Black British literature see my *Identità nere e cultura europea. La narrativa di Bernardine Evaristo* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), especially chapter 1.

[7] Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender', in *A Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 226.

zation of the racial Other thanks to multiple displacements and cultural interactions. To this we may add the mixedness of the protagonist, which further complicates received notions of identity and national belongingness. The deriving sense of plurality is paralleled, on the formal level, by a narrative frame marked by genre permeability due to Seacole's travel accounts being interspersed with biographical references.

In the text, from its very inception, it is possible to trace Seacole's complex enactment of her belongingness to both the British community and the Jamaican Creole. In the opening chapter she locates herself within a highly productive space of identity in-betweenness which proves to be conversant with multiple cultures. Lorraine Mercer highlights her composite identity positioning when she argues that Seacole's 'narrative illustrates the position of a colonial subject placed in the challenging situation of both admiring and deconstructing white and colonial culture simultaneously'.[8] While she seems not to reject the race-biased stereotypes elaborated within Western hegemonic discourses with the aim of producing an inferiorizing image of the Other, Seacole assertively lays claim to her mixedness:

> I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins. My father was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life, and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call 'the pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war'. Many people have also traced to my Scotch blood that energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race, and which have carried me to so many varied scenes; and perhaps they are right. I have often heard the term 'lazy Creole' applied to my country people; but I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent.[9]

The cultural process whereby the narrative persona activates the self-appropriation of her ethnic in-betweeness interweaves with Seacole's representation of an innovative genealogy with respect to traditional family models. In rejecting the racist association between indolence and the Creole group, she moulds her self-image by tracing an intimate connection with her Scottish father. As a consequence, her work counteracts dominant stereotyped representational processes of the period mainly surfacing from pseudo-scientific discourses as well as from literature.

---

[8] Lorraine Mercer, 'I Shall Make No Excuse: The Narrative Odyssey of Mary Seacole,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35, 1 (2005): p. 3.
[9] Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (London: James Blackwood, 1857), p. 1. From now on, the page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

Here, mixedness, primarily traceable along the female genealogical line, is closely associated with racial weakness and degeneration. Sander L. Gilman, referring to the culturally constructed notion of miscegenation, maintains that 'miscegenation was a fear (and a word) from the late nineteenth-century vocabulary of sexuality. It was a fear not merely of interracial sexuality but of its results, the decline of the population'.[10]

In deliberately recuperating, within the textual space, a father/daughter emotional bond across the racial divide as well as the cultural legacy it entails, Seacole deconstructs the unbalanced power relations of the man/woman binary couple as elaborated in nineteenth-century patriarchal Britain. In so doing, she lays the foundations for the dismantling of the discursive association between blackness and inferiority. A connection that, in the wake of the colonial encounter, had been clearly modelled on the paradigm of connotative meanings coalescing around the man/woman dichotomy, as Anne McClintock suggests in her seminal *Imperial Leather* (1995):

> By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the analogy between race and gender degeneration came to serve a specifically modern form of social domination, as an intricate dialectic emerged – between the domestication of the colonies and the racializing of the metropolis. In the metropolis the idea of racial deviance was evoked to police the 'degenerate' classes – the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane – who were collectively figured as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern metropolis. In the colonies, black people were figured among other things as gender deviants, the embodiment of prehistoric promiscuity and excess, their evolutionary belatedness evidenced by their 'feminine' lack of history, reason and proper domestic arrangements.[11]

A plethora of examples pervaded by the deriving dualisms man/woman and white/black – often inextricably interconnected – can be found in cultural contexts in which Victorian hegemonic discourses were produced. The inferiorization of womanhood and of female blackness in particular was so pervasive that it ended up informing even cultural products which, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, aimed at redefining stereotyped notions of female identity. Cases in point are

---

[10] Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1 (1985): p. 237.
[11] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 44-5.

Charlotte Brontë's semiautobiographical *Jane Eyre* (1847) and, in the artistic field, *Ophelia*, John Everett Millais's much-celebrated 1851 painting. In both works the thematic undertone of mental insanity is deeply connected with femininity.[12]

Going back to Seacole's work, it is useful to notice that the politics of location entailed in her initial self-fashioning and further developed throughout the narrative also implies an imaginative deconstruction of the traditional race-biased model of the colonized woman. In tracing her cultural belongingness, Seacole casts light on her mother's medical competence, as can be inferred from the following excerpt:

> My mother kept a boarding-house in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed at Kingston. It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me (p. 2).

What is important to emphasize here is that the medical knowledge and the socially acknowledged practice of which Seacole is depositary are handed down in the context of the matrilineal bond. The resulting female line of cultural transmission acquires oppositional traits with respect to the Western official custom of handing knowledge down to one's students in male-dominated contexts, which came into being in the aftermath of the institutionalization of the medical field.

As the narrative unfolds, the autobiographical events Seacole singles out amid her multiple displacements become the occasion for the author to reflect on the 'Creole character' in such a way as to valorise an axiological system as well as behavioural traits other than the dominant ones:

> I do not think that we hot-blooded Creoles sorrow less for showing it so impetuously; but I do think that the sharp edge of our grief wears down sooner than theirs who preserve an outward demeanour of calmness, and nurse their woe secretly in their hearts (p. 6).

[12] In Brontë's novel, in particular, madness is seen as the result of the biological weakening of the white group following the sexual encounter with the black in the colonial space. Here, the white Creole Bertha Mason typifies black women's supposedly inherent weakness and its transmission along the female family line. As for Millais's painting, its recuperation of the Shakespearean character, notwithstanding the celebration of powerful womanhood and of female artistic talents typical of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, seems to be in line with the spirit of an age when, as Elaine Showalter underlines, echoing Michael Donnelly's positions in *Managing the Mind* (1983), 'Ophelia became the prototype not only of the deranged woman in Victorian literature and art but also of the young female asylums patients'. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 90.

Also, when Seacole relates about local populations she offers a highly problematized vision. Unlike her two important predecessors, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) and Elizabeth Craven (1750-1828),[13] who both wrote about countries of the then Ottoman Empire, she alludes – albeit not always explicitly – to the power relations active in the Crimean area, thus showing a high political sensibility which both Montagu's and Craven's works seem to lack. She writes: 'They robbed us, the Turks, and one another; but a stronger hand was sometimes laid on them. The Turk, however, was sure to be the victim, let who might be the oppressor' (p. 105).

The formal dimension of the work, predominantly interspersed with dialogical passages, seems to be in line with the cultural issues examined. Indeed, one of the major characteristics of Seacole's narrative is that, throughout the textual space, the authorial persona always engages the reader in what appears to be a continuous dialogical exchange as the recourse to the second person singular pronouns highlights: 'If *you* had told me that the time would soon come when I should remember this sorrow calmly, I should not have believed it possible: and yet it was so' (p. 6). Further on, Seacole writes 'I was glad enough to go on shore, as *you* may imagine' (p. 16, emphasis added). If we consider that Seacole's reading public would be mainly English, such a continuous involvement of the reader could be interpreted as a search of consent in the context of Seacole's complex (self-)fashioning, which also includes an explicit socio-cultural identification as an English citizen. This dynamic of national self-appropriation can be found, in particular, in one of the headings of Chapter XI which reads 'I become an English schoolmistress abroad' (p. 102).

The second printing of the work, following the initial one by James Blackwood in 1857, indicates that its reception in the context of imperial England was most favourable. This was also due to Seacole's fame to which William H. Russell, the war correspondent of the *Times*, had greatly contributed during the conflict. The editorial success of the work as well as the institution in 1867 of the Seacole's Fund, established to provide the war 'veteran' with a pension, and Seacole's well-off acquaintances (including the Prince of Wales himself) also urge contemporary critics

---

[13] For a comprehensive analysis of the different cultural perspectives informing Montagu's and Craven's work, structured around both gender and 'race' as analytic categories, see Efterpi Mitsi, 'Lady Elizabeth Craven's Letters from Athens and the Female Picturesque,' in *Women Writing Greece: Essays on Hellenism, Orientalism and Travel*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Efterpi Mitsi (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 19-37.

to take into account all possible forms of negotiation, complicity, resistance and mutual acknowledgement (if only on a private level) between colonized subjectivities and the British hegemonic groups, rather than postulating a clear-cut Manichean opposition between the two, which, however, kept pervading official discourses.

If Seacole's work is constructed around the motif of cultural hybridity,[14] in Shaw's prose tale *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* the deconstruction of the colonial paradigm is pushed even further. Authored by a white, male Irish playwright originally coming from the domestic 'margins' of the imperial territory, it was published seventy-five years after the publication of Seacole's life story, when Britain still exerted its control over the Empire. In the meantime, in the cultural field the Modernist revolution, a real watershed in terms of forms and thematic motifs, had taken place. And as I shall attempt to demonstrate, the multiplicity of time levels and voices as well as the pivotal role attributed to the female leading character testify to the influence of Modernism on Shaw's tale. In his *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2005), Pericles Lewis argues that 'Shaw seems more at home among the Edwardians like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells, than the modernists T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf'.[15] However, I contend that although the Shavian tale cannot be classified as a modernist work *tout court*, modernist tenets – especially those concerning an innovative representation of identity – can be found in its textual space. My position mainly draws on Astradur Eysteinsson's view of Modernism as 'a historically explosive paradigm'.[16] Indeed, the scholar argues that 'modernism can be seen as the negative other of capitalist-bourgeois ideology and of the ideological space of social harmony demarcated for the bourgeois subject',[17] thus underlining the rethinking of traditional subjectivities and of the concomitant social order which modernist literature introduced. When we consider Shaw's social commitment, his active involvement in the reformist action of the Fabian Society and his support of William Archer's introduction of Henrik Ibsen's revolutionary theatre – with its new female characterizations – in

---

[14] For the notion of hybridity in Seacole's work, see Jessica Howell, 'Mrs. Seacole Prescribes Hybridity: Constitutional and Maternal Rhetoric in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38, 1 (2010): pp. 107-25.

[15] Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 201.

[16] Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 19.

[17] Eysteinsson, p. 37.

England, the hypothesis that Modernist new symbolic paradigms might have influenced his later production proves to be more plausible than not.

The protagonist of Shaw's tale, a mission-educated young black woman, is an innovative character from the very inception of the story. Unlike any other female colonized character delineated by contemporary white writers, she sets off for a voyage across an unspecified African forest on her own in order to find God, taking with her a Bible as her only guide.[18] Since her journey becomes an occasion for the girl to speculate on both religious and philosophical issues, it enables the symbolic disarticulation of the stereotypical nexus between blackness and savagery.[19] Simultaneously – as I shall demonstrate – her irony-pervaded voyage also becomes a textual space in which European colonialism as well as gendered cultural practices openly come under attack. Her displacement across an unspecified – and, consequently, unidentifiable – African space peopled by human beings as well as human-like animals implies a series of displacements in time. In so doing, it recalls – and simultaneously deconstructs – one of the major tropes at the basis of most Victorian colonial travel writing and official discourse, a trope that McClintock has called 'anachronistic space'.[20] In the scholar's words this construction, elaborated by European hegemonic groups, 'reached full authority as an administrative and regulatory technology in the late Victorian era [...] Within this trope the agency of women, the colonized and the industrial working class are disavowed and projected onto anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity'.[21] However, in the case of the black girl, her journey across the African space follows an opposite temporal direction as it implies – due to her encounters with characters belonging to or allegorically signifying different historical eras – the crossing of multiple time levels unfolding from the past to the pres-

[18] Readers may only assume that the forest in question is a South African one since, in the original afterword to the tale, Shaw reveals that he wrote it in the winter of 1932 in the South African city of Knysna, where he stayed five weeks due to an accident occurred to his wife, Charlotte. Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl*, p. 59.

[19] In European imagery, the alleged black savagery was sexually connoted. Europeans blamed black people – males in particular – for degenerate sexual appetites. As Margaret Strobel notes, in the colonies the emergence of this fear corresponded to an increased perception of imperial vulnerability. In her words, 'collective sexual hysteria swept South Africa with fears of a Black Peril in 1893, 1906-1908, and 1912-13, coinciding with economic depression'. See Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 5.

[20] McClintock, p. 40.

[21] McClintock, p. 40.

ent rather than from the historical present to an artificially constructed primitive past as the one referred to by McClintock. Moreover, in such a process, hegemonic cultural tenets – mostly Western – are symbolically projected onto the African space and come under the severe scrutiny of a young black female observer, ready to detect and stigmatize their inherent contradictions and inferiorizing meanings.

Constructed as it is around dialogues and marked by sarcastic undertones, the textual fabric of the tale is imbued with philosophical, religious and scientific speculations. Indeed, the protagonist encounters various characters – both men and women – who act as the boastful embodiments of cultural eras, philosophical currents and social practices. In this context, for example, through the depiction of would-be god-like characters, the far-stretched extremes of the Christian as well as the Islamic creeds are portrayed as ridiculous, thus becoming the real objects of the black girl's contempt. This explains why the volume caused disquiet among Christian circles and why in Ireland in 1933 the Censorship Board even banned it on the grounds of its being 'indecent'.[22]

Simultaneously, the respective embodiments of the self-proclaimed gods seem to undergo a process of museification, which, in spite of its peculiar symbolic outcomes, inevitably recalls the practice of exposing people of African descent in the European imperial metropolises of London and Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century.[23] However, interestingly enough, in Shaw's tale Otherness, rather than being symbolically associated with the African territory or with people of African origin, is epitomized by traditional beliefs mainly pertaining to western, Judeo-Christian culture, which, as a result, are deprived of their alleged axiological normativity. Thus, in one of the first scenes, the vengeful Old Testament God – typified by the Lord of the Hosts – is openly criticized and its manifest irrationality

---

[22] See Brad Kent, 'The Banning of George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* and the Decline of the Irish Academy of Letters,' *Irish University Review* 38, 2 (2008): pp. 274-91.

[23] A case in point is Sarah Baartman's tragic life experience, an extreme example of what I would call 'living museology'. Indeed Sarah (1789-1815), a woman of the Khoikhoi group, probably suffering from steatopygia, was exposed in London as well as in Paris (here, in particular, in conditions closely resembling slavery) in the context of freak shows due to her allegedly abnormal physical characteristics. The latter, in turn, caused her to be iconographically inferiorized as the quintessential example of black female sexual primitivism in the realm of the contemporary pseudo-scientific discourse of medicine. In this respect, Gilman, who explicitly underlines the role of nineteenth-century medicine in structuring the prevailing, perceived categorization of the world, observes that 'Sarah Baartman's sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century' (Gilman, p. 216).

becomes synonymous with theoretical fallacy (read: uselessness). As in a parable, this is visualized when those pages of the young black girl's Bible corresponding to the Old Testament revert to dust after she has deconstructed the assumptions of the Lord of the Hosts through her powerful reasoning: 'But whether the ants had got at it, or, being a very old book, it had perished by natural decay, all the early pages had crumbled to dust which blew away when she opened it'.[24] Such a challenging axiological reversal also implies a symbolic reframing of the colonizer/colonized couple whose theoretical validity, within the racialized discourse of imperialism, presupposes, on the contrary, a naturalized relation of power between its two poles. Referring to the imperialist discursive practice of signifying difference, Stuart Hall maintains that

> typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing 'difference'. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification and change. But if they are natural […] then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure'.[25]

Shaw's critique is also unmistakably addressed to the cultural control exercised on the local populations through the colonizers' manipulative preaching of the Christian doctrine among the young African generations. This can be inferred from his initial portrait of the woman who runs the mission in which the black girl had been educated. In this respect, Leon Hugo remarks that 'what bothered Shaw was the effect of such teaching on Africans, for, as he saw the situation, the consequence would be to graft falsehood presented as divine truth on young souls before their potential for a healthy apperception of the truly divine had had a chance to be realized. This, to him, was an effrontery that could not be brooked – the spiritual rape of innocence, no matter if performed with the best of intentions'.[26]

[24] George Bernard Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (London: Constable, 1932), p. 11. From now on, the page numbers of Shaw's tale will be given parenthetically in the text.
[25] Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the Other', in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), p. 234 (emphasis in the original).
[26] Leon Hugo, *Bernard Shaw's* The Black Girl in Search of God*: The Story Behind the Story* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 134.

If, on the one hand, the black girl's journey ends up casting light onto the primitivism of Western civilization and its uncritical acceptance of some of the conventions of Christian thought, a similarly powerful critique is addressed to Islamic cultural practices. This, in turn, testifies to gender issues being the major thematic threads of the work, as demonstrated by the girl's open attack to polygamy and her stigmatization of the gender unbalance it implies. When talking to a character named 'the Arab', the black girl poignantly asks him, 'If it is as you say, God must have created Woman because He found Man insufficient. By what right do you demand fifty wives and condemn each of them to one husband?' (p. 50). And, later on, she insists, 'How is she to know your value unless she has known fifty men to compare with you?' (p. 51).

Her robust awareness of gender relations makes the black girl parallel, in Andrew Sanders's words, the 'men-mastering, no-nonsense, strong-willed women that [Shaw] created',[27] following Ibsen's influence. It is no surprise that in his 1913 preface to *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw condemns the patriarchal attitude of Western men since, in his view, 'in killing women's souls they had killed their own'.[28] Moreover, in line with the black girl's gender self-awareness, one of the distinctive traits of her portrait is her use of the knobkerry, a detail that cannot be taken for granted as the Afro-American author, Carter G. Woodson, had suggested as early as 1935. In his 'Some Attitudes in English Literature', while dismissing Charles Herbert Maxwell's reply to Shaw's tale as 'a modest companion', he underlines Shaw's girl's use of such a stick as peculiar:

> Charles Herbert Maxwell wrote in 1933 a reply entitled *Adventures of the White Girl in Her Search for God*, in which he inserts a note, 'Let not the reader think it strange that the White Girl should carry a "niblick." To anyone acquainted with things African, this is far less extraordinary than that a Bantu Girl should carry a "knobkerry," as happens in Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*'.[29]

Significantly, if, on the one hand, the young woman's iconoclastic attack – metonymically conveyed by her knobkerry – is directed against

[27] Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 478.

[28] George Bernard Shaw, 'Preface: 1913', in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano, 1922), p. xii.

[29] Carter G. Woodson, 'Some Attitudes in English Literature,' *The Journal of Negro History* 20, 1 (1935): p. 85.

the traditional hegemonic constructions pertaining to religious thought, to imperialist discourses as well as to the patriarchal system, it is also true that her character displays a profound consciousness of complex power relations within which gender and 'race' inextricably interweave. Consequently, this seems to anticipate, on a narrative level, some of the theoretical issues Black feminists would pose nearly four decades later, between the late Seventies and the early Eighties.

If examined in the light of such an interpretative perspective, where multiple levels of inferiorization interact, Seacole's work too proves to be imbued with a specific condemnation of unbalanced power relations between women of different ethnic backgrounds. When Seacole tries to be recruited as part of Florence Nightingale's nurses, she clearly perceives that the refusal of her application is due to socio-political reasons having to do with her ethnic belonging: 'Once again I tried, and I had an interview this time with one of Miss Nightingale's companions. She gave me the same reply, and I read in her face that had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it' (p. 79). However, after reading the passage from which this crucial exchange is taken, one has the impression that Seacole's stigmatization of its inherent race-biased contradictions is not explicit as mostly confined within the boundaries of a private interethnic negotiation between two women. By contrast, in Shaw's tale, the ironic altercation between the black girl and Miss Fitz-jones, one of the women in the white group she meets along her journey, comes immediately after the black girl's outspoken condemnation of the political as well as economic subordination of the colonized determined by western imperialism. In her words,

> The most wonderful things you have are your guns. It must be easier to find God than to find out how to make guns. But you do not care for God: you care for nothing but guns. You use your guns to make slaves of us. Then, because you are too lazy to shoot, you put the guns into our hands and teach us to shoot for you. [...] But nothing will satisfy your greed. You work generations of us to death until you have each of you more than a hundred of us could eat or spend, and yet you go on forcing us to work harder and harder and longer and longer for less and less food and clothing (p. 39).

Following the specific passage in which the black girl has just openly blamed the Europeans for being the true 'heathens and savages' since, as perpetrators of colonial violence, they deprive the colonized of their

self-determination, the white woman's reaction is extremely revealing of the mechanisms whereby racial imbalances further create levels of conflict among and between women:

> 'Look!' cried the first lady. 'She is upsetting the men. I told you she would. They have been listening to her seditious rot. Look at their eyes. They are dangerous. I shall put a bullet through her if none of you men will.'
> And the lady actually drew a revolver, she was so frightened (p. 41).

Significantly, Miss Fitzjones's abrupt outburst – 'I told you she would' – reveals that, in her perception, the black girl is entrapped in the stereotypical construction of the Other to which the white woman relates, thus interposing the filter of the Manichaean imperialist rhetoric between the young woman and herself. As a result, this not only prevents her from creating authentic gender counter-alliances across the racial divide, but also leads her to become a potential vehicle for colonial practices inspired by violence. The cultural clash between the black girl and Miss Fitzjones explores – albeit in caricatural terms – the impossibility for a white woman and a black one in the African colonial context of the 1930s to mirror each other. Almost fifty years later, in 1979, this issue was raised theoretically by Audre Lorde who, in her founding essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', intervened in the feminist debate of the time emphasizing the pervasiveness, within its boundaries, of a dominant white feminist discourse. Consequently, the black theorist urged women not only to acquire a deep awareness of the multiple subject positions existing in the female sphere, but also to give them an adequate voice in order to articulate effective counter-discourses in the context of the political implementation of forms of interdependence, so as not to replicate patriarchal power relations:

> For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. [...] Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom that allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.[30]

A formally over-determined text, in which the generic features of travel narrative, *Bildungsroman* and satirical pamphlet productively in-

---

[30] Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), p. 111.

tersect, Shaw's tale is also pervaded by multiple oppositional thematic motifs. Against this background, its conventional heteronormative ending – the black girl ends up interrupting her search for God and marrying an initially reluctant Irish man – may seem, at least at first sight, to act as a narrative anti-climax mostly due to its seeming conformity to a middle-class family model. In reality, the fictional construction of the black girl's domestic environment is far from being pacifying. Albeit marked by ironic undertones, the union between the two – in which the Irishman is literally forced to take the young woman as his wife – implies a reversal of the roles within the traditional white man/black woman couple in the colonial context: more precisely, it foregrounds a representational overturning of the conventional imperialist iconography which saw the black woman subordinate to the white man's predatory act directed towards the colonial land and the colonized female body.

The black girl and the Irishman's household and garden are to be viewed as the symbolic representation of social(ist) commitment. It is no coincidence that the initial owner of the place, the old gentleman, a figuration of the French philosopher Voltaire, gives the black girl hospitality and convincingly suggests she should interrupt her search and opt for active participation in the (metaphorical) gardening. As the tale unfolds, onto this micro-context is projected the progressive replacing (evolution?) of Voltairean rationalism by the Shavian socialist ideal of egalitarian cooperation for the advancement of society exemplified by a renewed metaphorical cultivation of potatoes introduced by the Irishman.

In line with such deconstructive identity models, the harmony of the final domestic scene seems to further contradict a widespread imperialist discourse (thus revealing its inherent constructedness) that blamed mixed unions for the progressive weakening of the white group due to the alleged process of 'going native' to which white people might yield in the context of a most dreaded assimilation to local people in the colonial space. If, from the very beginning of the work, the authorial aim was primarily that of disavowing false religious beliefs, once the reading has been completed, the Shavian tale reveals a more complex thematic fabric: indeed, it proves to be an act of accusation against an entire civilization which, brandishing the ideological weapon of the white man's burden, had activated, for centuries, a military control system supported by the cultural process of a systematic inferiorization of the Other. Furthermore, as the narrative develops, a robust sensitivity to gender issues can

be outlined, which further contributes to reinforcing the counter-discourse of the text.

The point to note here is that the oppositional thematic motif of the text is not contradicted at the end of the story when the young black woman, having interrupted her search for God (at least on a material level) is portrayed taking care of her children and carrying out daily family duties. Indeed, it should be considered that her family life is, after all, the result of her self-determination. Hugo observes that she is 'a "champion" endowed with heroic qualities: moral courage, physical and mental strength, good looks, quick-wittedness, a healthy reserve of skepticism, and tons of common sense'.[31] The young woman's journey has represented, for the reader, a real literary quest resulting in a redefinition of Otherness, traditionally represented by the black group, and by black women in particular. Therefore, Shaw's work is to be interpreted as a literary space within whose productive blurring of generic conventions a renewed trope of travel and, consequently, an equally revised travel narrative allow to deconstruct – at least on an imaginative level – Western hegemonic axiological systems and interrupt racialized circuits of knowledge.

Moreover, due to the relational nature of meanings, in deconstructing the traditional racist association between blackness and the symbolic axis of Nature (as opposed to Culture) and morally connoted deviance, not only does Shaw activate a reconfiguration of ethnic Otherness but he also offers a redefinition of Western and, within it, British identity. And if Seacole had operated an identity self-fashioning from a perspective which, at least initially, positioned itself in the productive space of cultural inbetweenness, similarly Shaw's iconoclastic meaning production originates from a perspective that is internal to British civilization and, at the same time, filtered by a gaze reminiscent of the original complex positioning on the 'domestic' (read: Irish) margins of the empire.

In conclusion, Seacole's and Shaw's works – notwithstanding their different contexts of production and peculiar formal solutions – are to be seen as oppositional literary products in which a reinterpreted trope of travel, together with the generic porosity marking both texts, helps deconstruct Western hegemonic representational practices. Indeed, by contesting traditional areas of identity representation, Seacole and Shaw

---

[31] Hugo, p. 142.

activate an imaginative reconfiguration of both ethnic difference and Britishness. Moreover, if in the traditional white/black binary couple the pervasive stereotype of a homogenized and pathologized black woman used to represent the most inferiorized 'layer' of the black pole, in their works, on the contrary, this construct is progressively reversed. As a result, not only is the black woman given a voice, but also her speculative faculty is foregrounded. This implies for the colonial Other *par excellence* being almost re-cast into a black New Woman, which, in turn, programmatically creates symbolic possibilities of political transformation.

Bibliography

Bassnett, Susan, 'Travel Writing and Gender,' in *A Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 225-41.

Donnelly, Michael, *Managing the Mind. A Study of Medical Psychology in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Tavistock, 1983).

Eysteinsson, Astradur, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

Gendusa, Ester, *Identità nere e cultura europea. La narrativa di Bernardine Evaristo* (Roma: Carocci, 2015).

Gilman, Sander L., 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1 (1985): pp. 204-42.

Guerra, Sergio, *Figli della diaspora. Romanzo e multiculturalità nella Gran Bretagna contemporanea* (Fano: Aras, 2014).

Hall, Stuart, 'The Spectacle of the Other,' in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), pp. 215-87.

Howell, Jessica, 'Mrs. Seacole Prescribes Hybridity: Constitutional and Maternal Rhetoric in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38, 1 (2010): pp. 107-25.

Hugo, Leon, *Bernard Shaw's* The Black Girl in Search of God*: The Story Behind the Story* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

Kenny, Kevin, *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Kent, Brad, 'The Banning of George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* and the Decline of the Irish Academy of Letters', *Irish University Review* 38, 2 (2008): pp. 274-91.

Lewis, Pericles, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Lorde, Audre, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), pp. 110-3.

McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Mercer, Lorraine, 'I Shall Make No Excuse: The Narrative Odyssey of Mary Seacole,' *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 35, 1 (2005): pp. 1-24.

Mitsi, Efterpi, 'Lady Elizabeth Craven's Letters from Athens and the Female Picturesque,' in *Women Writing Greece: Essays on Hellenism, Orientalism and Travel*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Efterpi Mitsi (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 19-37.

Sanders, Andrew, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Seacole, Mary, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (London: James Blackwood Paternoster Row, 1857).

Shaw, George Bernard, 'Preface: 1913,' in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano, 1922), pp. vii-xvii.

———, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (London: Constable, 1932).

Showalter, Elaine, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago, 1987).

Strobel, Margaret, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

Woodson, Carter G., 'Some Attitudes in English Literature', *The Journal of Negro History* 20, 1 (1935): pp. 27-85.

BACK INTO THE BOX: T.S. ELIOT'S PREFACE TO DJUNA BARNES'S NIGHTWOOD

Monica Manzolillo

On 1 May 1936 T.S. Eliot wrote to Djuna Barnes that Faber & Faber would publish her *Nightwood* subject to some deletions and alterations. The novel was issued in the following year with a preface by Eliot that Djuna Barnes later admitted to have found 'acceptable' only because it was written by the famous modernist poet. In his preface in fact Eliot does not highlight the elements that make *Nightwood* an absolutely original work, which stands outside any given literary pattern. In his few introductory pages, Eliot insists on the stylistic and moral cohesion of the novel in such a way as to preventively reject any possible accusation of excess and indecency. But Eliot's preoccupations were only partly concerned with the risk of censorship or of an editorial failure. The modernist cantor, who in *The Waste Land* had given voice to the sense of loss of an entire generation, was baptized in 1927 proclaiming himself 'Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics, Anglo-Catholic in religion'. Since then his interests as a poet and literary critic had moved more and more in the direction of the moral philosophy of F.H. Bradley, based on the assumption that the ideal self can be realized through religion. Moreover, the vast kaleidoscope of 'inverted' characters depicted by Barnes holds an implication as opposition to Aryan essentialism, forecasting Nazi racial and gender cleansing. Reactionary Eliot deliberately overlooks Barnes's antifascist polemic, which indeed appears quite clear since the very first chapter. Both the preface and the several deletions thus largely correspond to Eliot's deliberate intention to 'canonize' a novel which stands out of any possible convention, to 'domesticate' Barnes's voice while presenting it to the reader as 'harmless'. Unfortunately *Nightwood* has not been given justice in most recent times, even when it became mostly a cult lesbian classic. Patriarchy, from Eliot to Kenneth Burke, has had deleterious effects on this highly imaginative and revolutionary novel.

Modernism; T.S. Eliot; Djuna Barnes; Gender Studies

Djuna Barnes began to write *Nightwood* after a nine-year relationship with the sculptor Thelma Wood, another American expatriate in Paris, and it took her several years to find a publisher for her novel. An early version of the manuscript was typed for Barnes by author Charles Henri Ford during the summer of 1932 and, by 1935, she had received six rejections from potential publishers. Her creative process proved equally arduous because it covered almost six years in which she wrote at least

three versions of the novel, the latter of which was finally accepted by T.S. Eliot at the London house Faber & Faber in 1936, and was republished in America by Harcourt Brace with the addition of Eliot's introduction in 1937.

In October 1935 Eliot had received a letter from Miss Emily Coleman, the American poet and novelist who, along with Barnes, was part of the alternative culture of Greenwich Village in New York. In her letter, she was writing about the manuscript of a 42-year-old American writer, well known in the New York intellectual world, who had had two previous books published. While Barnes's first two works, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) and *A Night among Horses* (1929), are described by Coleman as having no philosophical viewpoint and lacking an organic structure and emotional strength, the novel included in this manuscript for her contains extraordinary writing which reflects the anxieties and the emotional state of the times.[1] But, as Coleman expected, Eliot's reaction was not enthusiastic and in fact he candidly responded to her: 'the style struck me as incredibly tortured and tedious. I should doubt whether anyone would have the endurance to read through a novel written in this style'.[2] However, Miss Coleman went on in pursuing her case, anthologizing her favourite lines for Eliot's introspection so that he apparently capitulated. As he admitted, he 'didn't appreciate *Nightwood* at first' and 'Emily Coleman practically forced the book down my throat'.[3] Under assault, on 1 May 1936 he wrote to her: 'I am now able to tell you that my firm will be glad to publish *Nightwood*, subject to Miss Barnes's acceptance of such deletions and alterations as we think necessary'.[4] The next day Djuna Barnes accepted Faber & Faber's offer.

In what exactly these deletions and alterations consisted, and in what measure Eliot shares responsibility with Barnes and Coleman for the final version of the novel remains uncertain. We know that Barnes submitted two versions of the novel and that Eliot found the shorter one more satisfactory. Moreover, he suggested 'more drastic cutting, twelve to fifteen pages [...] I know it is painful to sacrifice what one feels to be good lines, but you had to cut a good deal, you will remember, out of

---

[1] Letter from Emily Coleman to T.S. Eliot, 25 October 1935, Emily Holmes Coleman Papers, Newark, University of Delaware Library, Folder 10.
[2] T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 8, 1936-38, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 49.
[3] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 115.
[4] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 123.

Nightwood, stuff which was quite good enough to stay in, except that there was too much of it'.[5] These deletions were mainly related to direct allusions to sexuality and religion, but Eliot also intervened in the long-standing question of the title suggesting that *Nightwood* was much better than *Anatomy of the Night* since:

> *Nightwood* seems to me a perfect title for this book; *The Anatomy of the Night* not only imperfect but definitely bad. There is a self-conscious literary flavour in the latter title which does the book a great injustice. In fact it is quite contrary to the spirit of the work. It suggests a volume of totally superfluous maundering essays by some ephemeral and insignificant literary hack.[6]

Barnes agreed that *Nightwood* was the perfect title. In fact, it is just one word whose sound immediately evokes the idea of night obscurity, poison and forest. Moreover, it is immediately related to the dreamlike atmosphere of the novel that reminds of many fairytales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Red Riding Hood.*

Most importantly, Eliot wrote a preface to the 1938 edition of the novel, reprinted in 1949, which appears rather unconvincing to many critics such as C.L. Watson who defined it 'unreliable', adding that Djuna Barnes later admitted to have found it 'acceptable' only because it was written by the famous modernist poet.[7] This preface appears quite indolent and does not provide much examination of the book it introduces, for indeed T.S. Eliot starts by effacing his function as 'introducer' claiming that the book needs no introduction at all. In his few pages, in fact, Eliot does not highlight the elements that make *Nightwood* an absolutely original work, which stands outside any given literary pattern, but somehow tries to canonize Barnes's voice even in her most obscure traits noticing a certain similarity with the Elizabethan tragedy 'in her quality of horror and fate'.[8] He mainly insists on the poetic quality of Barnes's language which, in his opinion, is so musical and intense that 'only the readers who have formed their sensibility on poetry can really appreciate'.[9] Moreover, he stresses the stylistic and moral cohesion of the novel in such a way as to preventively reject any possible accusation of excess and indecency. Eliot had identified in the voluntary use of ambiguous language and in the

[5] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 125.
[6] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 121.
[7] C.L. Watson, 'Mr Eliot Presents Miss Barnes,' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 March 1937, p. 16.
[8] T.S. Eliot, Introduction to *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), p. 17.
[9] Eliot, Introduction to *Nightwood*, p. 5.

choice of unconventional characters (such as homosexuals, transvestites, circus actors and impoverished nobles) the most vulnerable elements of *Nightwood* and in fact on 10 June 1936 he wrote to Djuna Barnes:

> We not only have taken and are taking a very considerable amount of trouble over the book, but we expect that at best we shall not recover the expenses of publication for some considerable time. At worst it is just possible that the book might be prohibited, in which case we should have a considerable loss. Our publishing the book is not certainly for the purpose of profit, but we do feel that we are entitled to make any minor condition that might help us to protect against loss.[10]

In his preface Eliot does all he can to attenuate the impact of this novel on the public but, in doing so, his preoccupations were only partly with the risk of censorship or of an editorial failure. Like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Djuna Barnes's strange and sensuous *Nightwood* surely belongs to that small class of books that somehow reflect a time or an epoch. That time is the period between the two world wars, and Barnes's novel unfolds in the decadent shadows of Europe's great cities such as Paris, Berlin and Vienna. 1936, when *Nightwood* was published in Britain, was the year of the British abdication crisis because Edward VIII chose his mistress Wallis Simpson over the British throne. This year also saw the start of the Spanish Civil War, while Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda was rising. The National Socialist German Workers' Party promoted an ideology which demonized all its opponents, principally Jews and Communists, but also intellectuals and any kind of minority which could threaten the idea of a superior Germanic race pride.

The vast kaleidoscope of unconventional characters depicted by Barnes implicitly opposes Aryan essentialism, forecasting Nazi racial and gender cleansing. The protagonists of the night are the Jewish Felix Volkbein, the African-American circus actor Nikka, the lesbians Nora and Jenny, but especially the androgynous Robin Vote and Dr Mattew O' Connor. Far from acquiescent, Robin's promiscuity and 'powerful and wilful silence' constitutes an aggressive gesture against the euphemistic 'hygiene' of 'good women' and 'good housewives'.[11] Moreover, in a novel that focuses on a human misery that usually remains well hidden and on

---

[10] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 130.
[11] Margaret Vandeburg, 'Aryan Mundus and Sexual Inversion: Eliot's Edition of *Nightwood*,' *Prospects. An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 23 (1998): p. 342.

the need to be healed from suffering, Dr Matthew Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor plays the role of 'general practitioner, seer, father confessor, psychologist, and all-around saviour',[12] so that, when he is finally overcome himself by illness and cannot effect a cure, Barnes's suggestion that healing in the modern world is an impossible task becomes clear.

This heterogeneous group of characters forms a transgressive band of outlaws who lack any connection with the canons and norms imposed by authoritarian and dogmatic conventions. Defined by Jane Marcus a 'female Rabelais', Barnes indeed operates a carnivalesque inversion as the symbolic antithesis of Nazism that derives from the epistemological status of sexuality in Modernism.[13] Margaret Vandeburg affirms that 'in the psychoanalytic context of literary texts, gender is the very locus of meaning, initially constructed in response of the so-called Oedipal Law of the Father (Freud's Reality Principle and Lacan's Symbolic Order) whose first commandment outlaws pre-Oedipal bisexuality'.[14] In her opinion Robin's and Dr O'Connor's androgyny can be considered the persistence of pre-Oedipal bisexuality which, in the symbolic realm of Modernism, represents the primal form of resistance to any sort of tyrannical authority. Thus 'their inversion thwarts the Law of the Father, as did the bisexuality and homosexuality of Modernist gender theorists including Barnes, Woolf and Stein'.[15]

In his preface Eliot states that it took him some time before he could grasp the global meaning of the novel, but we can argue that he deliberately overlooked many of its themes and especially Barnes's antifascist polemic which indeed appears quite clear since the very first chapter where she presents the birth of 'a Jew of Italian descent,[16] whose mother questions 'the opportunity to perpetrate a race that has God's sanction and men's blame'.[17] Eliot, the modernist cantor, who in *The Waste Land* had given voice to the sense of loss of an entire generation, had already found his personal solution to that crisis in conservatism. In 1927 he had in fact received baptism proclaiming himself 'Royalist in politics, Clas-

---

12 Miriam Fuchs, 'Dr. Matthew O'Connor: The Unhealthy Healer of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*,' *Literature and Medicine* 2 (1983): p. 134.
13 Jane Marcus, 'Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic,' in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 225.
14 Vandeburg, p. 333.
15 Vandeburg, p. 333.
16 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), p. 4.
17 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 4.

sicist in literature and Anglo-Catholic in religion'.[18] From that moment on his modernist season was over, even though he was still regarded as a spokesman of experimentation in literary circles. After the 1927 conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, Eliot turned more and more to literary and social criticism. He wrote a play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and a poem, *Ash Wednesday* (1930); their religious focus opens the second phase of his literary production forecasting the final spiritual testament of the *Four Quartets* (1943). As a consequence of his religious and nationalistic interests, like Ezra Pound and other experimental writers of the interwar period, he embraced more and more extreme right-wing positions but never really became a political activist. As he explained in an essay of 1950, *The Literature of Politics*, in his opinion intellectuals must remain in the pre-politic domain of the formulation of ideas which is the realm of ethics and theology.[19]

Thus, in his preface to *Nightwood*, Eliot did not give adequate space to Barnes's revolutionary depiction of humanity not only because he feared censorship and financial loss, not only because he did not really share Barnes's views since he had moved to rigidly conservative positions, but also because for him writers must remain in the ivory tower of artistic creation. While in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' he had affirmed that the artist is a catalyst of the moral and spiritual needs of his time,[20] in 'From Poe to Valery' he maintained this view but clearly stated that he did not really believe in the figure of *écrivain engagé*, even though pure poetry is 'a goal that can never be reached' and so he was equally distant from *l'art pour l'art* credo which 'has already gone as far as it can go'.[21]

For this reason it is not correct to say that Eliot did not catch the political allusions in *Nightwood*; he simply bypassed them after having asked Barnes to adjust some of the most direct allusions to sexuality and religion. But there is one deletion that Barnes refused: the cutting of the last chapter that for her was indeed the most important. When Eliot wrote to her 'I should certainly advise strongly the omission of the last chapter, which is not only superfluous but really anti-climax. The Doctor is so central a character, and so vital, that I think the book ends superbly with

[18] T.S. Eliot, Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928).
[19] T.S. Eliot, *The Literature of Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965).
[20] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1950).
[21] T.S. Eliot, 'From Poe to Valery,' *The Hudson Review* 2, 3 (1949), p. 342.

his last remarks',[22] Djuna Barnes marked the margins of the manuscript with a pencil note lamenting 'Eliot's lack of imagination'.[23]

Robin's final regression to pure animalism, described in the last chapter, 'Possessed', was meant by Barnes as a ritual of inversion: this scene represents the woman's flight from the culture that has tried to tame her since her first appearance as 'a woman who is beast turning human'.[24] Her becoming pure instinct identifies Robin with what Sigmund Freud calls Id,[25] where man's primitive instinct originates. She comes into contact with the forces in the human psyche that people are generally only dimly aware of and which determine the loss of her social identity. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud states that the dictates of society will inevitably frustrate the gratification of instinctual needs and that human beings are therefore creatures divided against themselves.[26] Barnes appears to have arrived at the same understanding of this basic human dilemma, of the mechanisms that alienate and enslave the individual. In Robin's final dance/fight with the dog, the lost innocence of pre-lapsarian, pre-Oedipal, pre-Nazi paradise is regained. Christianity and totalitarianisms are undone, so that regression becomes progression towards a new paradigm of existence in the inverted world of the night. Eliot surely understood the symbolic meaning of this chapter, but for him it was more useful to delete this section and limit *Nightwood* to the portrayal of a spiritual crisis he knew very well. It would have established this novel, like his *The Waste Land*, as a sort of modern version of Dante's *Inferno*, which was more suitable to the economy of his literary and editorial views.

On her part, Djuna Barnes always maintained an ambivalent attitude towards her publisher. While publicly she praised Eliot's introduction and acknowledged her debt to his patronage, she was often privately critical as she realized that 'his support was a double-edged sword'.[27] With a slightly ironic tone she wrote to him on 11 December 1936: 'Thank you for your beautiful preface to *Nightwood*. No critical appreciation has ever given

[22] Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 141.

[23] Djuna Barnes, 'Nightwood,' Barnes Collection Manuscript, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, p. 84.

[24] Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 17.

[25] Sigmund Freud, 'Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis,' in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol.1 (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 395.

[26] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 54.

[27] Andrew Field, *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Putnam, 1983), p. 219.

me so much pleasure; it makes my life a little less terrifying'.[28] *Nightwood* belongs to the modernist tradition which rebelled against clear-cut story-telling and formulaic verse; Eliot's identification with the movement was so complete that his publication of Barnes's novel and his introduction to it must have seemed a perfect match to anyone. However, by the time Eliot read this novel, his modernist season was already over and he had become too conservative and mainstream not to try to normalize the book and take it back to definite and somehow traditional categories such as the association with poetry, the description of universal sorrow, the horror and fate of Elizabethan tragedy. More than a scrutiny of the book, Eliot's preface seems intended to legitimize it and appears mainly as 'a suggestive articulation of his thought during his later years'.[29]

Nightwood has not been done justice to even in more recent times, when it has become mostly a cult lesbian classic. Any residual notion of *Nightwood* as a sapphic novel or as a text of high (male) modernism should, at this point, be challenged because its power makes a nonsense of any categorization especially for what concerns gender and sexuality. Patriarchy, from T.S. Eliot to Kenneth Burke – who also strongly maintained that the novel was 'as innocent of political organization as is childhood'[30] – whether canonizing *Nightwood* or turning it into a sort of lesbian version of modernism, has had deleterious effects on this highly imaginative and revolutionary novel.

Bibliography

Barnes, Djuna, *Nightwood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

———, 'Nightwood,' Barnes Collection Manuscript, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland.

Burke, Kenneth, 'Thoughts on Djuna Barnes's Novel *Nightwood*,' in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 240-53.

Eliot, T.S., 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1950).

———, Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928).

---

[28] Barnes, 'Nightwood,' p. 129.

[29] James Morrison, 'Preface as Criticism: T.S. Eliot on *Nightwood*,' *Centennial Review* 32, 4 (1988), p. 414.

[30] Kenneth Burke, 'Thoughts on Djuna Barnes's Novel *Nightwood*,' in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 250.

———, Introduction to *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), pp. 11-17.

———, 'From Poe to Valery,' *The Hudson Review* 2, 3 (1949), pp. 327-42.

———, *The Literature of Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965).

———, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 8, 1936-38, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

Field, Andrew, *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Putnam, 1983).

Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961).

———, 'Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis,' in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 2020), pp. 340-420.

Fuchs, Miriam, 'Dr. Matthew O'Connor: The Unhealthy Healer of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*,' *Literature and Medicine* 2 (1983): pp. 125-34.

Letter from Emily Coleman to T.S. Eliot, 25 October 1935, Emily Holmes Coleman Papers, Newark, University of Delaware Library, Folder 10.

Marcus, Jane, 'Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic,' in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), pp. 221-50.

Morrison, James, 'Preface as Criticism: T.S. Eliot on *Nightwood*,' *Centennial Review* 32, 4 (1988): pp. 414-27.

Vandeburg, Margaret, 'Aryan Mundus and Sexual Inversion: Eliot's Edition of *Nightwood*,' *Prospects. An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 23 (1998): pp. 323-9.

Watson, C.L., 'Mr Eliot Presents Miss Barnes,' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 March 1937: pp.16-21.

Williamson, Alan, 'The Divided Image: The Quest for Identity in the Works of Djuna Barnes,' *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 7 (1964): pp. 58-74.

III.
AN EXPERIMENT IN DIALOGUE:
H.I.E. DHLOMO ACROSS GENRES

INTRODUCTION: READING HERBERT DHLOMO OUT OF THE BOX

Giuliana Iannaccaro

Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56) was a Zulu South African teacher, writer, journalist, musician, and literary critic. Like many South African intellectuals of his generation, he received a formal education in a Christian mission, where he was taught to read and write in Zulu and English. Deeply committed to the South African cause, he is one of the first black writers who voiced an idea of modernity in the South African context and is often considered one of the most prominent representatives of an elite group of writers, the so-called 'New Africans' – mission-educated intellectuals who strongly believed in the progress of South Africa as a nation, at the same time rejecting any notion of tribalism. Dhlomo's choice of writing exclusively in English is consistent with his idea of educating the masses and reaching a wider reading public; likewise, his newspaper articles, as well as his didactic writing, express the ideology shared by black writers in the thirties and forties, who imbibed the tenets of Western-style education and Christianity. The social and political situation in South Africa, however, worsened rapidly during the first half of the twentieth century, until segregation eventually became institutionalized with apartheid in 1948. Following suit, Dhlomo's mature writings display a disillusionment with the moderate progressivist-assimilationist ideology of missionary education.

Herbert Dhlomo's elementary education took place in Johannesburg, at the American Board Mission in Doornfontein; in 1922, he moved to the south of Durban and enrolled in the Teachers' Training Course at the Amanzimtoti Training Institute, another American Board mission institution later renamed Adams College. He then worked as a teacher until 1935, when he finally left his job to dedicate himself fully to journalism. Above all, Dhlomo was self-taught: his education was also the fruit of an all-absorbing passion for literature. Apart from Christian teaching, the mission schools he attended (Teachers' Training Course included) gave him a canonical British literary education spanning from

Chaucer to present times, in which the major subjects comprised Shakespeare's plays, the Romantics and the Victorians. In addition, his works and journal articles give proof of a much wider literary, philosophical, and political knowledge, most of it resulting from individual reading: for instance, he mentions Greek drama and the Homeric epics, Virgil, Cicero, medieval philosophy, Descartes, Vico and Marx; he was an eager researcher in African culture and traditional dramatic forms, and was of course familiar with contemporary African literature and with the current cultural debate; in his capacity as librarian-organizer of the Carnegie Non-European Library in Johannesburg (from 1937 to 1940), he came into contact with coeval North American sociological studies and literary works dealing with 'the negro question'.

Rarely known among non-specialists of South African literature, Dhlomo occupies a somewhat delicate position even within the literary and cultural history of South Africa, torn as he is between the two paradigms of tradition and modernity, of tutelage and protest. He tends to be more appreciated for his role as an intellectual than for the quality of his writing. This may account for the much belated publication of his collected works in 1985 (by Visser and Couzens, never published outside South Africa) as well as for the relative lack of critical studies on his imaginative oeuvre. Nonetheless, his literary production is extensive: it includes poetry, narrative, prose-poems, drama, and journalism.

The four contributions collected here discuss several works by Herbert Dhlomo according to the literary genres they belong to: historical plays (Iannaccaro), the long poem *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (Canani), short stories (Sullam), and his prose style more in general, by looking at the intersection between his fiction and his numerous journal articles (Fossati). This seemingly canonical approach provides, indeed, the starting point to address the issue of genre mobility: although strongly inspired by well-codified Western forms, Dhlomo's works also eschew the constraints of conventional 'literary boxes', and testify to the writer's controversial relationship with a revered, but at the same time culturally colonizing, literary tradition.

THE TEACHER AND THE BARD:
HERBERT DHLOMO'S HISTORICAL DRAMA

Giuliana Iannaccaro

Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56) was an exceptionally prolific Zulu intellectual, deeply involved in the cultural debate of the first half of the twentieth century. His dramatic production is the target of the present essay: I offer a reading of his five historical plays that takes into consideration, together with their cultural and political significance, also literary aspects like structure, coherence, character consistency, style and register. Such an approach to Dhlomo's works, which combines the analysis of thematic issues with the scrutiny of formal attributes, is meant to supplement the prevalent trend of recent literary criticism, which is more inclined to discuss the writer's production in terms of its impact on coeval intellectuals and on future generations, rather than to engage with stylistic features. I propose to bring to the foreground the contextual, biographical *and* literary aspects of Dhlomo's dramatic works which inform, as I anticipate in my title, his markedly didactic and prophetic mode of writing.

South Africa; Early Twentieth Century; Herbert I.E. Dhlomo; Historical Drama; Themes and Style

> Black man! Black man! Trust yourself. Serve yourself. Know yourself. Had the black man himself trusted as he has the white, we would have much achieved. Had he served himself as he has the white man, we would not be here now. [...] Black man you are your own enemy! You are your own oppressor. [...] My people! Don't stand there like fools. Don't stand cowering. My people! Get out of the bush. Get out and fight. Our Soul lives. The battle still rages.[1]

Apart from the high-sounding and emphatic tone and the slightly archaic language, the above-quoted passage could be taken as an excerpt from one of Stephen Bantu Biko's articles in the SASO monthly Newsletter, where the Xhosa intellectual articulated and expanded his 'Black Consciousness' ideology.[2] Sharply aware of the inferiority complex that

---

[1] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Cetshwayo', 1936-37, in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, eds Nick W. Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 174.
[2] When he was elected Chairman of SASO (South African Students' Organisation) Publications in 1970, Biko (1946-77) started writing articles for their monthly newsletter; he generally entitled them 'I Write What I Like' and signed them under the pseudonym 'Frank Talk'. In 1978 Aelred Stubbs edited a collection of Biko's writings under the title *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heine-

centuries of oppression had produced on the indigenous peoples of South Africa, Biko gave voice to his project of restoring full dignity to the black man in passages that are not dissimilar from our opening quotation.[3] Yet, those resounding lines do not belong to Biko, nor were they written between the sixties and the seventies, when he was politically active. They are taken, instead, from a play entitled *Cetshwayo*, composed in the 1930s by Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56), an exceptionally prolific Zulu intellectual deeply involved in the cultural debate of the first half of the twentieth century.

Dhomo's dramatic production is the target of the present essay. In my investigation, I offer a reading of his five historical plays that takes into consideration, together with their cultural and political significance, also literary aspects like structure, coherence, character consistency, style and register. Such an approach to Dhlomo's works, which combines the analysis of thematic issues with the scrutiny of formal attributes, is meant to supplement the prevalent trend of recent literary criticism, which is more inclined to discuss the writer's production in terms of its impact on coeval intellectuals and on future generations, rather than to engage with stylistic features. I propose to bring to the foreground the contextual, biographical *and* literary aspects of Dhlomo's dramatic works which inform, as I anticipate in my title, his markedly didactic and prophetic mode of writing.

However, before addressing Dhlomo's plays, a necessarily brief introduction to the historical and cultural context in which he wrote can be useful to bring to the fore his commitment both to literature and politics, which is at the basis of my analysis. Namely, I will take into consideration three factors that strongly influenced Dhlomo's dedication to writing and that shed light on one another: his social, political, and cultural commitment to the shaping of a new South African nation; his conception of literature as a powerful pedagogical tool; and, just as importantly, his strong personal drive to literary excellence. A contextual reading of

mann); they refer to the period 1969-72, when Biko was publicly active in the Black Consciousness movement.

[3] The following passage, quoted from *I Write What I Like*, gives an idea of the similarity of Dhlomo's and Biko's pleas (even if the latter's is more argumentative and less vibrant): 'the only vehicle for a change are these people who have lost their personality. The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of "Black Consciousness"' (Biko, p. 29).

Dhlomo's works is all the more necessary as the first half of the twentieth century is not generally considered a period in which black writers gave voice to the kind of protest literature that characterized, notably, the end of the 1960s and the 1970s. Indeed, the emphatic plea to the black man uttered in *Cetshwayo* and Steve Biko's writings on the psychological condition of blacks are separated by approximately thirty-five years, in which the political system of racial segregation and the methodical disempowerment of the native populations of South Africa were implemented and institutionalized. Even if it is likely that Biko would have endorsed the message contained in the excerpt from *Cetshwayo*, the latter belongs to a period, the mid-1930s, that the Black Consciousness leader still considered dormant and politically naive: 'It was only at the end of the 50s that the blacks started demanding to be their own guardians'.[4] Yet, the literary and journalistic production of a relevant number of black writers between the twenties and the forties is evidence of a closer and more complex relationship between pre- and post-1948 ideological stances and political commitments. The 1920s, and even more forcefully the 1930s, saw the post-Union governments laying the foundations for the modern industrial, capitalistic and racially segregationist South African state. As the following pages will exemplify through the investigation of the dramatic production of Herbert Dhlomo, the early decades of the century witnessed the political and cultural commitment of remarkably active African intellectuals, who were sharply aware of the devastating impact that the administrative measures taken in the present were likely to have on future generations.[5] Confronted with the seemingly inexorable 'progress' of racist white policies in South Africa, the early twentieth-century African intelligentsia, among other cultural practices, had recourse to the representation of indigenous past history, in order to re-read it in the light of present events and as a warning for the years to come.

According to Visser and Couzens, the editors of the only published volume of Dhlomo's literary works, the Zulu writer composed about 24

[4] Biko, p. 20.

[5] Dhlomo himself had written about the black man's inferiority complex and the need to develop 'race pride' as early as 1929: 'All this exertion to be what one is not is brought about by, and is proof of, the inferiority complex [...]. We must needs develop not only race pride but that critical and analytic faculty that will lead us to weigh the pros and cons, and understand things before we discard, adapt, avoid, modify or adopt them.' Herbert Dhlomo, 'Inferiority Complex,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, November 23 (1929), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/23_11_29.gif.

plays, 10 short stories, over 140 poems, and a vast number of journal articles and essays in cultural, literary and political criticism. Not all of his writings have been retrieved in complete form; indeed, many are unfinished or in fragments, while others are lost, and only their mention survives.[6] His five historical plays, which are the target of the present investigation, were most likely written between 1935 and 1937: they are entitled *The Girl Who Killed to Save, Ntsikana, Dingane, Cetshwayo*, and *Moshoeshoe.* With the exception of the first, as we shall see, none of them was published during the playwright's lifetime, but they all appear in Visser and Couzens' edition. The five plays deal with Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho historical events spanning roughly eighty years, from the inception of the Christian penetration among the Xhosas at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the year 1879, when the still self-governing Zulu territories were annexed by the British in the aftermath of a crushing defeat suffered by Cetshwayo, the last independent king of the Zulus. In his thoroughly researched literary biography of Herbert Dhlomo, *The New African*, Tim Couzens gives notice of two additional historical plays, *Shaka* and *Mfolozi*, mentioned in an interview with Dhlomo published in *The Sunday Tribune* in November 1937.[7] These lost plays, together with *Dingane* and *Cetshwayo*, should have formed a quartet aimed at the retrieval of Zulu history through the representation of its 'Black Bulls', the last independent great leaders of the Zulu tribes. Dhlomo's dramatic production, though, is not limited to historical scripts; his collected works also contain four plays dealing with coeval and highly controversial political and social questions, as some of their titles suggest: *The Living Dead*, *The Pass*, *The Workers,* and *Malaria.*

The choice to narrow down the present analysis to historical drama is justified by the need to select a somewhat coherent group of works among a vast and heterogeneous literary corpus, for the most part disregarded by international scholarship.[8] Nevertheless, the reading offered

---

[6] See Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. xvi; this only-extant edition offers the undeniable advantage of putting a fairly good number of Dhlomo's literary texts at the disposal of the reading public. Understandably, it leaves out the bulk of the writer's production, that is, the innumerable journal articles he contributed to several South African newspapers during his relatively short lifespan. In this regard, Ntongela Masilela's comprehensive website, entitled 'New African Movement', partly fills that gap: the section referring to Dhlomo contains a remarkable number of essays and articles, alongside the literary works also present in the 1985 edition.

[7] Tim Couzens, *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 125.

[8] On Dhlomo's historical drama see, among others, Bhekizizwe Peterson, 'The *Black Bulls* of

in the following pages is meant to highlight thematic and stylistic features that are fairly exemplary of Dhlomo's literary practice: exemplary, that is, not only of the cultural significance of his works, but also of his pronounced, and at times 'inescapable', didactic mode, which is also identifiable in his poem *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941) and in his short narratives. The mission-educated Zulu intellectual[9] strongly believed in the instructive power of literature and drama; as we shall see, the 1930s saw him in the guise of promoter and producer of what at the time was called the 'Bantu' theatrical activity. His knowledge of classical and modern Western literary models,[10] together with his study of indigenous dramatic forms, brought him to experiment with a blending of traditions and styles under the banner of the English language, that he considered the only viable modern tool for spreading knowledge. Within the syncretic project of attempting to fuse the best of African and European artistic traditions, the young writer saw himself as the prophet of a new cultural awakening, as well as the 'bard' of the developing South African nation. Dhlomo's didacticism was part of a broader stimulus coming from both white liberals and black intellectuals to the creation of black reading communities, especially in fast-growing, degraded urban locations like Johannesburg's townships, in order to enhance 'the role of culture as a powerful ameliorative and moralising force'.[11] Yet, besides endorsing white pedagogical projects at various levels, Dhlomo in his thirties also aimed at turning black readers and audiences from passive

H.I.E. Dhlomo: Ordering History out of Nonsense,' *English in Africa* 18, 1 (1991): pp. 25-49; Bhekizizwe Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals. African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000); Jennifer Wenzel, 'Voices of Spectral and Textual Ancestors: Reading Tiyo Soga alongside H.I.E. Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save,' Research in African Literatures* 36, 1 (2005): pp. 51-73; Tony Voss, 'Refracted Modernisms. Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): pp. 339-59.

[9] For a brief overview on Dhlomo's education, see the introduction to the four essays in this volume. It is worth recalling that Dhlomo was principally self-taught: Couzens relates that 'Herbert collected and read books fanatically', and quotes a personal interview with Herbert's sister Florence (January 1975), where she recollects: 'He [Herbert] wanted to have an education ... higher education, ooh, very, very much. [...] Oh, his library would have filled this house. Wooh, there where all his money went. Ordered them from England. Encyclopaedias ...', Couzens, p. 46.

[10] On Dhlomo's studies, see Couzens, pp. 82-124; on the cultural context in which he was immersed, see Alan G. Cobley, 'Literacy, Libraries, and Consciousness: The Provision of Library Services for Blacks in South Africa in the Pre-Apartheid Era,' *Libraries & Culture*, 32, 1 (1997): pp. 66-9.

[11] Corinne Sandwith, 'The Idea of Reading in Early 20th-Century South Africa,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* (2016): p. 4. Sandwith also discusses the reading debates in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s.

recipients of Western liberal reading projects to 'awakened' South African citizens. In order to do that, in his historical plays he tried his hand at a very complex literary task: he used the English language and the European literary canon (that he cherished and was eager to imitate) to instruct and enchant his readers. At the same time, he had recourse to that very language and cultural tradition to challenge, in several passages of his plays, the political and cultural practices of European settlers and governors, making reference both to past events and to present times. By so doing, he put himself in an ambivalent, thorny position vis-à-vis his white mentors and past teachers: on the one hand, that of the 'proficient pupil', able to make the most of his education; on the other, that of the ungrateful and dangerously radicalized 'native'.

The thematic approach to Dhlomo's literary works is by now fairly traditional: especially in the wake of Visser and Couzens' 1985 edition, a few scholars from both sides of the Atlantic have noted the strong link between Dhlomo's dramatic production and the coeval South African social and political context. His historical 'Zulu' plays, in particular, have been chiefly read as the embittered intellectual's reaction to national and local early twentieth-century legislation, aimed at the total disempowerment and marginalization of the South African native – who, in Solomon Plaatje's words, already in June 1913 had 'found himself [...] a pariah in the land of his birth' as a consequence of the Natives' Land Act.[12] If the 1920s witnessed the recrudescence of racial conflicts, leading to increasingly organized forms of black resistance, the 1930s proved beyond doubt that the white Government had no 'assimilationist' or 'progressivist' intention as far as South African natives were concerned, not even black leaders and intellectuals. In 1936-37 – the same period in which Dhlomo was presumably writing his historical plays – the South African Parliament passed a number of bills which enhanced segregationist measures and land expropriation, besides restricting, or totally abolishing, residual native political rights.[13] In this context, the playwright's sharp criticism of nineteenth-century white colonial leaders and of their deceitful ways, particularly evident in *Dingane* and *Cetshwayo*, appears politically

---

[12] Solomon T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), ed. Brian William (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p. 6.

[13] On the 1936-37 Native (or 'Hertzog') Bills, see Bill Freund, 'South Africa: The Union Years, 1910-1948,' in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Vol. 2, eds Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, Bill Nasson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 233-42. Tim Couzens discusses Dhlomo's *Cetshwayo* in the light of coeval South African white politics (pp. 125-59).

grounded, as well as his glorification of a precolonial past. The retrieval of South African native history and its reinterpretation in the light of present struggles – a literary practice begun in the first decades of the twentieth century and increased towards the 1940s – meant to provide a counter-discourse to the official, colonial version of the country's past.[14] As Bhekizizwe Peterson has it,

> The role of narrative as an ideological tool was of the utmost importance in the period under study given the arguments between, broadly speaking, the missionary and colonial disembodiment and denigration of the African past as inchoate and barbarous, and, conversely, Africanist assertions of ordered, self-sufficient, independent societies.[15]

In the case of Herbert Dhlomo, the investigation of his literary production as a sophisticated instrument to convey his ideas is a rewarding critical practice: as mentioned above, the Zulu writer was first and foremost a journalist, to judge from his outstanding, lifelong activity as columnist and essayist;[16] the relationship between the issues tackled in his articles and the topics addressed in his literary works is very close, even to the point of self-quotation, given his propensity to transfer general reflections on the most various topics from a factual to a fictional context.[17] This is also true in the case of his dramatic works, in which it is possible to identify, as anticipated, two main functions: didactic – Dhlomo

[14] See for instance: Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka* (1925), written in Sesotho; John Dube's *UJeqe Insila kaShaka* (1930; *Jeqe: The Body Servant of King Tshaka*) in Zulu; Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), in English; Bambatha Benedict Vilakazi's poetry in Zulu; Rolfes Dhlomo's (Herbert's elder brother) five historical novels on the life of Zulu chiefs. See Bhekizizwe Peterson, 'Black Writers and the Historical Novel,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 296. Dhlomo wrote on the task of historians and the role played by historiography in a number of articles published in 1931 in the journal *Umteteli wa Bantu*, under the collective title 'The Evolution of the Bantu' (14, 21, 28 November and 5 December).

[15] Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries*, p. 9.

[16] Dhlomo himself, instead, allegedly gave priority to his literary mission, as he stated in a 1941 letter: 'My creative writing is the greatest thing I can give to my people, to Africa' (quoted in Dhomo, *Collected Works*, p. ix).

[17] On the relationship between Dhlomo's fiction and his journalism, see Couzens, *The New African*; Horst Zander, *Fact - Fiction - 'Faction'. A Study of Black South African Literature in English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999); Ntongela Masilela, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007); Tony Voss, 'Refracted Modernisms. Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-59. See also Marta Fossati's essay in this volume.

considered drama, 'like the school [...] a great educating agency'[18] – and 'poetic'. Indeed, even if he traced the origins of modern African drama in tribal ritual and oral performances, Dhlomo the essayist insisted on the intrinsic superiority of plays written for reading, rather than for acting: 'We must strive to build great, lasting literary drama, and not be carried away by the desire to produce plays that [...] act well and are good for immediate, commercial purposes only [...] the greatest drama of all time is literary'.[19] Literary drama allowed for a slower, more detailed plot, in which prominence could be given to words, rather than actions. On the one hand, it gave the playwright the possibility to formulate fully and clearly, through the mouth of his characters, the manifold messages and moral teachings he considered an integral part of the artist's mission; on the other hand, a text devised for reading could be used to display the lyrical and rhetorical virtuosity of the playwright – who was not to be considered a mere writer of scripts, but rather an epic narrator, a poet and a gifted prophet, the interpreter of history and the moral conscience of his people: in short, a teacher and a bard.

In order 'to be read and seen in spirit and imagination',[20] Dhlomo's typescripts needed the printed page to reach as many literate South Africans as possible; accordingly, he tried to publish his dramatic works in the 1930s. As Pallo Jordan made clear almost fifty years ago in his foreword to *Tales from Southern Africa*,[21] within a market-oriented conception of printed literature African artists found themselves chronically disadvantaged in the face of a publishing industry firmly in the hands of white capital. Totally deprived of the means of production, the majority of black writers in the first half of the twentieth century had no choice but to seek out publishers willing to support 'black literature' and submit their work to them. Accordingly, in 1938 Herbert Dhlomo sent his plays to the Reverend Robert Henry Wishart Shepherd, the director of publications of Lovedale's Press, the most important printing site of the

---

[18] Dhlomo, 'Drama and the African,' *The South African Outlook*, 66, 1 (1936): pp. 232-5; reprinted in *English in Africa*, special issue: *H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Nick W. Visser, 4, 2 (1977): p. 6.

[19] Dhlomo, 'Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?,' *Transvaal Native Education Quarterly*, March 1939, pp. 20-4; reprinted in *English in Africa*, special issue: *H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Nick W. Visser, 4, 2 (1977): p. 38.

[20] Dhlomo, 'Why Study,' p. 38.

[21] A.C. Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa. Translated and Retold by A.C. Jordan, Foreword by Z. Pallo Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. ix-xxiii.

region.[22] In his letter to Shepherd, the Zulu playwright – who was also founding member and promoter of the Johannesburg Bantu Dramatic Society[23] – mentioned the chronic need of new African plays on the market, trying to convince the Director that the publication of his plays would also be remunerative. Nevertheless, Shepherd rejected the proposal, replying that the plays were 'not up to publication standard', even if they showed 'considerable talent'.[24] It seems that Shepherd's refusal had crushing and lasting effects on the playwright's career in print, since no play by Dhlomo was ever published during his lifetime, with the only exception of *The Girl Who Killed to Save*. The latter, generally considered his first attempt in historical drama, was issued by Lovedale Press in 1935 in 2000 copies; since by 1938 only 336 copies had been sold, Shepherd's caution in accepting more scripts by Dhlomo may be explained by the failure of the first effort.[25] Yet, as we shall see, Lovedale's director of publications may well have objected also to the 'content' of the historical plays he received from the Zulu dramatist, given that they were far less detached from present issues, or far less lost in a 'harmless' Bantu tribal past, than he might have wished.

One element that all historical plays by Dhlomo have in common is the way in which the African chief is represented: the regal and dignified image of Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho kings is recurring, irrespective of their embodying positive or negative patterns of behaviour.[26] The overt endorsement of black leaders as opposed to white colonizers, and their dignified characterization, were patently in contrast with the general disparagement of African history and its protagonists diffused by white

---

[22] Founded in 1824 by the Glasgow Missionary Society near present-day Alice (Eastern Cape Province), Lovedale Mission Station had soon become the most important institution for the development of black literature in the Xhosa language area, thanks to its educational and printing activity.

[23] Founded in 1932 to encourage and produce African plays, the Bantu Dramatic and Operatic Society staged a remarkable number of performances, in spite of its short lifespan (1932-1940). See Couzens, chapters 3 and 5; for an 'organisational history of the Bantu Dramatic Society and the myriad social and artistic challenges that [it] had to contend with', see Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries*, chapter 6 (quotation on p. 136).

[24] Couzens, pp. 176-7 and 192, note 54.

[25] Couzens, p. 177. For consistency purposes, my quotations from *The Girl Who Killed to Save* in this essay are from Dhlomo's *Collected Works*. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the original edition presents significant paratextual elements that are omitted in Visser and Couzens' edition. Some of them are discussed in Wenzel's *Voices of Spectral and Textual Ancestors*.

[26] See Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries*, p. 9: 'debates over whether African monarchs were despots exercising tyrannical rule or whether they were visionary nation-building martyrs who governed by consensus [...] were frequently high on the agendas of Huss, Vilakazi, and Dhlomo'.

historiography. This is not to say that Dhlomo's leading political figures always stand for excellence and steadfastness: with the only exception of Moshoeshoe, the king of the Basotho, who is represented as the model of all regal virtues in the eponymous play, neither the Xhosa chief Kreli (in *The Girl Who Killed to Save*), nor the Zulu Dingane, and not even the last, tragic figure of Cetshwayo can be said to personify fully the righteous native king; conversely, those leaders often prove unwise and rash, when not directly treacherous and mischievous. Nevertheless, their status and pose (described similarly in the stage directions of the different plays) is invariably regal.

Cetshwayo is the clearest example of the way in which Dhlomo's dramatic works are made to convey a critical and at the same time strongly supportive image of the last independent leaders of the native tribes. Cetshwayo himself makes many mistakes: initially suspicious of the whites and of their ability to insinuate themselves into the social and political structure of the African chiefdoms, he actually reveals himself incapable of discerning their true motives and is blind to their strategies. By so doing, and by trusting the wrong advisors when crucial decisions must be taken, he precipitates the Zulus into a ruinous war, that sanctions the end of their political independence. In spite of his decisive political and military failure, though, he is represented as the typical tragic hero, inspired by the right idea – 'Like great Shaka I will fight to unite all the races into one strong nation'[27] – but finally crushed by the blows of fate. Notwithstanding the disastrous choices he is about to make, the end of Scene Six depicts him as a towering figure, majestic in attitude and speech:

> Cetshwayo [...]: Go tell the white man that power is right; force, discipline; war, a game of life; the army, the last word; the battlefield, the highest deciding Council; the shield, the argument; strife, the birth of beauty; the assagai, the chief speaker; might, freedom. Blood cleanses. *(He rises. With a mighty, wild gesture he flings away the 'crown' that Somtsewu brought on the day of coronation).*[28]

If Cetshwayo's historical figure lends itself to the representation of the classical tragic hero, the dignified depiction of the Xhosa paramount chief Kreli in *The Girl Who Killed to Save* is much less predictable, given

27 Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 139.
28 Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, pp. 152-3.

the negative role assigned to the African leader in the play.[29] Yet, his figure stands out at the end of Scene Two in much the same way as the Zulu King's: he is granted resounding and aphoristic concluding lines, as well as a proud, defiant posture, described in the stage directions.[30] Dingane in the eponymous play is no exception: although presented as a Shakespearian villain from the very beginning, he is granted dignity and regality towards the end, in spite of the fact that the dire consequences of his baseness – the betrayal and murder of his half-brother, the great Shaka – sowed the seeds of division in the kingdom and precipitated disaster: 'The people of the King lie like grass in the Ncome River which has been turned into blood'.[31]

Basically, through the literary representation of nineteenth-century native chiefs, Dhlomo wanted to teach his countrymen that the great leaders of the past had to be known and revered in spite of their individual shortcomings, no matter how fateful. This does not mean that he was blind to the ruinous and long-lasting drawbacks of the historical African leaders he chose to celebrate, the mythical Shaka first and foremost: in an article published in 1932, entitled 'Tshaka. A Revaluation', he denounced the chief's destructive militarism, which dissipated the energy of the Zulus and caused massive migration. Nevertheless, Shaka's image could be reworked into a symbol of national unity; even more effectually, the Sotho king Moshoeshoe – who was able to rule over several communities, including migrants and refugees – could embody the new African leader of present times: from Dhlomo's perspective, a modern country like South Africa no longer needed military leaders, but wise and competent administrators from the ranks of black educated civil servants and intellectuals.[32]

[29] Kreli, Sarhili, or Sarili, are the transliterations of the name of the last King (chief of the Galekas, Eastern Xhosa tribes) to rule over Xhosaland before it was fragmented by the consequences of the 'Cattle Killing Movement' of 1856-57, that Kreli endorsed. See John A. Chalmers *Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Mission Work* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1877), chapter IX; Charles and Frances Brownlee, *Reminiscences of Kaffir Life and History, and Other Papers*, edited by Andrew Smith (Lovedale: Lovedale Mission Press, 1896), pp. 135-70. See also Jeffrey B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise. Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[30] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 15.

[31] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 110. The Messenger who speaks these lines in the last scene is referring to the historical battle of the Ncome River (December 1838), in which the Zulus were defeated by the Boers; the fight was so fierce that the whites gave the name of 'Blood River' to the Ncome.

[32] In typical prophetic style, as early as 1929 Dhlomo envisaged 'an army consisting of regiments of Native lawyers, journalists, doctors, teachers, clerks, and farmers training strenuously to meet the demands of our country's call' ('Africa's Call,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 16 November 1929 http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/16_11_29.gif).

Besides teaching his contemporaries that African history is 'a great story',[33] Dhlomo's historical drama was meant to prove how deeply current evils were rooted in the past. In this respect, *Cetshwayo* is generally considered the best example of an overtly political play, in which the issues of racism, land grabbing, and segregation on the part of white settlers are denounced and clearly connected to early twentieth-century policies by means of pervasive prophetic lines and interpolated poems.[34] Nevertheless, other historical plays allow for the identification of similar stances, stated by means of the same instructive and visionary style that characterizes the Zulu playwright. The key point to take into consideration when investigating Dhomo's plays is that his self-appointed mission as a man of letters – to teach *and* to fashion himself as the bard of the Bantu people – often predominate over the work's internal coherence, especially as far as character consistency is concerned. For this reason, it is not always easy to make out the general meaning of his works, that not infrequently give rather the impression of following several directions – at times in contradiction with one another – according to the ethical or ideological message entrusted to whichever character at whatever juncture in the play. The lack of an authoritative narrative voice in drama – that, when needed, can take upon itself the task of foregrounding how the story should be received – compels the strongly didactic Zulu writer to rely on the several individual voices of the various characters, as well as on the enchanting power of the many interpolated poems. With this in mind, the crucial role of the stage directions becomes clear, since they provide an invaluable support for the instructive purpose of Dhlomo's literary plays: 'inaudible' in the case of performed drama, stage directions (that can be used as authorial interventions) become perfectly visible to the reading public. Focussing on *Cetshwayo*, but not limiting the analysis to the most explicitly political script, the next few pages will provide some instances of the dialogue between Dhlomo's historical plays and crucial contemporary social issues; at the same time, they will provide a few examples of the way in which his over-didactic mode risks undermining the clarity of his message, thus paradoxically compromising the instructive purpose of his literary mission.

As mentioned before, the character of Cetshwayo is dangerously blind to the machinations of white settlers in the eponymous play; although

---

[33]   Dhlomo, 'Dingane,' in *Collected Works*, p. 71.
[34]   See Couzens, pp. 125-59, and Peterson, *Monarchs, Missionaries*, pp. 199-213.

suspicious of Shepstone, the British administrator of Natal, from the very beginning, he tends to trust the English people and to identify the root of all evil in the greed of the Boers: 'The English are on our side. It is the Boers who stand in the way'.[35] The truth regarding the real motives at the basis of white policies is uttered by Cetshwayo's beloved, Bafikile, a young woman at the same time humble and wise who stands for loyalty and truth in the play, against treason and deceptiveness: 'Trust no white person. They do not want us. It is all pretence. And that is the source of our troubles – and our hope. [...] Blood speaks to blood. The English and the Boers may fraternise in the end, and both stand against us'.[36] Clearly, the play is here making reference to present times and talking to the people who, like Dhlomo himself, saw the constitution of the Union of South Africa in 1910: in the aftermath of the South African war (1899-1902), British and Afrikaners 'united' the formerly independent provinces under a white coalition government, in spite of their ancient grudges and of their recent, ruthless military conflicts.

The historical figure of Sir Theophilus Shepstone (1817-93) – a very influential British official who served as diplomat and secretary for native affairs in Natal from the 1840s to the 1870s – was particularly meaningful for a playwright committed to providing the true version of history and to identify the roots of present evils in past mistakes. The historical Shepstone is remembered by historiography, among other doings, as the colonial agent who devised the first grand scale 'Native Reserves' in Natal, 'a wholesale relocation of chiefs and people to lands not required by settler farms'.[37] His arguments in favour of setting aside specific tracts of land for native residence and possession (justified by the alleged right of blacks to live according to native customs with minimal interference on the part of white settlers) resonated clearly in the ear of black intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s as the anticipation of the establishment of native reserves in post-union South Africa. Dhlomo himself had brief-

---

[35] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 140.

[36] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, pp. 140-1. An analysis of Dhlomo's female characters lies beyond the scope of the present essay; yet, there is a recurrent pattern in his historical plays, in which the wise and beautiful girl (Nongqause in *The Girl*, Thuthula in *Ntsikana*, Bafikile in *Cetshwayo*) is surrounded by silly and anonymous female friends, and opposed to dangerous and sometimes devilish female counterparts.

[37] Norman Etherington, Patrick Harries, and Bernard K. Mbenga, 'From Colonial Hegemonies to Imperial Conquest, 1840-1880,' in *The Cambridge History of South Africa. Vol. 1, From Early Times to 1885*, eds C. Hamilton, B.K. Mbenga, and R. Ross (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 360.

ly denounced Shepstone's policy in a 1929 article, 'Africa's Call', where he had openly related it to J.B.M. Hertzog's segregationist plans: 'Africa calls not for Sir T. Shepstone's develop-along-your-line policy: not for the Krugerian repressive policy; not for the Hertzogian fear and prejudice policy; but for the policy of merit and fairplay'.[38] In *Cetshwayo*, a lengthy dialogue between the fictional Shepstone and his chief clerk Park progressively discovers and denounces the British official's true motives in implementing his separate-development plan. In spite of Shepstone's persuasive rhetoric, Park answers back to each and every point in long, clear-sighted and authoritative discourses, certainly more suited to an essay than to dramatic dialogue; undeniably a spokesman for Dhlomo himself, Shepstone's clerk talks about future times in the light of the playwright's present, even prefiguring a darker future yet to come:

> It seems to me, Sir, your policy seeks to create two different civilisations and two conflicting states in one country at one and the same time. [...] You cannot have two parallel lines that do not meet in human affairs where life is relative. [...] To my mind, Sir, there is no western and eastern, white or black, civilisation. [...] If you want Natives to develop along their own lines, you will be forced to dictate what those lines must be, sooner or later. Else how can it be done?[39]

The whole dialogue is four pages long, and it represents one of the several instances in which white dealings are depicted in an unequivocally negative light in Dhlomo's historical plays. Yet, Shepstone himself, deceptive and ruthless as he proves to be, is also granted lines in which he candidly denounces the Europeans' violent dealings and unconquerable thirst for power: 'Ah! The missionaries, too, want the overthrow of Cetshwayo [...] They complain of witchcraft, immoral orgies and murder... as if these things count when we Europeans deceive, plunder and murder daily for power!'[40] Another historical white character in the play, the adventurer John Dunn, can perform the worst deeds on stage, confess them to the audience as a Shakespearean villain would do, accuse himself of intemperance and ambition, give vent to his racist feelings, and at the same time pontificate over the whole colonial enterprise, even taking the side of natives:

---

[38] Dhlomo, 'Africa's Call.' Dhlomo was not the only black intellectual, and not even the first, to connect Shepstone's nineteenth-century segregationist measures with current policies; see for instance Selope Thema's 1928 article, 'Shepstone's Native Policy,' in Couzens, pp. 136-7.
[39] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, pp. 143-4.
[40] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 143.

> As I expected the fools have fallen into the trap I've set for them [...] I know I am lascivious and gloat over their women. But still am I better than these savages mentally, culturally and racially [...] My ambition to overthrow Shepstone? Nonsense! There is nothing immoral and unusual in that. It is the western game and way of life. Are we not Europeans, playing our dirty, sweet, old game of gain, greed and power? No, conscience, the true tragedy is to cheat these poor savages who are blind and gullible, not to rob the European who himself stands to rob.[41]

Dunn's moralizing has no ethical consequence on his actions; he is and remains a villain, the one who plays foul with everybody. Just like many other characters in Dhlomo's dramatic works, he suddenly becomes the conscience of the play when a lesson is at hand and the opportunity to teach it must be seized, only to return to his blind, ruthless dealings immediately afterwards.

Other plays can help to exemplify both the relationship between the past and the present and Dhlomo's pervasive, but also inconsistently conveyed, didacticism. In *Dingane*, it is the Boers who emerge as the 'total evil': ruthless land grabbers and deceivers, they have been enslaving and murdering black people since their first occupation of the South African soil in the seventeenth century. The following lines are meant to warn early twentieth-century readers about their own progressive loss of the land of their forefathers, and the reiterated paradoxes serve to underline the absurdity of the Boers' pretensions: 'They seek the very freedom and independence they are out to destroy among us! They seek freedom to enslave, independence to subjugate, honour to dishonour'.[42] Yet, these truth-resounding words are put in the mouth of a reckless traitor, the chief Induna (advisor) Nzobo, who helps Dingane to get rid of his antagonists after murdering King Shaka; Nzobo is, therefore, paradoxically instrumental in the fatal process that finally leads the Zulus to the loss of their lands and of political independence. Dhlomo's strong penchant for maxims – which are often based on some form of antithesis, like the above-quoted lines – to convey moral truths is pervasive in his drama as well as in his narrative, journalism, and even poetry. Jennifer Wenzel, in her analysis of *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, highlights Dhlomo's 'overfondness for oxymoron',[43] by which term she probably wanted to refer to

---

[41] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, pp. 132-3.
[42] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 85.
[43] Wenzel, p. 59.

the broader rhetorical field of antithesis (the very title of the play she discusses is antithetical and paradoxical). The Zulu writer possibly felt that antitheses – together with maxims and aphorisms, and not infrequently coupled with them – allowed him to convey the paradoxes of history in an elevated and authoritative style, that matched his equally cherished prophetic mode.[44]

The above examples could be easily multiplied, since they are recurrent in Dhlomo's historical drama; they bear witness to the playwright's predilection for scattering pearls of wisdom here and there in the lines of his characters, even independently of their identity and function in the play. One wonders whether Shepherd's crushing comment in receiving the scripts – that they were 'not up to publication standard' – may have taken into consideration also the dramatist's literary shortcomings. Oddly enough, that hypothesis would be optimistic: to be able to prove that white patrons, who had the power to make or break black artists, mainly judged their work according to aesthetic principles – albeit European ones – would be good news. Unfortunately, decades of historical and literary investigation into primary sources discussing the significance and the limits accorded to 'Bantu' reading and writing practices (missionaries' and white liberal patrons' letters, essays, articles, reports, monographs, conferences and committees) suggest that Shepherd, in the specific situation, very likely objected to Dhlomo's knowledge of past and present history, and to his clear perception of the issues at stake in contemporary white politics, rather than to his literary style.[45] Indeed, by means of the very essayistic and instructive passages that interfere with the creation of convincing dramatic characters, the Zulu writer managed to be outspoken on the political and social practices of his time. If the urgency of his didactic mode rendered his lines at times inconsistent with the development of his historical plays, those same lines could not fail to appear, to the eyes of the literary arbiter Robert Shepherd, poignantly consistent with the wider context of the government's discriminatory 'native policies'.

---

[44] In *Ntsikana*, the way in which the dichotomy between past and present is introduced (to the disadvantage of the latter) is itself antithetic to extremes: 'Tell us the old and make us young. This new world makes us old' (Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 32).

[45] On Shepherd as 'censor', see Jeffrey B. Peires 'The Lovedale Press. Literature for the Bantu Revisited,' *History in Africa* 6 (1979): pp. 155-75; Tim White, 'The Lovedale Press during the Directorship of R.H.W. Shepherd, 1930-1955,' *English in Africa* 19, 2 (1992): pp. 69-84; Couzens, pp. 181-2; Zander, pp. 116-9; Graham A. Duncan, 'Coercive Agency in Mission Education at Lovedale Missionary Institution,' *HTS Theological Studies* 60, 3 (2004): pp. 947-92.

Bibliography

Biko, Stepehn Bantu, *I Write What I Like*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (Oxford: Heinemann, 1978).

Brownlee, Charles and Frances, *Reminiscences of Kaffir Life and History, and Other Papers*, edited by Andrew Smith (Lovedale: Lovedale Mission Press, 1896).

Chalmers, John A., *Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Mission Work* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1877).

Cobley, Alan G., 'Literacy, Libraries, and Consciousness: The Provision of Library Services for Blacks in South Africa in the Pre-Apartheid Era,' *Libraries & Culture*, 32, 1 (1997): pp. 57-80.

Couzens, Tim, *The New African. A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Duncan, Graham A., 'Coercive Agency in Mission Education at Lovedale Missionary Institution,' *HTS Theological Studies* 60, 3 (2004): pp. 947-92.

Dhlomo, Herbert I.E., 'Africa's Call,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, November 16 (1929), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/16_11_29.gif.

———, 'Inferiority Complex,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, November 23 (1929), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/23_11_29.gif.

———, 'The Evolution of the Bantu,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, November 14, 21, 28 and December 5 (1931), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/umteteli.htm.

———, 'Tshaka. A Revaluation,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, June 18 (1932), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/18_6_32.gif.

———, 'Drama and the African,' *The South African Outlook*, 66, 1 (1936): pp. 232-5; reprinted in *English in Africa*, special issue: *H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Nick W. Visser, 4, 2 (1977): pp. 3-8.

———, *The Girl Who Killed to Save (Nongqause the Liberator). A Play by H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1935).

———, 'Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?,' *Transvaal Native Education Quarterly*, (1939), pp. 20-24; reprinted in *English in Africa*, special issue: *H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Nick W. Visser, 4, 2 (1977): pp. 37-43.

———, *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, eds Nick W. Visser and Tim Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Etherington, Norman, Harries, Patrick, and Mbenga, Bernard K., 'From Colonial Hegemonies to Imperial Conquest, 1840-1880,' in *The Cambridge History of South Africa. Vol. 1, From Early Times to 1885*, eds C. Hamilton, B. K. Mbenga, and R. Ross (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 319-91.

Freund, Bill, 'South Africa: The Union Years, 1910-1948,' in *The Cambridge History of South Africa, 1885-1994*, Vol. 2, eds Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, Bill Nasson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 211-53.

Jordan, A.C., *Tales from Southern Africa. Translated and Retold by A.C. Jordan, Foreword by Z. Pallo Jordan* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973).

Masilela, Ntongela, 'New African Movement, 1900-60' (2004), http://pzacad. pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/zi40s.shtml.

———, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007).

Peires, Jeffrey B., 'The Lovedale Press. Literature for the Bantu Revisited,' *History in Africa* 6 (1979): pp. 155-75.

———, *The Dead Will Arise. Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

Peterson, Bhekizizwe, 'The *Black Bulls* of H.I.E. Dhlomo: Ordering History out of Nonsense,' *English in Africa*, 18, 1 (1991): pp. 25-49.

———, *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals. African Theatre and the Unmaking of Colonial Marginality* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000).

———, 'Black Writers and the Historical Novel,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 291-307.

Plaatje, Solomon T., *Native Life in South Africa*, ed. Brian William (Harlow: Longman, 1987).

Sandwith, Corinne, 'The Idea of Reading in Early 20th-Century South Africa,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* (2016): pp. 1-14.

Visser, Nick W., 'H.I.E. Dhlomo: Literary Theory and Criticism', *English in Africa* (Special Number) 4, 2 (1977).

Voss, Tony, 'Refracted Modernisms. Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-59.

Wenzel, Jennifer, 'Voices of Spectral and Textual Ancestors: Reading Tiyo Soga alongside H.I.E. Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save*,' *Research in African Literatures*, 36, 1 (2005): pp. 51-73.

Zander, Horst, *Fact - Fiction - 'Faction'. A Study of Black South African Literature in English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999).

ROMANTIC POLYPHONY IN HERBERT I.E. DHLOMO'S VALLEY OF A THOUSAND HILLS

Marco Canani

At a first reading, H.I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941) suggests the memorial attempt typical of epic poetry. However, this classification is not unproblematic in that Dhlomo's poem reveals a constant tension between tradition and modernity, as well as between Western conventions and Bantu tropes. In this essay, I argue that in this complex dialogue a central role is played by British Romantic poetry. To this end, I explore Dhlomo's politicized reception of the Romantics, and his aesthetic and ethic views in *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, with reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley's reformist ideals and his concern over language, thought, and poetry. Subsequently, I investigate Dhlomo's debt to John Keats in their shared belief in the epistemic value of suffering. Despite causing multiple narrative fractures, this imbrication of voices and allusions produces a polyphonic effect, testifying to Dhlomo's tormented attempt at negotiating between cultures.

When it appeared in 1941, Herbert I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills* was welcomed as a ground-breaking work within the South African literary tradition. The black national newspaper *The Bantu World* praised it as one of the earliest instances of African epic poetry, as well as the first full-length verse experimentation with Bantu mythology. That such a response rests on political rather than literary claims is even more evident in the review that was published in the Zulu newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, which commended the poem for its contribution towards raising 'a modern national spirit'.[1]

Dhlomo was a prominent figure of the so-called 'New African Renaissance', and *Valley of a Thousand Hills* is part of his commitment to establishing cultural and political modernity in mid-twentieth century South Africa. As submission to the colonial presence was being forcefully questioned, 'New African' intellectuals embraced radical views,

---

[1] The reviews are cited in Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 220; Ntongela Masilela, 'Theorising the Modernist Moment of New African Intellectuals: From *Imvo Zabantsundu* (1880s) to *Drum* Magazine (1950s),' in *New African Intellectuals and New African Political Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Mbukeni Herbert Mnguni (Münster: Waxmann, 2015), p. 101.

epitomized by the unwavering belief of their ideologue, Selope Thema, that modernity and tradition were inherently incompatible.[2] Despite this political outlook, *Valley of a Thousand Hills* unveils a tension between tradition and modernity on the one hand, and European and indigenous themes and tropes on the other, which is embodied in Dhlomo's decision to write in English. My contention is that it is precisely this tension that foregrounds Dhlomo's aesthetic and political views in the poem. Consequently, his Zulu epic stands out as the result of a complex mediation between conflicting impulses.

Consisting of seven sections followed by an epilogue, *Valley of a Thousand Hills* may be read as an epic poem insofar as it celebrates the homonymous valley in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal.[3] The eulogy of the purity of the land, and the hymns to the ancient Bantu gods and legendary Zulu leaders in the first section rapidly turn into an extended meditation on poetry and religion in the central part, which is followed by wider considerations on the past and present history of the valley in sections five and six. In the last two sections and the epilogue, Dhlomo envisages an apocalyptic future, whose ambiguous hopes for regeneration suggest a view of history that is simultaneously teleological and antiteleological, suspended between radical and progressive ideals.

At a first level, *Valley of a Thousand Hills* thus discloses a memorial attempt that is central to epic poetry, but this classification is not unproblematic. Voss, for example, defines it as at once 'a major ode', an elusive 'post Romantic epic', and a 'brief epic' influenced by the Modernist experimentation.[4] Whereas the use of irregular sections and metres, and the juxtaposition of different genres by embedding songs, odes, and choruses into an epic frame suggest the patchwork structure of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, I argue that Dhlomo's work rests on the conflation of multiple British Romantic voices. The poet's debt to Romanticism has been highlighted by critics such as Couzens, Visser, and Voss. However, the impact of such a debt on the linguistic and political frame of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* requires further scrutiny, and so do the Romantic models that Dhlomo possibly imitated. Visser, for example, reads in Dhlomo's poetry

---

[2] Masilela, p. 100 ff.
[3] The valley stretches between the cities of Pietermaritzburg and Durban, around the twisted course of the Umgeni river.
[4] Tony Voss, '*The Flaming Terrapin* and *Valley of a Thousand Hills*: Campbell, Dhlomo and the "Brief Epic",' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, 3 (2006): pp. 451, 458.

'a sub-romantic rhetoric' that lacks unity and coherence,[5] but this impression of discontinuity largely depends on the desire to determine which *western* genre the poem falls into. As Okpewho observed in *The Epic in Africa* (1979), the idea of linearity and organicity as key features of epic and heroic narratives exposes a bias, that is the reference to critical conventions that are not wholly compatible with African orature and its performative dimension. African epic poetry, Okpewho concluded, should rather be seen as 'a narrative collage of affective moments and moods'.[6]

If Dhlomo's desire to compose a national epic modelled on the black tradition explains the fragmentary tone of *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, its multiple voices and perspectives reveal the poet's debt to a written, non-indigenous tradition that I identify with Percy Bysshe Shelley's and John Keats's poetic and philosophical views. Accordingly, in this article I firstly examine the circulation of British Romantic poetry among the New African intellectuals in the 1930s-40s. Besides highlighting the role of missionary education, I suggest that a precedent and possible source of influence may be the politicized reading of the Romantics by Indian intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi. Subsequently, I discuss Dhlomo's aesthetic and ethic views in *Valley of a Thousand Hills* with reference to Shelley's reformist ideals and his concern over language, thought, and poetry. More specifically, I argue that Shelley's reflections are mirrored by Dhlomo's belief in the role of music in creating an absolute language that may defy the constraints of verbal discourse. Finally, I explore Dhlomo's debt to Keats in their common trust in the epistemic value of suffering. This imbrication of genres, voices, and allusions leaves textual scars which, despite causing multiple narrative fractures, produce a polyphonic effect that documents Dhlomo's tormented attempt at negotiating between cultures at a literary and political level.

1. The new Africans and British Romanticism

As a result of Dhlomo's missionary education, and his role as Organizer-Librarian at the Carnegie Library for Non-Europeans in Germiston in 1937-41, *Valley of a Thousand Hills* is largely indebted to Romanticism.

---

[5] N.W. Visser, 'H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903-1956): The Re-emergence of an African Writer,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): p. 9.
[6] Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 82.

However, the New Africans' debt to the Romantics is more complex than the role of missionary schools suggests. The 'comparative readability' of the Romantics possibly contributed, as the Poet Laureate Mazisi Kunene claimed, to their circulation among Christian-educated blacks. Yet, and more importantly, the New Africans shared the Romantics' concerns over the transition from a society based on tribal and rural communities to an industrial and increasingly urban form of modernity. Couzens, however, denies any political commitment to this symbiosis, arguing that the Romantics essentially offered New African poetry a model of literary and political escapism.[7]

What is striking about existing scholarship is the scanty evidence of *which* Romantic models Dhlomo was possibly exposed to. With the exception of Voss, who reads *Valley of a Thousand Hills* as 'a Wordsworthian narrative of individual growth' infused with 'a Blakean moment of illumination', critics mostly interpret Dhlomo's post-Romantic diction as belletrism.[8] Yet only by establishing which Romantic poets and texts Dhlomo had access to can one examine the aesthetic and political implications of this debt. Due to the scarcity of realia such as letters and diaries I address these issues by resorting to the key tenets of attribution studies, that is, external and internal evidence. Consequently, I provide here some extra-textual and textual indications to shed light on the role played by Shelley's and Keats's philosophical views in *Valley of a Thousand Hills*.[9]

As far as external evidence is concerned, the syllabus approved by the South African Library Association for the Preliminary Examination of candidates applying for a post as librarian suggests that Dhlomo was familiar with most English classics. William Shakespeare and John Milton are unsurprisingly among the canonical poets recommended in the reading list, which includes the work of only two Romantics, Wordsworth and Shelley.[10] Another useful document is the second report of the Carnegie Non-European Library (1938), which illustrates the criteria adopted

---

[7] Tim Couzens, 'The Continuity of Black Literature in South Africa before 1950,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): p. 15.

[8] Voss, p. 462; also see Lewis Nkosi, 'South Africa: Black Consciousness,' in *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Albert S. Gérard (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), p. 437.

[9] See Harold Love, *Attributing Authorship: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 51-97.

[10] The syllabus is reproduced in Marguerite Andree Peters, 'The Contribution of the Carnegie Non-European Library Service, Transvaal, to the Development of Library Services for Africans in South Africa: An Historical and Evaluative Study' (MA diss., University of Cape Town, 1974), p. 215. I thank Sara Sullam for this useful insight.

by the committee in selecting titles for non-white readers. Echoing Kunene's words on the readability of the Romantics, the report states that non-whites were primarily interested in books written in native languages and in the 'English classics – Shakespeare, Thackeray, Keats, Sheridan and Dickens. In the opinion of the librarian [i.e. Dhlomo], these demands are based on "little learning"'.[11] Published during Dhlomo's mandate as Librarian-Organizer, the report demonstrates his familiarity with Keats's poetry.

Textual evidence also confirms Dhlomo's knowledge of the Romantic canon when one examines the wealth of allusions and references present in works other than *Valley of a Thousand Hills*. For instance, Dhlomo significantly chose as an epigraph for his first play, *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (1935), the following stanza from Robert Browning's 'Memorabilia' (1855):

> 'Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
> And did he stop and speak to you?
> And did you speak to him again?
> How strange it seems, and new!'[12]

A case in point is the poem that Dhlomo dedicated to the memory of the other leading Zulu poet of the time in 1947. Published in *Ilanga lase Natal*, 'Ichabod! Elegy on Benedict Wallet Bambatha Vilakazi' is not only an instance of pastoral elegy – it is also considerably modelled on Shelley's elegy for the death of Keats, *Adonais* (1819). As a matter of fact, Dhlomo draws on a natural and cosmological imagery that suggests multiple parallelisms. Vilakazi's absence has left a void in his 'honoured place' where, 'like a planet in the firmament' he 'Blazed forth'. This image refashions Shelley's claim on Keats as part of 'the immortal stars' that will 'awake again' among mortals, and both poets are reunited with nature after death. Keats 'is made one with Nature', and his soul, 'like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are'. Dhlomo, on his part, assures readers that '[Vilakazi] is enfolded in Eternity. / The Beauty that he loved and sang is one / With him. He is beyond the stars and suns'.[13]

---

[11] *Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal. Second Report*, July 1938, p. 13.

[12] H.I.E. Dhlomo, *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1935). Unfortunately, this detail has been omitted in the only available edition of Dhlomo's *Collected Works*, which was published by Visser and Couzens in 1985. I am indebted to Giuliana Iannaccaro for bringing this to my attention.

[13] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 4, *1820-1821*, ed. Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan and Kelvin Everest (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 301, 315, 330; H.I.E. Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 352-3.

After this allusive palimpsest, Dhlomo makes a further, explicit statement on Vilakazi's affinity with the Romantics. The dead poet rests among valiant Zulus such as Shaka, but he is also in the company of the 'long-haired bards' that left an indelible mark on his poetic identity:

> Now Keats, his idol, whom he prayed to meet,
> Chaste Shelley, too, come forth our Bard to greet,
> And Catholic great Dante, Comedy
> Divine enjoying, smiles to meet and see
> A Catholic bard mate.[14]

Dhlomo falls short of providing perspicuous insights into the reasons why Shelley, Keats, and Dante stand among the New Africans' literary pantheon. Nevertheless, this passage provides a clear textual indication of which Romantics he viewed as poetic models. One year after 'Ichabod!' Dhlomo would define Shelley as a rebel and a religious iconoclast in the essay he devoted to 'The Ethical Tone in Folk Poetry' in *Native Teachers' Journal* (1948).[15] Yet Shelley's and Keats's philosophical and aesthetic speculation sheds considerable light on his attempt at reconciling tradition and modernity and at harmonizing cultures. In this sense, two possible mediators may have been the champions of Indian nationalism, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Their influence on the South African desire to obtain independence from Britain should not be overlooked, and equally important is their politicized reading of the Romantics.[16]

During the years that Gandhi spent in South Africa, his campaign against Indian discrimination on the one hand, and his support of the Zulu Kingdom in Natal on the other, were voiced by the *Indian Opinion*, the short-lived newspaper he founded in 1904. This publication had a major role in circulating Gandhi's theory on the need of a non-violent form of resistance, initially known as 'Sadagraha'. Gandhi would later rename his doctrine 'Satyagraha', emphasizing the importance of 'non-violent courage and self-suffering' to achieve enfranchisement from white rule.[17] Tagore, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and died

---

[14] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 353.

[15] H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'Zulu Folk Poetry,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): p. 55.

[16] I would like to thank Francesca Orestano for her advice and suggestions.

[17] Uma Majmudar, *Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 138; see also Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Cape, 1957), p. 136, who reports that Gandhi once read passages from Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) at a public gathering in India.

the same year that Dhlomo published his epic poem, counteracted the threat of segregation in India by developing a unitarian ideal of society that is grounded in Romantic philosophy. The organicist views of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, as Goldberg argues, are at the basis of Tagore's conception of society as a 'collective creation'. According to the Bengali poet, this cooperative effort may enhance human progress and foster the 'perfectibility' of the divine in man by attaining to moral ideals such as beauty, truth, and goodness.[18] Tagore's influence on Dhlomo is manifest in the article that the South African writer published in *Ilanga lase Natal* on 23 April 1949. Praising the Campbell Collection of African Arts and Crafts, Dhlomo prefaces his text with a passage from Tagore's article 'My Interpretations of Indian History' (1913):

> Thus placed between two contending forces, we shall mark out the middle path of truth in our national life; we shall realise that only through the development of racial individuality can we truly attain to universality, and only in the light of the spirit of universality can we perfect individuality.[19]

Germinating in South Africa, Gandhi's and Tagore's nationalism possibly provided an ideological catalyst for Dhlomo's politicized reading of the Romantics, and especially his debt to Shelley and Keats. Particularly in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) Dhlomo found an artistic example to educate his readers towards civil resistance, tolerance, and love while experimenting with language. In this regard, Dhlomo pursued the same hybridization of arts that is central to Shelley's lyrical drama, and the aesthetic and philosophical speculation at the core of *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). With Keats, Dhlomo shared the importance of the epistemic value of suffering and the idea that poetry should encompass the whole of human experience, well beyond social, historical, and political contingency.

2. *Dhlomo's hybridization of black tradition and Romantic voices*

In *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (1983), Opland remarked that the common poetic form for memorializing ancestral myths in the black literary tradition is eulogy, whereas Xhosa and Zulu epic poetry is a less codified genre in-

---

[18] Ellen Goldberg, 'The Romanticism of Rabindranath Tagore: Poetry as Sadhana,' *Indian Literature* 45, 4 (2001): p. 176.

[19] H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'Great Contribution to African Culture,' *Ilanga lase Natal*, 23 April 1949, http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/editorial/23_4_49.gif.

fluenced by European models.[20] Written black epic, in other words, is the result of poetic negotiation, and the prologue of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* offers a number of interesting considerations in this sense. In his search for 'Sweet Purity', 'Beauty', and 'Glory', the poet refashions the classical trope of the invocation of the muses as an appeal to the ancestral spirits of the valley:

> Ancestral Spirits great vouchsafe me power
> This beauty fierce to seize and rape and make
> My own . . . to express! The poet do not jilt.
> Give me the words, the depths, the holiness
> This magic sight to hold, imprison, sing!
> This myriad beauty of the Thousand Land.[21]

The encounter between African orature and the Western tradition soon exposes a clash as well as multiple textual scars. The narration rapidly turns from epic to eulogy insofar as it celebrates the Bantu Olympus, or 'The skipping playing ground of tribal gods' who 'thought and wrought this thousand-shaped / Earth-heaven'. Dhlomo amalgamates into his epic four hymns: one to Nkosazana, the goddess of prosperity, fertility, reason, and justice; one to Nomkhubulwana, the goddess of love and guardian of virginal purity; one to Mvelinqanga, the 'creator and protector' of men; and one to Nkulunkulu, the supreme creator. These hymns, and the interposed 'Song of Sunrise and Mists', produce a perceivable effect of narrative disruption even though, as Opland remarks, African epic poetry often incorporates eulogy, thus obliterating the difference between the two genres.[22]

However, I would add that Dhlomo's hymns blur another difference, the one between the memorial and the political aim of the poem. Nkulunkulu is eulogized not so much for presiding over a tribal state ruled by harmony, but for elevating the early African peoples to a semi-divine status. By bestowing godly powers and virtues on the earliest Zulus, the ancestral spirits raised a 'host majestical / Of lesser gods',[23] valiant leaders such as Phuka, Mageba and his son Ndaba, and the legendary Shaka. Dhlomo entrusts this praise to four subsequent hymns that he embeds

---

[20] Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 209-12.

[21] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 295.

[22] Opland, p. 145.

[23] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, pp. 298-9.

into the text as separate poems, suspending the narration and slackening its rhythm. The result is an extended digression whose pan-nationalistic accents need careful discussion.

In an article published in *Umtetli wa Bantu* in 1929 and titled 'Africa's Call', Dhlomo had urged the black elites to take action in order to obtain 'liberation from the tyranny of the "chosen" few'. This aim could only be attained through a 'spirit of tolerance, conciliation, service and understanding', which he believed to be key to developing 'the future potentialities of this our country'.[24] However, in the years preceding the publication of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* Dhlomo had also been at work on a group of plays – collectively known as *The Black Bulls* (1936-37) – on the valiant leaders of the African past. Central to these plays is the scrutiny of the reasons behind the failure of independent African societies, which led Dhlomo to question the expediency of compromise in the light of the Unionists' discriminatory politics. Whereas Dhlomo's journalism in the 1920s and early 1930s confirms, in Couzens's words, the idea that 'progress was evolutionarily inevitable', the *Black Bulls* plays suggest, as Peterson argues, the writer's refusal of Christian-liberal views in favour of 'a militant liberal-democratic nationalism'.[25] However, I believe that Dhlomo's seeming apostasy should not be taken at face value when one reads its implications in *Valley of a Thousand Hills*. The hymn to Nkulunkulu contradicts his changing political outlook:

> [...] to make
> Of Africans a race apart and rare,
> UBuntu Nkulunkulu shed on them:
> Strong legioned hopes; the fadeless blooms of Love;
> The spirit of stout youthfulness e'er green;
> Sweet effluence of song; the gift to know
> To serve and wait as aid to victory;
> The Masitela power the deepest wrongs
> To bear, forgive; to smile in woe; to sing
> In pain; to laugh when laughter is but mask;
> To hide deep piercing pain, injustice dark;
> To forgive who hate, betray, or wreck and hurt,
> Using such bitterness of soul as stuff
> To build mid ruins of the shattered Self;

[24] H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'Africa's Call,' *Umtetli wa Bantu*, 16 November 1929, http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/16_11_29.gif.
[25] Couzens, *The New African* p. 65; Bhekizizwe Peterson, '*The Black Bulls* of H.I.E. Dhlomo: Ordering History out of Nonsense,' *English in Africa* 18, 1 (1991): p. 31.

> To do the right, see light, when all is dark . . .
> This was uBuntu Nkulunkulu gave
> To them – the purest essence of God-life!
> UBuntu, fadeless star, green bloom, heaven's song!
> Destined to lead to triumph Black Africa![26]

This passage is worth discussing at length due to its moral, semantic, and syntactical similarities with *Prometheus Unbound*. Conceived during the poet's first year in Italy in 1818-19, Shelley's lyrical drama testifies to his concern over political despotism after the failure of the late eighteenth-century revolutionist ideals and the political geography determined by Napoleon's fall. Shelley's views are largely utopian, combining the nineteenth-century faith in human rationality with Miltonic idealism. The 'sacred Milton', the poet states in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, was 'a republican and a bold inquirer into morals and religion'. As such, he provided an example for Shelley's belief, later shared by Dhlomo, that spiritual and political regeneration may only be attained by 'moral excellence'. As long as 'the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure', Shelley argues, 'reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life, which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness'.[27] Similarly, at the end of Act IV Demogorgon reminds the readers of the virtues that enabled his victory over, and Prometheus's resistance against, Jupiter's tyranny. Oppression is to be fought through a 'most firm assurance' that is grounded in 'Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance', ideals that enable humankind to 're-assume / An empire o'er the disentangled doom'.[28] In Demogorgon's words tyranny may be overthrown, and justice and freedom ensured, by an attitude of wisdom and endurance. Dhlomo's hymn to Nkulunkulu similarly suggests that political enfranchisement should be attained through resistance, but the similarities are more manifest when one compares it with Demogorgon's words in the last stanza of *Prometheus Unbound*:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
>   To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;

---

[26] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 298.
[27] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 2, *1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 475.
[28] Shelley, *Poems,* vol. 2, p. 648.

To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
    Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.[29]

Shelley articulates his philosophical views through a series of infinitive clauses that validate his message beyond historical contingency, and the syntactical structure of this stanza, as well as its content, resonate in the hymn to Nkulunkulu. When read side by side, Shelley's and Dhlomo's words provide sufficient evidence to dispute Couzens' claims on the New Africans' debt to the Romantics as grounded in escapism. What these lexical and philosophical similarities point to is that Dhlomo found in Shelley an aesthetic embodiment of the civil, non-violent form of resistance that was first theorized in South Africa with Gandhi's *Indian Opinion*. In addition, further elements suggest that Dhlomo possibly had Shelley's drama in mind while he was trying to reach a compromise between black vindications and white power.

Largely inspired by *coreodramma*,[30] which Shelley had become interested in after seeing Salvatore Viganò's *Otello, o sia il moro di Venezia* at La Scala, *Prometheus Unbound* possibly appealed to Dhlomo for its conflation of poetry, music, and dance, elements that his epic similarly exploits. The first section of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* incorporates a number of hymns devoted to Zulu demigods such as Ndaba, Mageba, Phunga, and Shaka. The second section, which explores the poet's relation with the valley in the form of the Wordsworthian autobiographical narrative, includes an ode to Pain and Love, and the fourth section a litany addressed to a possibly Christian Lord. The praise of 'The Tribal State' in section

---

[29] Shelley, *Poems,* vol. 2, pp. 648-9.

[30] Inspired by the *ballet d'action*, *coreodramma* was a hybrid art form combining dance, music and pantomime. While he was living in Milan in April 1818, Shelley saw Viganò's *coreodramma Otello, o sia il moro di Venezia* and *La spada di Kenneth* at La Scala. As he wrote to Thomas Love Peacock, he was impressed by 'The manner in which language is translated into gesture, the complete & full effect of the whole as illustrating the history in question, the unaffected self-possession of each of the actors, even to the children, made this choral drama more impressive than I should have conceived possible'. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2, *Shelley in Italy*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 4. On the influence of Viganò's *coredramma* on *Prometheus Unbound* see Lilla Maria Crisafulli, '"A Language in Itself Music": Salvatore Viganò's *Ballet en Action* in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*,' in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 135-59.

five ends with songs and choruses, 'age-group ditties'[31] that interrupt but complement the narrative rhythm. The following songs of the Children, the Youth, and the Aged hybridize voices and time perspectives, creating a polyphonic effect that is enhanced by a chorus and final ensemble. Such conflation is at least partially modelled on the rhythm and polyphony of *Prometheus Unbound*, whose aesthetic experimentation is tinged with philosophical speculation and democratic values. Central to Shelley's drama is the search for an expressive form that may overcome the constraints of verbal discourse in an attempt to be at once subjective and universal. The result is an imbrication of forms that, as Crisafulli suggests, testifies to the poet's ambition 'to create a boundless language' that might obliterate 'traditional and codified divisions between sexes, social classes, scientific classification, literary and artistic genres and, more than anything else, between verbal language, bodily language and the language of the soul'.[32]

In the years preceding the publication of *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, Dhlomo had been engaged in a heated dispute with Vilakazi over the use of rhyme in Bantu poetry. Dhlomo rejected rhyme in favour of rhythm and movement, which he considered the core elements of African orature. In a 1939 essay he claimed that poetry – which, in its highest sense, subsumes drama – 'deals with actions, passions, and furies', elements that are at odds with 'the stagnant, dam-like banks of rhyme'.[33] A decade later, in the articles he published in *Native Teachers' Journal* in 1947-48 he would claim that the staples of 'Zulu Folk Poetry' are precisely rhythm and musicality. Dhlomo, in other words, opposed rhythm to rhyme, which he believed to be alien to the indigenous tradition. Musicality, instead, he believed to be key to the African performative tradition in that it reconciles poetic delivery with tribal dances.[34]

Conceived in the central years of Dhlomo's aesthetic reflection, *Valley of a Thousand Hills* expresses the search for a balance between the precepts of written epic and the tenets of African orature. While the result oscillates between a mannerist search for polyphony and the overall perception of fragmentation, this imbrication gives the poem that rhythm and dynamism that Dhlomo believed to be key to traditional black poetry.

[31] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 313.
[32] Crisafulli, p. 140.
[33] H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'African Drama and Poetry,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): p. 13.
[34] Dhlomo, 'Zulu Folk Poetry,' pp. 43-60.

3. Poetry, thought, and language

Another interesting aspect testifies to Shelley's influence on Dhlomo, that is, their conception of poetry as a divine faculty grounded in human language and thought. In addition to the virtues he gave his earthly descendants, Nkulunkulu bestowed on them the gift of thought and poetry:

> He laughed aloud . . . . The waves turned restless. Thought!
> He dreamed . . . the dreams melt to Illusive Song!
> A thought escaped . . . it shaped to poesy!
> Too late, the God, for once afeared, awoke!
> Thought, Poetry and Song, heaven's gifts,
> Sweet attributes and boast of gods themselves,
> To mortal man, immortal had escaped!
> Shedding their Light and Immortality
> And god-like powers and joys, making their beings
> Immortal spite their cursed mortality.[35]

The idea of poetry as a divine faculty is not a Romantic prerogative, nor is it alien to African orature. Indeed, Dhlomo's views in this passage are reminiscent of Plato, whose reading was recommended for the Preliminary Examination of the South African Library Association. In *Ion*, Plato defined *poiesis* as divine inspiration, possession, and enthusiasm, and Shelley translated Plato's dialogue between 1819 and 1820, partly imbibing its views.[36] When Asia questions Demogorgon on the nature of divinity, freedom, and slavery in Act II of *Prometheus Unbound*, she remarks that the titan 'gave men speech, and speech created thought / Which is the measure of the Universe'.[37] Her words anticipate the reflection that Shelley entrusts to the voice of the Earth in Act IV, foregrounding the role of language in creating verbal embodiments for thought. Language gives shape and sense to the poet's ideas and words, which become speech acts: 'Language is a perpetual Orphic song, / Which rules with daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were'.[38] In Dhlomo's poem, the secrets that the Bantu gods disclosed to the ancient Africans are reminiscent of Pro-

---

[35] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 297.
[36] The translation was published posthumously by Mary Shelley, who included it in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mrs. Shelley, vol. 1 (London: Moxon, 1840), pp. 273-98.
[37] Shelley, *Poems,* vol. 2, p. 561.
[38] Shelley, *Poems,* vol. 2, pp. 639-40.

metheus's revelation, a transgression that the Romantics commended in that it was committed for the delivery of humankind:

> These were not gods as other gods were gods . . .
> Strange foreign gods with human frailties!
> [...] these were gods as gods if gods should be:
> Speaking the language of Eternity!
> Performing deeds of Immortality!
> Surrounded by a cloud of dignity!
> All sexless, in spiritual vortex bathed!
> But coming in the garb of sex to earth,
> That poor sex-centred man may understand;
> So that the Absolute Reality
> Subjective mind of Man may apprehend.[39]

The Bantu spirits enabled the early African peoples to establish a connection between the individual and the universal mind, that 'Absolute Reality' which is ultimately left to the poet to grasp and voice. After *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley makes this point explicit in *A Defence of Poetry*. In his manifesto, he defines poetry as 'the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own' that makes the mind 'the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought'.[40] For Shelley, in other words, poetry is endowed with an epistemic function that elevates it over all other art forms. Moreover, by defeating 'the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions'[41] it provides access to that absolute, non-immanent reality which, as Dhlomo similarly claims, transcends sensorial knowledge and historical contingency.

It is precisely this meditation on poetry that simultaneously confirms Dhlomo's debt to the Romantics and challenges the definition of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* as an epic work. The same year that *Valley of a Thousand Hills* was published, Mikhail Bakhtin argued in 'Epic and Novel' (1941) that epic poetry rests on the existence of an 'absolute past' or a 'national tradition' markedly separated from the present through an 'absolute epic distance'. The Russian critic attributed to all literary genres a certain pliability influenced by the tendency towards 'novelization', but to destroy the distance between past and present, he pointed out, implies

---

[39] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 298.
[40] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 505, 487.
[41] Shelley, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 505.

destructing the epic genre on a formal basis.[42] In addition, Bakhtin explicitly disentangled epic poetry from the epistemic implications that he assigned to other genres. In his view, what is pivotal to poetic creation in traditional genres is memory and not knowledge, a function that he specifically attributed to the novel. However, when one acknowledges that epic poetry has a crucial role in the construction of cultural memory in that it gives an institutional form to socially shared knowledge, one may as well question Bakhtin's distinction, which rather suggests the porosity of literary genres.

Dhlomo does not comply with Bakhtin's distinction between the 'absolute past' of the Bantu gods and the present, yet *Valley of a Thousand Hills* reveals his attempt to fulfil an epistemic as well as a memorial function. At the end of the first section, the poet states that in the valley 'sages, hunters, warriors', as well as 'Philosophy and law; Past, Present, or / Grim fact and grimmer fiction, tell and hear'.[43] Again, the belief that the valley provides access to absolute knowledge by means of a sympathetic connection with the place further testifies to Dhlomo's Romanticism. As he contemplates the flowing of the river Arve in 'Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni' (1816), Shelley develops an extended meditation on the interchange between the universal and the individual mind:

> Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
> Thou art the path of that unresting sound—
> Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
> I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
> To muse on my own separate fantasy,
> My own, my human mind, which passively
> Now renders and receives fast influencings,
> Holding an unremitting interchange
> With the clear universe of things around;[44]

Dhlomo's debt to Shelley is at first glance semantic. They both focus on the interchange between the universal mind embodied in nature and the 'wise' observer, that is the poet. Through this relationship Dhlomo emphasizes the ability of art to reconcile disharmony, a fact that acquires

---

[42] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 16.

[43] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 302.

[44] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley,* vol. 1, *1814-1817*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 544.

philosophical as well as political relevance in the aftermath of the Native
Land and Trust Act (1936) and the Representation of Natives Act (1936).
In the valley,

> Despite charmed peacefulness there is no rest,
> Beginning, end or death, but constant birth;
> A flowering into never-ceasing maze
> Of beauty's silent song as gods compress
> Their magic notes into a vale, or touch
> The strings into a tingling rill, or swoop
> A chord into a bulging hill, or fling
> A theme into a scattering coloured swarm
> Of winging melody![45]

The political implications of this search for organic unity are evident.
Only by establishing a connection with what is immanent in nature,
Shelley claims in 'Mont Blanc', can the poet deliver a message endowed
with moral truth. The mountain possesses a voice that can 'repeal / Large
codes of fraud and woe', but it can only be understood by 'the wise, and
great, and good'.[46] His reference to the 'codes of fraud and woes' resonates
in Dhlomo's statement on the relationship between art and morality:

> Foul immorality the poet does
> Not know. Far moral than our crippling codes
> Of warped morality, his morals must
> Appear immoral in immoral spheres.[47]

Dhlomo posits here a triangulation that connects art, morality, and
human sympathy. In so doing, he stresses the social as well as the po-
litical function of poetry at a time when art has become a 'commercial
pantomime' growing 'in chains of fungus soil / Of crippling laws and
forms'. In such a dark moment in history, the poet contends, the Valley of
a Thousand Hills remains a universal source of inspiration in its role as a
'Gem which tells of our myriad-chambered Soul'.[48] Whereas conceptual
and lexical allusions suggest that Shelley provided the South African
poet with an aesthetic model fit to voice ethical and political concerns,
Dhlomo's meditation on poetry also reveals the influence of Keats's views

---

[45] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 302.
[46] Shelley, *Poems,* vol. 1, p. 546.
[47] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 310.
[48] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 301.

on the epistemic value of suffering. What sounds as an offhand metaphor expresses the idea of knowledge as the inevitable progress of the soul from a state of innocence to the awareness of pain. This is a central tenet of Keats's reflection, which secularizes, as Kucich remarks, Milton's Christian ideals.[49] Even in this case, Dhlomo's debt is conceptual as well as lexical. Writing to John Hamilton Reynolds on 3 May 1818, Keats defined life as 'a large Mansion of Many Apartments', a house consisting of a series of chambers which humans must enter in a succession as they experience pain and misery:

> The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think [...] but are at length imperceptibly impelled by awakening of the thinking principle – within us – we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man – of convincing ones [sic] nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression.[50]

Influenced by his own experience of personal loss and artistic failure, Keats deemed suffering fundamental to the development of one's own identity. Writing to his brother and sister-in-law on 21 April 1819, the poet further articulated his views by comparing two conceptions of the world, the 'vale of tears' and the 'vale of Soul-making'. The first identifies a state from which individuals need redeeming in that it implies a meaningless experience of pain. To this Christian ideal Keats opposed the 'vale of Soul-making', which rests on the salvific function of pain. Accordingly, he distinguishes between soul and intelligence, claiming that the former is the result of the interaction of three elements,

> the *Intelligence* – the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *World* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of *Mind and Heart* on each other for the purpose of forming the *Soul* or *Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*. [...] Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?[51]

[49] Greg Kucich, 'Keats and English Poetry,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 196-7.
[50] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. 1, *1814-1818*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 280-1.
[51] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. 2, *1819-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 102, emphasis in the text.

Both letters were included in Sidney Colvin's edition of Keats's correspondence, which first appeared in 1891 and was reprinted three times in the 1920s. To my knowledge, no external evidence confirms that Dhlomo read them, but after defining the Valley of a Thousand Hills as a 'myriad-chambered Soul' he significantly embeds in his epic an ode to 'Insidious Pain' and 'Pandemic Love'. And although he defines these two states as a malady, he considers them to be ineludible. On the one hand, awareness of suffering is crucial to the non-violent attitude based on endurance that Dhlomo possibly inherited from Gandhi's contributions to the *Indian Opinion* and refined following the example of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. On the other, his epic anticipates what he would more consistently expound in prose. Writing in *Native Teachers' Journal* in 1948, Dhlomo emphasizes that poetry needs to encompass the whole of human experience, across time and place and beyond the constraints of subjectivity. Like the Keatsian 'chameleon poet', the 'artist must live the life of other men other times, other places. Great art or thought is more than racial and national. It is universal'.[52] On the verge of the National Party victory in May 1948 and the impending institution of apartheid, this claim may sound like a statement of political disengagement. However, it does not undermine Dhlomo's belief in the social function of art, whose imperative is to raise awareness because only by educating the masses, as his journalism and drama suggest, can change happen.

4. *Which tradition, which modernity*

Dhlomo's comparison between 'The Tribal State' and 'The Present State' in sections five and six of *Valley of a Thousand* Hills focuses on the transition from a rural community to an increasingly urban and industrial society, which he criticizes for enacting separation and difference. Unlike tribal life, the new social asset promotes 'shames and wrongs veiled fair by law!' and 'Man-made steel monsters crush[ing] all flesh',[53] a statement that is lexically and ideologically close to William Blake's conception of institutions as 'mind-forg'd manacles' in *Songs of Experience* (1794).[54]

---

[52] Dhlomo, 'Zulu Folk Poetry,' p. 59.
[53] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 317.
[54] William Blake, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 36. Blake's famous definition is in the poem titled 'London'.

Dhlomo denounces the oppressive institutions of the present, yet he abstains from outlining any viable alternative. His nostalgic revivification of tribal life rests on the remark that its proto-republican organization was made possible by the absence of 'social institution dark'. The idea that the lack of social and political institutions might ensure that 'Corruption is unknown, and systems of / Correction and reform do not disgrace!'[55] suggests more an idealistic belief in the Romantic doctrine of utopian rationalism than a clear political agenda. Dhlomo's hope for moral regeneration seals the epilogue to the poem by envisaging, like the conclusion of *Prometheus Unbound*, a new order regulated by 'A world of Love and Truth, divinity fair'.[56] In this sense, his appropriation of Romantic voices acquires further significance with reference to what he would argue in *Native Teachers' Journal* in April 1948. On the brink of the South African general elections, Dhlomo emphasized the need for compromise in art as well as in politics. He warned against 'blindly reverting' to the past, endorsing instead a harmonious blending of 'the native and the alien, the traditional and the foreign', which alone can create 'something new and beautiful'.[57] The following year, Dhlomo further stressed this point in his editorial on the Campbell Collection of African Arts and Crafts, this time entrusting his message to Tagore's words: 'we shall know of a verity that it is idle mendicancy to discard our own and beg for the foreign, and at the same time we shall feel that it is the extreme abjectness of poverty to dwarf ourselves by rejecting the foreign'.[58]

Taken together, what Dhlomo's articles and *Valley of a Thousand Hills* suggest is the belief that tradition must be embraced in a flexible and dynamic way for social and political progress to occur. The undated essay '"The House of Bread": Poet versus Politician' ultimately clarifies Dhlomo's progressive, rather than radical, views. 'More courageous and wise at time', the New African intellectual argues, 'it is to live without attaining your ideals and applying your beliefs. Plato knew that his cherished Republic was not practicable but idealistic, and did not insist upon its immediate realization'.[59] This claim confirms the attitude of civil resistance that Dhlomo had endorsed in his journalism and in *Valley of a Thousand*

---

[55] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 312.
[56] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 320.
[57] Dhlomo, 'Zulu Folk Poetry,' p. 59.
[58] Dhlomo, 'Great Contribution to African Culture'.
[59] H.I.E. Dhlomo, '"The House of Bread": Poet versus Politician,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): p. 76.

Hills, and ratifies his reading of the Romantics. Shelley's most articulate meditation on the need for gradual reform is certainly his longest essay, the posthumously published *A Philosophical View of Reform.* The poet's extensive examination of nineteenth-century Britain dwells on political and economic issues, investigating the problem of inflation caused by paper currency and the national debt, widespread inequality, and the inefficiency of Malthusian politics. According to Shelley, the careful scrutiny of all these issues, and an accurate assessment of costs and benefits, need to be made before introducing reforms in fields such as parliamentary representation. Likewise, educating the masses on their rights and aims, and promoting an attitude based on endurance and reason are efforts that should be made prior to attaining change. Although the 'period of conciliation' is over, Shelley argues in *A Philosophical View*, revolutionary measures may be counterproductive if the masses have not been educated to reform:

> it is no matter how slow, gradual and cautious be the change; we shall demand more and more with firmness and moderation, never anticipating but never deferring the moment of successful opposition, so that the people may become habituated to exercising the functions of sovereignty, in proportion as they acquire the possession of it. [...] But nothing is more idle than to reject a limited benefit because we cannot without great sacrifices obtain an unlimited one.[60]

A Philosophical View of Reform was first published in 1920, but the lack of sound external evidence, such as the registers and catalogue of the Carnegie Non-European Library, makes it difficult to establish whether Dhlomo read this essay. For certain, he shared with the Romantics a number of concerns that shed light on his preoccupation over the social role of the artist, but also his constant reflection on the need for compromise between tradition and modernity on the one hand, and between radical reform and progressive change on the other. Dhlomo's Romanticism ultimately shapes his poetry at an aesthetic as well as an ethic level. The seeming escapism of *Valley of a Thousand Hills* bridges, in fact, the educational aim of his journalism with his political commitment as a playwright.

---

[60] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 76-7.

Bibliography

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 'Epic and Novel,' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3-40.

Blake, William, *Selected Poems*, ed. Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal. Second Report, July 1938.

Couzens, Tim, 'The Continuity of Black Literature in South Africa before 1950,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): pp. 11-24.

———, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Crisafulli, Lilla Maria, '"A Language in Itself Music": Salvatore Viganò's *Ballet en Action* in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*,' in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 135-59.

Dhlomo, H.I.E., 'Africa's Call,' *Umtetli wa Bantu*, 16 November 1929, http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/16_11_29.gif.

———, *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1935).

———, 'Great Contribution to African Culture,' *Ilanga lase Natal*, 23 April 1949, http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/editorial/23_4_49.gif.

———, *Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

———, 'African Drama and Poetry,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): pp. 12-17.

———, '"The House of Bread": Poet versus Politician,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): pp. 73-6.

———, 'Zulu Folk Poetry,' *English in Africa* 4, 2 (1997): pp. 43-60.

Fischer, Louis, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Cape, 1957).

Goldberg, Ellen, 'The Romanticism of Rabindranath Tagore: Poetry as Sadhana,' *Indian Literature* 45, 4 (2001): pp. 173-96.

Keats, John, *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. 1, *1814-1818*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

———, *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. 2, *1819-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Kucich, Greg, 'Keats and English Poetry,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 186-202.

Love, Harold, *Attributing Authorship: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Majmudar, Uma, *Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).

Masilela, Ntongela, 'Theorising the Modernist Moment of New African Intellectuals: From *Imvo Zabantsundu* (1880s) to *Drum* Magazine (1950s),' in *New African Intellectuals and New African Political Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Mbukeni Herbert Mnguni (Münster: Waxmann, 2015), pp. 25-110.

Nkosi, Lewis, 'South Africa: Black Consciousness,' in *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Albert S. Gérard (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), pp. 434-50.

Okpewho, Isidore, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

Opland, Jeff, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Peters, Marguerite Andree, 'The Contribution of the Carnegie Non-European Library Service, Transvaal, to the Development of Library Services for Africans in South Africa: An Historical and Evaluative Study' (MA diss., University of Cape Town, 1974).

Peterson, Bhekizizwe, '*The Black Bulls* of H.I.E. Dhlomo: Ordering History out of Nonsense,' *English in Africa* 18, 1 (1991): pp. 25-49.

Shelley, Mary, ed., *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1 (London: Moxon, 1840).

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920).

———, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2, *Shelley in Italy*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

———, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977).

———, *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 1, *1814-1817*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

———, *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 2, *1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

———, *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. 4, *1820-1821*, ed. Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan and Kelvin Everest (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

Visser, N.W., 'H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903-1956): The Re-emergence of an African Writer,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): pp. 1-10.

Voss, Tony, '*The Flaming Terrapin* and *Valley of a Thousand Hills*: Campbell, Dhlomo and the "Brief Epic,"' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, 3 (2006): pp. 449-66.

AN EXPERIMENT IN READING: NARRATIVE COMPOSITION IN H.I.E. DHLOMO'S SHORT FICTION

Sara Sullam

H.I.E. Dhlomo is a key figure in the South African context of the first half of the twentieth century, one whose 'newness' and 'modernity' has been highlighted by almost all critics. By focussing on three short stories – 'The Barren Woman', 'The Daughter' and 'He Forgave Her', this essay aims to explore the contradictions that emerge when Dhlomo's short fiction is considered under the label of modernism that is used for his literary practice in general. I argue that while the short stories are rather ascribable to melodrama, they do display *loci* in which the narrative technique changes through the exploitation of narrative techniques usually associated – at least from a purely formal point of view – with canonical modernist short stories. I shall define these *loci* as 'narrative dissonances'. Although at first sight they may appear as a flaw, these 'dissonances' illuminate the tension between the didactic aims that characterize Dhlomo's fiction and the challenges of modernization.

Herbert I.E. Dhlomo; South-African Literature; Modernism

This essay aims to explore the contradictions that emerge when Dhlomo's short stories are considered under the label of modernism that is used for his literary practice in general. I will argue that while the short stories are rather ascribable to melodrama, they do display *loci* characterized by the exploitation of narrative techniques usually associated – at least from a purely formal point of view – with canonical modernist short stories. I shall define these *loci* 'narrative dissonances'. Although at first sight they may appear as a flaw, these 'dissonances' illuminate the tension between the didactic aims that characterize Dhlomo's fiction and the challenges of modernization.

By considering this tension, my essay aims to illuminate the controversial and contradictory implied author that these texts produce. I shall argue that Dhlomo's apparent failure in fiction (only one of the stories was published during his lifetime) is actually relevant to the making of his own 'fiction of authority'[1] within the South African literary field. To

---

[1] I borrow the definition of 'Fiction of authority' from Susan Sniader Lanser, for whom 'the authority of a voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties.

do this, I will (i) provide a brief survey of how the word modernism and its cognates have been used with reference to the South African context, and in particular to Dhlomo; (ii) offer two examples of 'narrative dissonance' as found in two short stories by Dhlomo, 'The Barren Woman' and 'He Forgave Her', and (iii) focus on Dhlomo's difficulty in finding a narrative voice and in shaping his *persona* as fiction writer.

1. Under modern(ist) eyes?

Modernism is a difficult word, one could say adapting Raymond Williams' famous definition of literature.[2] Since its entrance into the critical lexicon at the turn of the Sixties, 'modernism' has expanded well beyond the borders of the territory occupied by British high-modernism and some related European avant-gardes. Over the last fifteen years, scholars have proposed to expand both the chronological and the geographical borders of modernism. This has resulted into scholarship dealing with peripheral or semi-peripheral modernism(s), into the definition of modernism being applied to works that had been grouped under a different label but shared formal features traditionally ascribed to high-modernist literature,[3] and into scholarship on 'global modernism'.[4] This abundance

Discursive authority – by which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice – is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities'. Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fiction of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 6.

[2] 'Literature is a difficult word, in part because its conventional contemporary meaning appears, at first sight, so simple. There is no apparent difficulty in phrases like English literature or contemporary literature, until we find occasion to ask whether all books and writing are literature (and if they are not, which kinds are excluded and by what criteria) or until, to take a significant example, we come across a distinction'. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana Press, 2013), p. 183.

[3] The centre/periphery model was proposed by Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Since 2007 it has been adopted and adapted within the field of studies of World Literature, and adjusted by drawing on Fredric Jameson's theory of 'incomplete modernization' as presented in *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002). Particularly relevant is the Warwick Research Collective and their most recent output, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015). The second case is true, for example, of the Italian context, where works traditionally labelled 'decadentisti' were re-framed within 'Italian modernism'. See the themed issue of *Allegoria* 63 (2011); Romano Luperini and Massimiliano Tortora (eds.), *Sul modernismo italiano* (Napoli: Liguori, 2012); Romano Luperini (ed.), *Alla ricerca di forme nuove. Il modernismo nelle letterature del primo '900* (Pisa: Pacini, 2018); Massimiliano Tortora, *Il modernismo italiano* (Roma: Carocci, 2019).

[4] Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of scholarship, however, has not always contributed to a more rigorous definition of works within the widening borders of modernism. To adapt from Williams again, and with a slight provocation, one finds occasion to ask whether all books and writing composed between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1960s are, in fact, modernist. The question becomes particularly relevant for works produced in contexts of 'incomplete modernization', such as South Africa in the early twentieth century.[5]

Dhlomo is less known to scholars working outside the field of African studies than other South African contemporaries. This is probably due to the fact that Dhlomo was probably not known in London during his lifetime, unlike white South African writers such as Olive Schreiner, William Plomer or Roy Campbell, or Solomon Plaatje, who gained visibility with his three trips to London. The South African literature of the period became part of transnational modernism mainly thanks to William Plomer's connections with the Hogarth Press.[6] However, Dhlomo is indeed a key figure in the South African context of the first half of the twentieth century, one whose 'newness' and 'modernity' has been highlighted by almost all critics. One of the two re-discoverers of Dhlomo, South African scholar Tim Couzens, entitled his monograph *The New African*, overtly stressing the connection between the African-American modernism of Alain Locke's *New Negro* and Dhlomo's work.[7] Dhlomo scholar Ntongela Masilela speaks of Dhlomo's 'cultural modernity'. The *Cambridge History of South African Literature* uses the category of 'modernism' for literature produced between 1910 and 1948, and Dhlomo is the subject of Tony Voss' chapter dedicated to 'refracted modernisms',

[5] Jade Munslow Ong argues that, while Jameson 'maintains that the only true example of this [incomplete modernization] is Ireland', the definition also applies to the South African context; *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism, Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 15. To corroborate her statement, Ong quotes Laura Winkiel's study on Plaatje and Joyce; Laura Winkiel, 'The Modernist Novel in the World System,' in *A History of the Modernist Novel*, ed. Gregory Castle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 408-28.

[6] See Johan K. Young, 'William Plomer, Transnational Modernism and the Hogarth Press,' in *Leonard and Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press, and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. Helen Southworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 128-49. On South African modernism in London see Munslow Ong, pp. 164-8.

[7] Tim J. Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985). In more recent times Stephen Smith has expanded on Couzens' work to further explore the relationship between Dhlomo and modernity (*Restoring the Imprisoned Community: A Study of Selected Works of H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo and their Role in Constructing a Sense of African Modernity*, unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2004).

alongside with Roy Campbell and N.P. van Wyk Louw.[8] More recently, breaking 'with received constructions of African and modernist literary histories',[9] Jade Munslow Ong has included Dhlomo in her study of South African Modernism. Ong convincingly argues that the very definition of African Modernism is not commonly used as such, since 'modernism' and 'Africa' have usually remained two separate terms[10] and, more importantly, there has been no distinction between different parts of Africa and the focus has been mainly on the postcolonial experience, while

> by adopting a new geographical and historical vantage point that shifts the focus from West, Central and East Africa to Southern Africa, and from the twentieth to the nineteenth century, it becomes possible to perceive a recognisably modernist aesthetic emerging in South Africa in the fin de siècle that endures in modified forms even in contemporary literature.[11]

While Munslow Ong's book is devoted to Olive Schreiner, she also dedicates an insightful chapter to Dhlomo, whom she considers the author of a 'modernist manifesto'.[12] Her focus, however, as in the case of other scholars, is mostly on Dhlomo's journalism and essay writing, on his progressive engagement as a black intellectual. Much less attention has been devoted to Dhlomo's short fiction,[13] which, even more than his poetry with its romantic influences, is apparently a far cry from anything 'modernist', both under a formal and a thematic point of view.

However, defining Dhlomo a modernist is a particularly problematic operation when it comes to his fiction. His ten short stories hardly share any of the formal and structural features ascribed to the genre in its modernist form, as traditionally defined by a set of texts by James Joyce,

---

[8] Tony Voss, 'Refracted Modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-59. Voss' title implies the adoption of the term modernism in the specific context of studies on World Literature, since the definition comes from David Damrosch, who defines World Literature as the 'elliptical refraction of national literatures'; *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 281.

[9] Munslow Ong, p. 12.

[10] Munslow Ong, p. 11: 'It is not a term that is commonly used. In fact, critics are judicious in their use of conjunctions, prepositions and punctuation to separate the two words, so that discussions revolve around Africa and modernism, modernism in Africa, or African literature after modernism'.

[11] Munslow Ong, p. 12.

[12] Munslow Ong, pp. 160-4.

[13] The only studies up to date are Couzens' (*The New African*), who focuses on 'An Experiment in Colour' (pp. 181-5), 'Farmer and Servant' and 'Drought' (pp. 276-88) and Giuliana Iannaccaro, '"The great change": Herbert Dhlomo's "An Experiment in Colour",' *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 53 (2019): pp. 395-408.

Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. This should not come as a surprise since it is improbable that Dhlomo had access to those that are now defined modernist works. While we have no catalogue of Dhlomo's personal library, useful information on his readings can be retrieved from the syllabus that the Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal provided to applicants for the position of 'librarian organizer', which Dhlomo covered between 1937 and 1940, and from the annual report of the Library published in 1938. Authors featured in the syllabus included

> J. Addison. J. Austen. J. Barrie. R. Blackmore. C. Brontë. R. Browning. J. Bunyan. R. Burns. L. Carroll. G. Chaucer. D. Defoe. C. Dickens. G. Eliot. H. Fielding. O. Goldsmith. T. Hardy. A. Hope. J. Keats. C. Kingsley. R. Kipling. C. Lamb. J. Milton. C. Reade. A. Sewell. W. Scott. W. Shakespeare. P.B. Shelley. R. Sheridan. R.L. Stevenson. J. Swift. A. Tennyson. W.M. Thackeray. M. Twain. W. Wordsworth.[14]

The canon clearly stops at the end of the nineteenth century also in the case of 'Foreign Literary Classics'. The most contemporary author, H.G. Wells, is intriguingly listed under 'History'. In the 'Book orders' section of second report of the Non-European library (1938) we read that native people prefer reading English classics and that

> they simply are not aware that other authors have written readable works, and that if a reader starts with more easily understood authors his appreciation of the classics will be better founded. Quite often one hears of Native readers who, having inspected a box which has been sent to their centre, and having found only strange names like Oppenheim, P.C. Wren and Buchan on the backs of the books, turn away without borrowing anything.[15]

However, it is also difficult to detect common features in the case of African-American modernism as exemplified by Locke's *New Negro* anthology. As mentioned earlier, scholars consider the anthology[16] one of the major influences on Dhlomo, due to his work at the Carnegie Library, whose committee promoted the acquisition of works by contemporary African-American writers.[17] A comparison between Dhlomo's short sto-

---

[14] Marguerite Andree Peters, 'Appendix D: Syllabus for Primary Certificate,' in *The Contribution of the Carnegie Non-European Library Service, Transvaal, to the Development of Library Services for Africans in South Africa: An Historical and Evaluative Study* (unpublished MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1974), p. 215.

[15] *Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal. Second Report* (July 1938), p. 13.

[16] Couzens, pp. 121-3.

[17] Maxine K. Rochester, 'The Carnegie Corporation and South Africa: Non-European Library Services,' *Libraries & Cultures* 34, 1 (1999): p. 42.

ries and the ones featured in Locke's anthology easily illuminates differences more than similarities. Particularly striking is the difference in narrative technique. Dhlomo's stories mainly feature a highly intrusive omniscient narrator, who almost always assumes a didactic posture well in control of both his characters and the response of his readers. To use F.K. Stanzel's terminology,[18] this is a classical authorial narrative situation. The stories collected in the *New Negro* are instead characterized by a higher degree of experimentation tending towards the gradual effacement of the third-person narrator (when used), by the extensive use of mimetic dialogue, and by typographical experimentation.

2. Two instances of narrative dissonance: 'The Barren Woman' and 'The Daughter'

In two of Dhlomo's short stories – 'The Barren Woman' and 'The Daughter' the authorial narrative situation seems to give way to the reflector mode. More intriguingly, when this happens, the omniscient narrator is challenged by the discourse of a female character in the form of free indirect speech.

'The Barren Woman' is the story of Mamkazi, a Bantu woman convinced of her barrenness. In Bantu society, the narrator tells us, being barren means disgrace. Her best friend Ntombi is a midwife who has opened a successful 'clinic'. Therefore, when a surprised Mamkazi discovers that she is pregnant, she decides to give birth there. On that same day, another woman at the clinic gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl. To everybody's joy Mamkazi has a girl. But overnight tragedy occurs: Mamkazi awakens to find her baby dead. Mad with grief, she commits a terrible crime: she steals the girl twin from her cot, where she places her dead baby. Nobody seems to suspect anything, and after a couple of days, Mamkazi goes back home. Her restlessness, however, grows with the years and peaks when her daughter becomes intimate friend with the twin boy. Ntombi tackles her friend in order to know the truth (which she has always guessed), but Mamkazi sends her away threatening to blackmail her. However, when her daughter and the boy announce that

---

[18]   I am using Franz K. Stanzel's terminology as established in his *Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). According to Stanzel there are three narrative situations: first-person, authorial (featuring an external omniscient narrator) and figural (a third-person narration where the centre of consciousness is located within a 'reflector character').

they are in love, Mamkazi summons the whole community before exhaling her last breath to reveal the truth and to ask Ntombi to provide her version of the facts. The story ends on the midwife's words: 'It is true, it happened long ago in my clinic...'[19]

Mistaken identities, incest, recognition: 'The Barren Woman' seems to feature all the staple ingredients of fictional melodrama. Yet the narrator himself denies that the story has any dramatic climax: 'It is simple, has no dramatic climax and no element of surprise'. This is certainly true if the story is considered a didactic and straightforward demonstration of the tragedy of barrenness. This is also what the opening of the story apparently suggests:

> The Bantu love of children is well known. [...]
> Barrenness in women was a stigma and disgrace. Even today most Bantu people spend large sums of money and endure many hardships to fight it. [...]
> The story of Mamkazi Zondi is interesting because it involves most of the elements above. It is simple, has no dramatic climax and no element of surprise. She lived in the remote but thriving and, therefore, well-populated village of Manzini. As in many other rural areas part of the population was tribal and 'heathen', and part 'Christian' – meaning anyone who wore European clothes, sent their children to school, lived in square houses no matter how humble and dilapidated, or did not conform to tribal patterns one way or another.
> Mamkazi belonged to the 'Christian' group, had been married for three years, and would have been happy and her story not worth telling but for one curse. She was barren.[20]

The story opens with a general statement that can be attributed to an omniscient narrator typical of an 'authorial narrative situation', one who is well in control of the story and of his characters' discourse. The narrator mediates the characters' speech and thoughts, with the exception of a few lines uttered by Mamkazi in the most climactic moments of the story. He intends to present Mamkazi's story as paradigmatic, as a demonstration of something. Therefore his explanation in the form of commentary in the present tense is enough to justify the value of the story.

Yet, Mamkazi is not the only character in the narrative. For what makes the story a story – and what builds up its real climax – is the

[19] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'The Barren Woman,' in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 395.
[20] Dhlomo, 'The Barren Woman,' p. 395.

presence of a second female character: Ntombi. Despite being a second-ary character – the title makes clear that the main one is the barren woman – Ntombi is the modern figure in the narrative, the one that embodies the conflict between tradition and modernity. This becomes evident when Ntombi is first introduced:

> Unlike most 'Christian' women of her age in the village, who could only read and write (the younger generation were more progressive), Ntombi was consid-ered 'educated'. She had passed Standard Six, had travelled to several big towns, and had worked for some time in a large mission hospital where she acquired a rudimentary knowledge of mid-wifery. Although she had not been out of Manzini village for years, was married and had a big family, she still retained her reputation and status. She was the unofficial, unqualified, but useful district midwife of the place. Whether she thought and believed it was professionally necessary or she was too lazy (and had grown fat) and too snobbish (was she not above others?), she insisted that those who needed her help must come to her 'clinic', which was a large hut with four beds.[21]

The first striking aspect in this passage is Ntombi's outsider posi-tion, highlighted by the opening 'unlike', which clearly sets her apart from both her friend and other women in the village. Her position is further underlined by the two adjectives that describe her activity, 'un-official' and 'unqualified'. Secondly, the pace of the narration becomes much quicker, progressively shifting from the commentary mode used for Mamkazi to a summary relating Ntombi's experience outside the village.

Last, but certainly not least, a 'dissonance' in the narrative situation occurs with the introduction within brackets of sentences that seem to drift towards the reflector mode (or figural narrative situation), represent-ing Ntombi's thought. If '(and had grown fat)' can be equally attributed to the narrator and Ntombi, '(was she not above others?)' clearly represents Ntombi's opinion of herself. This interpretation is further corroborated by the synonymic couple 'thought and believed' at the beginning of the sentence and to the inverted commas used for the word 'clinic', which is how Ntombi herself calls her place and is therefore to be read as a reproduction of her speech. Throughout the whole story Ntombi is the only character for whom the reflector mode is used, as we see when she discovers Mamkazi's crime:

---

[21] Dhlomo, 'The Barren Woman,' p. 396.

> She was sure that there was something wrong. But was it possible? How could mediocre-minded and nervous Mamkazi have conceived and executed without help such a foul act?
> What was she to do![22]

Finally, 'was she not above others?' opens the question as to whether Ntombi's authority is a challenge to the narrator's. This is a crucial question if one considers that her closing line – '"It happened long ago in my clinic…," she began' is also the closing line of the story and opens to its retelling. Therefore 'The Barren Woman', besides being a paradigmatic story about Bantu society, is also a fiction of narrative authority, creating one potential public for the narrator's story and another one for Ntombi's.

'The Barren Woman' was included in the 1998 anthology of South African short stories edited by David Medalie.[23] In his introduction to the collection (including pieces of writing spanning from early twentieth-century to contemporary authors), Medalie places most of the stories within the category of realism. He notices, however, that a few of them depart from realism to opt for the allegorical form. Medalie does not mention modernism at all, yet allegory has been considered the predominant feature of South African modernism.[24] Reviewing Medalie's anthology, Dennis Walder observes that realist aesthetics, the umbrella under which Medalie places the stories, is 'rarely monolithic or straightforward as its naturalistic practitioners and their attendant commentators tend to assume'.[25] To make his point, Walder highlights the contradictions that arise in considering Dhlomo's story an example of realism: 'This hint of the irrecoverable distance between reality and its artistic articulation reminds us of the tensions within the realist project – whether in the story-telling of, say, Herbert Dhlomo, drawing on the social and cultural traditions of tribal narrative'.[26] The position of the story within the an-

---

[22] Dhlomo, 'The Barren Woman,' pp. 388-9.

[23] David Medalie (ed.), *Encounters. An Anthology of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1998).

[24] 'My view that the use of primitivist discourse in and as politicised allegory provides the hallmark of South African modernism', Munslow Ong, p. 17.

[25] 'The realist implications of "lived experience" and "texture" […] haunt the collection, as they haunt most South African fiction, which still largely avoids engaging with the traditional story-teller's easy shifts into myth and allegory on the one hand, or the modernist/postmodernist's playful questioning and intertextuality on the other'. Dennis Walder, 'Italicized Encounters,' *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 4, 1 (1999): p. 56.

[26] Walder, p. 57.

thology and Walder's review clearly illuminate the difficulty in finding a suitable label for Dhlomo's practice in fiction.

The tension between a melodramatic narrative revolving, once again, around incest, and a narrative composition that, instead, enhances a plurality of points of view, challenging the moral stance of the narrator is to be found in 'The Daughter', the story of a young girl, Rose, who moves to the big city, Johannesburg, and falls in love with her father. 'The Daughter' starts with a summary of Rose's stoy: Rose's mother, Zodwa, marries the wrong guy, Bob Fafa, in her mission reserve. She is three months pregnant with Rose when Bob leaves her and moves to Johannesburg, where, thanks to his good looks, he becomes a well-known lothario in the social scene. Zodwa soon marries her second-best, Maxwell, who turns out to be a devoted husband and an attentive father to little Rose, who grows into a beautiful girl. Zodwa and Maxwell have started a prosperous liquor business, but something gets in the way of their happiness. As soon as she comes of age, Rose accepts the invitation of a family friend, May, and moves to Johannesburg, just like her father had done years earlier. Once in Johannesburg, the girl starts attending social events with older May, who uses her as a bait for the men she actually wants for herself. One of them is the very Bob Faza. The man, needless to say, falls for his daughter, who reciprocates. During the summer holidays, both Bob and Rose go back to Durban, where a double tragedy unfolds: Rose is pregnant and when she introduces her lover to her mother Zodwa realizes the deadly curse that has fallen upon her family.

The story is composed of eight sections, each characterized by the predominance of one narrative technique. The first two sections are entrusted to a third person narrator telling the events leading to Rose's move to Johannesburg. There are occasional breaks in the narrative, the most relevant of which occurs when Bob's arrival in Johannesburg is related:

> No undulating green hills and fertile vales. No songs of birds and the magical music of streams and waterfalls. No picturesque footpaths, piper ditties of herd boy, the beauty of lowing, grazing cattle, and the splendour of moving fairy-like lamps that are fireflies. No soft melodious rains that come shimmering like gossamer veils of fancy. Here stood the great metropolis, naked yet magnificent, frightening yet fascinating, in the dry and dusty open veld.[27]

---

[27] Dhlomo, 'The Daughter,' p. 404.

Coming after a canonical sentence of pure narration – '[Bob] went to Johannesburg to try and find peace of mind' – the passage stands out as particularly elaborate stylistically, and therefore in stark contrast with the preceding pages. It is almost entirely composed of noun phrases, typical of modernist writing, and it ends with a sentence that, shifting to the figurative narrative situation,[28] renders Bob's impressions and mixed feelings upon encountering the modern metropolis. Last but not least, the sentence displays two significant alliterations – frightening/fascinating and dry/dusty – that enhance the sense of shock caused by the modern metropolis, commented upon a few lines later by the narrator: 'A newcomer to a great city either resists all changes and influences, and remains conspicuously and grimly eccentric, incongruously and stubbornly himself, or melts at once and is reshaped into the most metropolitan of the metropolitans'.[29]

However, Bob's arrival in Johannesburg is actually functional to foregrounding Rose's arrival in the big metropolis. The relevant fact, under the compositional point of view, is that while Bob's arrival in the metropolis is part of a longer section concerning his and Zodwa's past life, Rose's journey occupies the whole of the third section. With the exception of two sentences, the section entirely consists of sentences in free indirect discourse, with a shift from the authorial to the figural narrative situation:

> Uphill, uphill all the time. Tunnels of darkness and discomfort. Retarding bends and dangerous. Forced, incomprehensible and tedious stops at drab-looking sidings, and even in mid-air, as it were, in open spaces where it seemed stupid and unnecessary, and was definitely annoying as the rolling rails did not seem to offer hindrance or suggest danger.
> Ah! To get there! To get there at once! […]
> Rose sat up with a jerk. For the first time she felt a dull pang of apprehension and doubt in her heart. All along she had been fascinated by the beautiful scenery of the coastal belt and the midlands as the train labored to higher and still higher altitudes. Or she had been lost in her own wild thoughts and fancies. […]
> The next morning they reached Johannesburg.[30]

The few interventions of the narrator are here limited to a guess at Rose's 'wild thoughts', to which, however, he significantly seems to have

---

[28] The clue is the presence of a verb in the past tense and the deictic 'here'.
[29] Dhlomo, 'The Daughter,' pp. 402-3.
[30] Dhlomo, 'The Daughter,' p. 406.

no real access. Occupying a whole section, Rose's arrival in the city is therefore a fairly experimental graft on a more traditional texture, one rewriting from a female – and therefore unfathomable point of view – the typical narrative revolving around a young man who moves to Johannesburg.[31] The remaining sections alternate dialogue and pure narration (IV, VI, VII; VIII) and commentary by the narrator in the present tense (V). In it the narrator reflects on the reasons of incest, attributing it to the game Nature plays with human beings. The long section has a heavily didactic tone, which is in stark contrast with the sections that precede and follow it.

'The Daughter' can be read as Dhlomo's attempt at providing a more multi-faceted, multi-perspectival representation of the experience of the metropolis, and of the consequences of modernization. However, this formal experimentation remains in the background, a mere 'dissonance' within a more traditional 'didactic' tale on the nefarious consequences of incest.

3. In search of a public: is Dhlomo a fiction writer?

The striking feature of the two stories is the interaction between (i) a plot built on the elements of the cheap melodramatic novelette (recognition, incest), (ii) a narrator who, with his broad and authoritative generalizations, patronizingly counterbalances the melodramatic mode of the stories, and (iii) the emergence of a different discourse, from both a narrative and an ideological point of view, through the use of specific narrative techniques traditionally associated with modernist writing. A final example shall be offered here, even if it cannot properly be defined 'narrative dissonance'. A story of adultery ending with the killing of the infidel woman, 'He Forgave Her' stands out for starting *in medias res* with a cataphoric opening (typical of modernist fiction), and for not featuring an omniscient narrator commenting on events:

> A beastlike wail rent the air. The two visitors to the Thalia Mission Station stood dumb and frightened.
> A woman, the living image of a demon, tore past them. Frightened people from the house out of which she ran stood helpless. Said one of them:
> 'Lord, rather kill her than torture her thus.'

[31] I am grateful to Marta Fossati for pointing out that this is a common narrative in South African literature.

> Tribal social sanctions meant nothing to them. True, in and around the mission stations from which they came and where their parents and relatives lived, tribal Africans still adhered to their ancient customs. [...]
> But most of the younger people [...] had succumbed to the practice of free love.[32]

The reader receives no explanation whatsoever for (i) the woman's predicament and (ii) the comment 'rather kill her than torture her thus'. The challenge continues in the following paragraph, with the narrator commenting that 'tribal sanctions meant nothing to them,' separating 'old people' from 'younger people who worked in Durban'. Then the story of Dudu and Cingo unfolds, until the final surprise, which as the reader then finds out, is the event eliciting the comment that opens – and closes – the story.

In this story too, therefore, Dhlomo voices different moral stances on a crime (adultery) or, better, on its punishment, involving the reader in the debate by confronting him/her, in the very first lines of the story, with just the body of a mad woman tearing past him/her and dragging him/her into the narrative world.

The mobility of the narrative voice is of course not enough to say that Dhlomo's short stories share the features of canonical modernist short fiction, where there is notoriously very little, if any, melodrama, and where the narrator often disappears. The point is not to assess Dhlomo's modernist coefficient, which, neither for European or Anglo-American literature nor for so called 'global modernisms', can be determined through the detection of purely formal features. In fact, scholars of African modernism, like Voss, have stressed the fact that 'given the medium of refraction, colonial or dominion modernisms would never be mere imitations'.[33] This means, for Voss, that none of the writers he considers, including Dhlomo, 'committed themselves unequivocally to the formal devices of modernism'.[34]

Jade Munslow Ong argues for the uniqueness of South African modernism, being promoted

> by three groups of people unique to the colonial South African context: second- and third-generation local-born whites, such as Schreiner and Plomer, as well as Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post; black intellectual elites educated through the missions, such as Plaatje and Dhlomo; and a mixed-race coloured population that included Head and Rive.

---

[32] H.I.E. Dhlomo, 'He Forgave Her,' in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim J. Couzens, p. 483.
[33] Voss, p. 399.
[34] Voss, p. 399.

These writers, Ong argues, all shared a bicultural insight which was typical of 'incomplete modernization'.[35] Incomplete, I argue, was also Dhlomo's formal search, which, however, reflects in the self-conscious exploitation of different narrative techniques the bicultural insight, for which he failed to find a potential reader. Until now, no evidence has been discovered which allows us to indicate the reason why he did not publish his short stories despite occupying a central position in the black literary field. Yet I think that, right because of the fertile ambiguity of his short fiction and of the impossibility of being read only as didactic stories, Dhlomo's problem was, probably, to find a public for them, to find readers ready to accept the creative ambiguities of his short fiction, the unsettling potential of their characters, and therefore to challenge the image of implied author they had construed by reading his production in verse – the educated poet – or his journalism – the *engagé* intellectual.

Bibliography

Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal. Second Report. July 1938.

Casanova, Pascale, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Couzens, Tim J., *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Damrosch, David, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Dhlomo, Herbert I.E., 'The Barren Woman,' in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 395-401.

———, 'The Daughter,' in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 402-12.

———, 'He Forgave Her,' in *H.I.E. Dhlomo. Collected Works*, ed. Nick Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 483-8.

Everts, R.A., 'The Pioneers: Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo and the Development of Library Service to the African in South Africa,' *World Libraries* 3, 2 (1993): pp. 7-19.

Iannaccaro, Giuliana, '"The great change": Herbert Dhlomo's "An Experiment in Colour",' *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 53 (2019): pp. 395-408.

Jameson, Fredric, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

---

[35] Munslow Ong, p. 15.

Luperini, Romano (ed.), *Alla ricerca di forme nuove. Il modernismo nelle letterature del primo '900* (Pisa: Pacini, 2018).

Luperini, Romano, and Tortora, Massimiliano (eds.), *Sul modernismo italiano* (Napoli: Liguori, 2012).

Medalie, David (ed.), *Encounters. An Anthology of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1998).

Munslow Ong, Jade, *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism, Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Peters, Marguerite Andree, *The Contribution of the Carnegie Non-European Library Service, Transvaal, to the Development of Library Services for Africans in South Africa: An Historical and Evaluative Study* (unpublished MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1974).

Rochester, Maxine K., 'The Carnegie Corporation and South Africa: Non-European Library Services,' *Libraries & Cultures* 34, 1 (1999): pp. 27-51.

Smith, Stephen, *Restoring the Imprisoned Community: A Study of Selected Works of H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo and their Role in Constructing a Sense of African Modernity* (unpublished MA thesis, School of Language, Culture and Communication in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2004).

Sniader Lanser, Susan, *Fiction of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Stanzel, Franz K., *Theory of Narrative*, trans. by Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Tortora, Massimiliano, *Il modernismo italiano* (Roma: Carocci, 2019).

Voss, Tony, 'Refracted Modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-59.

Walder, Dennis, 'Italicized Encounters,' *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 4, 1 (1999): pp. 55-7.

Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

Winkiel, Laura, 'The Modernist Novel in the World System,' in *A History of the Modernist Novel*, ed. Gregory Castle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 408-28.

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords* (London: Fontana Press, 1976).

Wollaeger, Mark and Eatough, Matt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Young, John K., 'William Plomer, Transnational Modernism and the Hogarth Press,' in *Leonard and Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press, and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. Helen Southworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 128-49.

LITERARINESS AND GENRE MOBILITY: JOURNALISTIC FEATURES IN THE SHORT STORIES BY HERBERT DHLOMO

Marta Fossati

Working with an extended notion of 'literariness', my paper seeks to explore the different ways in which journalism affects the tone and mode of H.I.E. Dhlomo's prose fiction. Four short stories have been selected to discuss this instance of genre mobility, namely 'An Experiment in Colour', 'Farmer and Servant', 'Drought', and 'The Barren Woman'. From a formal point of view, these texts are written according to a factual narrative style that could be properly defined as 'literary journalism'. The thematic correspondence between Dhlomo's articles and short narratives, however, represents the most visible element of the influence of journalism on his prose fiction. Thus, the lack of literary criticism about Dhlomo's short stories is surprisingly supplied by the writer's own articles, which also serve as a commentary on his own fictional texts. In such an intersection of the fictional with the factual lies both the literary and the political significance of H.I.E. Dhlomo's writing.

South Africa; Herbert I.E. Dhlomo; Short Stories; Literary Journalism; Genre Mobility

The ten short stories by the South African intellectual Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56) have often been overlooked by critical studies. The reasons behind this gap are twofold: on the one hand, the only works published in book form while Dhlomo was alive, the play *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (1935) and the long poem *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941), have long overshadowed the author's short stories, which were made available only with the posthumous publication of his *Collected Works*, edited by Nick Visser and Tim Couzens in 1985, almost thirty years after his death. On the other hand, the construction and literary quality of the short stories are 'likely to prove something of a barrier to readers', as Visser and Couzens themselves observe.[1] Indeed, they write in the introduction to Dhlomo's *Collected Works* that his 'short stories [...] are often crudely constructed, shifting awkwardly from narrative to play-

---

[1] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, eds Nick W. Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. xiii. Considered one of the first prolific South African creative writers in English, Dhlomo wrote about 24 plays, 10 short stories, and over 140 poems.

like presentation, mixing tenses, and lapsing too frequently into melo-drama'.[2] The editors' judgment of the aesthetic value of Dhlomo's stories is in line with general remarks by other critics on the literary quality of the writer's oeuvre: as Tony Voss states, he is 'remembered by many for politics rather than style'.[3] Dhlomo's ten short stories in particular may strike twenty-first-century readers. It may be for this reason that Dhlomo's prose fiction has not entered the otherwise vast canon of South African short stories – to date, only one short narrative by Herbert Dhlomo has been reprinted, 'The Barren Woman'.[4]

While Dhlomo's prose fiction, available to the reading public since 1985, has not attracted a wide readership, his non-fictional prose consolidated his fame as a South African intellectual and writer. Apart from his essays in literary theory and criticism, Dhlomo composed and published thousands of newspaper articles and editorials, considered 'a creative achievement in itself'.[5] Indeed, Herbert Dhlomo, a published author, teacher, musician, and librarian, was also a journalist, beginning his writing career as freelancer in 1924 for one of the first independent black journals, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, where he would become assistant editor to his brother Rolfes in 1943; in 1935, he gave up his teaching position at the American Board Mission school in Johannesburg to permanently join the staff of *The Bantu World*. He also wrote extensively for *Inkundla ya Bantu* and *Umteteli wa Bantu*, and his articles, editorials, and commentaries represent his most prolific legacy. Ntongela Masilela, who has written the only existing monograph on Dhlomo, remarks that the writings of the South African author in '*Umteteli Wa Bantu*, in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, *The Bantu World* and in *Inkundla ya Bantu* formulate the intellectual history of the New African Movement and the cultural history of the idea of the New African'.[6] Apart from journalism in the strictest sense, in these

---

[2] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. xiii.

[3] Tony Voss, 'Refracted Modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 350.

[4] David Medalie (ed.), *Encounters. An Anthology of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1998), pp. 10-19; Michael Chapman (ed.), *Omnibus. A Century of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 2007), pp. 230-7.

[5] Voss, p. 347.

[6] Ntongela Masilela, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Toronto: Africa World Press, 2007), p. xiii. Dhlomo, torn between the two paradigms of tradition and modernity, belonged to the black elite group of the so-called 'New Africans', mission-educated intellectuals who strongly believed in the progress of South Africa as a nation, at the same time rejecting any notion of tribalism.

newspapers Dhlomo published also poetry, essays on literary criticism, prose poems, and only one short story, 'An Experiment in Colour'.

Starting from these considerations, and working with an extended notion of 'narrative' and 'literariness', this chapter seeks to explore the different ways in which journalism affects the tone and mode of Dhlomo's prose fiction. To limit the otherwise too broad discussion, only four short stories have been selected for the present investigation, namely 'An Experiment in Colour', 'Farmer and Servant', 'Drought', and 'The Barren Woman', as I believe these narratives in particular bear witness to the deep interrelation between the writer's journalism and his prose fiction. From a formal point of view, Herbert Dhlomo adopts a factual narrative style that could be properly defined 'literary journalism', especially when the theme of his short fiction relates to the clash between tradition and modernity. Adhering to the conventions of realism allows Dhlomo to denounce the injustices of his society, sometimes anticipating the investigative reports that characterized such publications as the magazine *Drum* in the 1950s. The thematic correspondence between Dhlomo's articles and short narratives, however, represents the most visible element of the influence of journalism on his prose fiction. Thus, the lack of literary criticism about Dhlomo's short stories is surprisingly compensated by the writer's own articles, which also serve as a commentary on his own fictional texts.

Before analysing Herbert Dhlomo's short stories, I would like to discuss briefly the role played by the black press in the 1930s in South Africa. 1932 saw the launching of *The Bantu World*, the first national African newspaper, by R.V. Selope-Thema, and in those years the rate of literacy among Africans increased significantly.[7] Newspapers such as *The Bantu World* or *Ilanga Lase Natal*, the first Zulu newspaper founded as early as 1903, were germane to the socio-political and cultural development of South Africa:

> The African press, in combination with other social forces, created the templates for the emergence of a national consciousness through both their mediation of time and space and the narratives they proffered. Even in their anonymity, the stories created links between the worlds of their characters and the world outside, feelings of continuity and community among dispersed reading individuals and communities.[8]

---

[7] Bhekizizwe Peterson, '*The Bantu World* and The World of the Book: Reading Writing, and "Enlightenment",' in *Africa's Hidden Histories. Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 239.
[8] Peterson, p. 239.

More specifically, the black press fostered reading habits and encouraged the publication of non-fictional and fictional writing by black authors, thus working in a double direction.[9] The promotion of literature was consistent with the project of forming a national consciousness and achieving liberation, as Herbert Dhlomo himself remarks: 'the leading African newspapers were conceived and born as organs of protest – to educate, organize and consolidate the African masses; to educate white Public Opinion; to voice to the world the sufferings and tribulations of the Africans in the land of their birth'.[10]

To promote literature, the black press favoured the short-story genre. There were several reasons for this. First and foremost, black writers could only publish their work through the mission presses, most notably Lovedale Press, where the director of publications, Reverend Robert Henry Wishart Shepherd, often acted as a 'censor'.[11] Consequently, newspapers provided the only outlet for publication for black intellectuals, who were often both journalists *and* creative writers. Among the works of fiction published in newspapers, short-story writing, for obvious reasons of space, was encouraged.[12] A cross-fertilization between journalism and the short-story genre thus took place, and the newspapers' involvement with social critique was often reflected in the creative works of the writer-journalist figure. For instance, when skimming the pages of the issues of *The Bantu World* of the year 1932, it is quite common to find hybrid pieces that blur the line between factual reportage and fictional account. A short story published by one S.M. Stanley-Silwana, for example, is prefaced by the telling line 'Facts in Fiction',[13] thus confirming a widespread trend in early black South African short prose published in newspapers.[14] It was also the structure of *The Bantu World* itself that

[9] Peterson, p. 251.

[10] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'The African Press,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, June 20 (1953), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/mis/20_6_53.gif.

[11] Horst Zander, *Fact – Fiction – 'Faction': A Study of Black South African Literature in English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999), pp. 116-19. For a discussion of Dhlomo's historical drama, and of Shepherd's refusal to publish the writer's plays, see Giuliana Iannaccaro's contribution in this volume.

[12] Zoë Wicomb, 'South African Short Fiction and Orality,' in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, ed. Jacqueline Bardolph (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 164.

[13] S.M. Stanley-Silwana, 'Mteto Becomes a Criminal: Facts in Fiction,' *The Bantu World*, November 19 (1932), p. 3.

[14] See also Zander, pp. 360-3. Tellingly entitled *Fact, Fiction – 'Faction'* (1999), Horst Zander's seminal monograph discusses the interrelation between fact and fiction in black South African literature.

encouraged the intermingling of articles and short stories, since the latter were published in the 'Special Features Articles' section, which also included articles and editorials.

When dealing with the intersection between short fiction and journalism in the South African literary context, however, critical studies tend to overlook the decades of the twenties and thirties, which were pivotal to the development of both the short-story genre and journalism by black writers. Instead, criticism mainly focuses on the period of the 1950s and 1960s with the foundation of *Drum* in 1951, a popular South African magazine that boosted the production of journalism and short fiction.[15] The short stories written in the *Drum* era are usually recounted in the present tense by a first-person narrator whose name sometimes corresponds to the author's, thus resembling an investigative report – see, for instance, Can Themba's 'Kwashiorkor'.[16] While these features are not to be seen in Dhlomo's short stories, all recounted by a third-person external narrator, his prose nonetheless shows the influence of journalism. The South African intellectual was conscious of the importance played by the African press in his country, and he devoted many articles to the argument of the 'influence, power and service of the African press': 'The Press is the platform not only for politicians, but for teachers, social workers, sportsmen, writers (many of whom owe their reputations and careers to it) and many others'.[17] Dhlomo's first published work of fiction, 'An Experiment in Colour', appeared in a newspaper in the form of a short story, in fact the only short story published in his lifetime.[18]

'An Experiment in Colour' was published in 1935 in *The African Observer*. Apparently, it was part of a longer work: in 1938, Dhlomo submitted a novel for publication – now lost – entitled *An Experiment in Colour*, but it was rejected by Shepherd. The short story appeared prefaced by a

---

[15] Lesley Cowling, 'Echoes of an African Drum: The Lost Literary Journalism of 1950s South Africa,' *Literary Journalism Studies* 8, 1 (2016): pp. 9-32. See also Michael Chapman (ed.), *The Drum Decade. Stories from the 1950s*, 2nd ed. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001). Chapman interestingly selected both articles and short stories for his anthology.

[16] Can Themba, *The Will to Die*, eds Donald Stuart and Roy Holland, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Africasouth, 1982), pp. 14-26. The protagonist and first-person narrator of 'Kwashiorkor' is a journalist who is roaming the poorest streets of Johannesburg in search for a story.

[17] Dhlomo, 'The African Press.'

[18] Tim J. Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 182. For a discussion of 'An Experiment in Colour', see Couzens, pp. 181-5; Zander, pp. 389-93; Giuliana Iannaccaro, '"The great change": Herbert Dhlomo's "An Experiment in Colour",' *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale* 53 (2019): pp. 395-408.

statement from the editors: 'We publish this well-written and interesting piece of fiction by a Native author. We would, however, point out that the author's views are not necessarily those of *The African Observer*'.[19] 'An Experiment in Colour' presents a peculiar, science-fictional plot. It begins in medias res with a speech by the Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare University, the most important institution for the higher education of black South Africans in the period, on graduation day. Frank Mabaso, the protagonist and one of the graduands, listens carefully to the Vice-Chancellor's speech on the 'vital subject' of race relations.[20] According to the speaker, the 'race problem' may be solved through intermarriage, which he defines 'repugnant',[21] or through science. Frank Mabaso is particularly impressed by the second solution mentioned in the talk: according to the most recent results in biochemical research, racial character could be modified by manipulating glandular action through an injection. The Vice-Chancellor, however, rejects the idea: 'the solution of the race problem must be a slow, gradual, methodical process'.[22] Two years later, the educated Frank Mabaso invents an injection that is able to change his skin colour to white, and he finally gains the recognition he deserves as an intellectual. When he decides to divulge his discovery, tired of leading a secret double life, he is shot dead by an Afrikaner.

What is interesting for the discussion here is the initial speech by the Vice-Chancellor, since it is actually a word-for-word reproduction of an article that Dhlomo himself wrote and published in 1931 in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, and tellingly entitled 'Aspects of the Race Problem'.[23] The article seems to be the second in a series of pieces on the 'race problem' published in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, for a month before the article 'Psychology of the Race Problem' had appeared. In the latter, Dhlomo remarks that 'Today the deciding factor is colour [...] but the fact remains that mind, not the body and its pigment, is what man should be judged by'.[24] This last idea is also what structures Frank Mabaso's last speech in 'An Experiment in Colour'. In 'Aspects of the Race Problem', instead, Dhlomo comments on the gland theory developed by British scientist Sir Arthur

---

[19] *The African Observer* 111, 4 (1935): p. 67, cit. in Couzens, p. 182.
[20] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 489.
[21] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 489.
[22] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 489.
[23] Couzens, p. 183.
[24] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Psychology of the Race Problem,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, February 07 (1931), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/ 7_2_ 31.gif.

Keith (1866-1955), who argued that 'racial differences' could be modified by altering the chemical behaviour of human glands through an injection. Dhlomo dismisses this theory with the same words used by the Vice-Chancellor at the end of his graduation speech: 'One thing is certain: that the solution of the Race Problem must be a slow, gradual, methodic[al] process'.[25] From the article, Dhlomo retains the general and introductory parts discussing the 'race problem' and the consequences of glandular action, but in the short story he leaves out any reference to factual details, such as the name of Sir Keith, and the parts in which he clearly doubts the scientificity of the gland theory, which he defines 'a forlorn hope'.[26] Thus, the speech at the beginning of 'An Experiment in Colour' represents an extreme example of the intersection of the fictional with the factual: as Zander remarks, 'in the context of the story, it is not apparent at all that this speech actually is or it exists simultaneously somewhere else as a factual text. The reader will needs conceive of it as fictional, all the more so since the science referred to here is rather reminiscent of science fiction'[27] – Couzens has tellingly defined the protagonist a 'modern-day Jekyll and Hyde'.[28] Moreover, the article refers to highly specific scientific theories, and it was unlikely that readers could recognize the documentary value of the speech inside the short story. Consequently, 'An Experiment in Colour' challenges our notion of literariness, since it confirms the assertion that 'the respective label of a text' – short story or newspaper article – 'is the one and only decisive criterion for the reception of its status' as fictional or factual piece.[29]

'Aspects of the Race Problem' had appeared only four years before the publication of 'An Experiment in Colour', so it is possible that Dhlomo was already working on his short story just after the publication of the article, if not before. Either way, the short story originates directly from the journal article, and the relationship between the two texts is key to interpreting 'An Experiment in Colour' itself.[30] Indeed, the article clearly outlines Dhlomo's position in the gland-theory debate: 'Assuming this gland theory to be true, is medical and surgical science sufficiently ad-

---

[25] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Aspects of the Race Problem,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, March 14 (1931), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/14_3_31 .gif.
[26] Dhlomo, 'Psychology of the Race Problem.'
[27] Zander, p. 390.
[28] Couzens, p. 182.
[29] Zander, p. 390.
[30] See also Iannaccaro, pp. 404-5.

vanced successfully to perform such operations?'[31] If the two texts are read together, 'Aspects of the Race Problem' can guide readers through an interpretation of 'An Experiment in Colour', which ultimately shows that science is not a solution, and that 'racial differences are *not* significant but that racial theories (as held by some) *are*'.[32] It can be argued that the presence in 'An Experiment in Colour' of an omniscient narrator who is less intrusive than in other stories by Dhlomo[33] may be somehow linked to the existence of the article: even if the narrator in this particular text does not decode the story for the reader, still its meaning can be easily disentangled not only by the tragic conclusion of the fictional text, but also by the factual article from which a pivotal passage of the short story is derived. If Dhlomo clearly states his opinion in the article, in the short story he uses the injection device and a fictional frame centred on the character of Frank Mabaso to prove his point.

'An Experiment in Colour' represents an extreme example of the way in which journalism and short fiction dialogue in Dhlomo's oeuvre. While none of his remaining nine short stories incorporates an article to this extent, many of the narratives still seem to originate from Dhlomo's articles. 'Farmer and Servant', a long short story divided in seven subchapters, describes the adventures of four black immigrants from the British protectorate of Nyasaland, present-day Malawi, who try to reach Johannesburg in search of 'good wages and a better kind of life'.[34] At the very beginning of the story, however, they are caught by labour recruiters and taken to a wealthy farmer's land, where they are exploited and treated as slaves by a white Afrikaner and his son. After a long and detailed description of the merciless working conditions on the farm, the short story recounts the successful escape of three labourers from the yoke of the farmer. Particularly interesting from a formal point of view is the shift in narrative perspective: the story alternates, from one subchapter to the other, between a solemn, highly intrusive narrator ('How lovely are the messengers that bring us the tidings of peace – calm sweet peace after a grim War!')[35] and a narrative situation in which the organization of labour on the farm is described realistically with a factual tone.

---

[31] Dhlomo, 'Aspects of the Race Problem.'
[32] Couzens, p. 185.
[33] Iannaccaro, p. 401.
[34] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 444.
[35] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 462.

Dhlomo's fictional account of the plight of rural blacks on white farms, indeed, poignantly adheres to the conventions of verisimilitude:

> The compound that housed the labourers consisted of two large stable-like structures with cement floors and glassless windows. Each had an open hearth in the centre, but the labourers were obliged to use braziers for various purposes. There were no beds or bunks. Some workers had managed somehow or other to get rough straw mattresses, but the rest used sacks as mattresses and blankets and sometimes even as work-clothes.[36]

These highly precise descriptions are both realistic and documentary. Before becoming a journalist, Dhlomo taught at the Amanzimtoti Training Institute for teachers, also known as Adams College, and at Umzumbe School in the southern province of Natal, where he was near mission reserves and farm areas; he must have been in close contact with the plight of rural blacks working on white farms.[37] Furthermore, Dhlomo's detailed knowledge of the situation on farms may also derive from the publication of the first reports on the notorious agricultural district of Bethal in South Africa, which probably prompted Dhlomo to write 'Farmer and Servant'.[38] The narrator's descriptions of the organization of labour on the farm are not limited to the setting, as the narrative voice also devotes several words to the peculiar hierarchy to be found in the compound:

> The compound was fenced in and it was guarded by the indunas. As most of the workers in the district were Shangaan people and Rhodesian and Nyasaland Africans, the indunas appointed by Rooi were Basotho and Swazi. This was done to exploit the tribal differences of the workers, as the Basothos and the Swazis considered themselves better and more privileged than their 'foreign' fellow-men.[39]

In the quoted excerpt, the narrator uses a factual tone to pinpoint the structural organization of labour in South Africa. Labour in both the mines and the farms was based on the presence of a white boss and of the boss boys, police boys, or indunas. The latter were usually black men who acted as intermediary between black workers and the boss, and they often took advantage of their superior position, harshly mistreating their

---

[36] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 450.
[37] Couzens, p. 276. Dhlomo himself qualified as a teacher at Amanzimtoti, a missionary institution, in 1924.
[38] Couzens, p. 285.
[39] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 450.

fellow workers. Rolfes Dhlomo, Herbert's brother, similarly condemned the behaviour of indunas in the mines in many of his short stories and articles.[40]

The realistic style adopted by Herbert Dhlomo in 'Farmer and Servant' anticipates fictional accounts of the situation in farm compounds, such as the short story 'A Glimpse of Slavery' in Mtutuzeli Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* (1979).[41] Additionally, Dhlomo's piece actually predates the several exposés of black farm labour in South Africa, most notably the investigative report 'The Story of Bethal' (1952) by *Drum* journalist Henry Nxumalo.[42] Nxumalo's factual description of the situation in farm compounds strikingly matches Dhlomo's own fictional account: 'Men [...] wear sacks in which holes have been cut for head and arms, and sleep on sacks. Most of the compounds I saw look much like jails. They have high walls, they are dirty and are often so closely attached to a cattle kraal that the labourers breath the same air as the cattle at night'.[43] Thus, the narrative style in the short story 'Farmer and Servant' at times resembles the narrative reportages of the so-called 'literary journalism' of the fifties, and can be compared to the style of Nxumalo's investigative report. Dhlomo's accomplishment in 'Farmer and Servant', therefore, deserves to be acknowledged as a 'remarkable early critique of farm labour conditions'.[44]

Unfortunately, the dates of composition of H.I.E. Dhlomo's stories are not known; judging from the content of 'Farmer and Servant', however, it can be stated with certainty that the narrative was written after the end of the Second World War, possibly between 1946 and 1948.[45] During those years, Dhlomo's articles on farm labour appeared, such as 'Africans on Farms'[46]

---

[40] Rolfes R.R. Dhlomo, 'R.R.R. Dhlomo: Twenty Short Stories,' *English in Africa* 2, 1 (1975): pp. 13-70.

[41] Mtutuzeli Matshoba, *Call Me Not a Man* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979), pp. 27-64. The similarities between 'Farmer and Servant' and 'A Glimpse of Slavery' are striking. As in Dhlomo's story, the workers in 'A Glimpse of Slavery' have to wear sacks and are victims of the cruelty of Bobby, the boss boy.

[42] Couzens, pp. 276-87.

[43] Henry Nxumalo, 'The Story of Bethal,' in *Reconstruction: 90 Years of Black Historical Literature*, ed. Mothobi Mutloatse (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), p. 142. See also Chapman, *The Drum Decade*, pp. 194-6. Chapman compares Nxumalo's reportage to the short story 'A Glimpse of Slavery' by Matshoba.

[44] Couzens, p. 285.

[45] Couzens, p. 285. The narrator recounts that one of the ex-labourers, now a free man, fights in the war and wins a medal for his bravery.

[46] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Africans on Farms,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, June 08 (1946), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/8-6-46.gif.

or 'Prison Labour for Farms',[47] published in *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1946 and 1947 respectively under the pseudonym of 'Busy-bee'. There, the journalist Dhlomo expresses his opinion on farm labour: 'You cannot under-pay, ill-treat and not properly feed and house labourers, and expect them to be efficient and contented servants'.[48] As in 'An Experiment in Colour', Dhlomo's activities as journalist and short-story writer appear deeply intertwined. It may be interesting to quote a definition applied to the works of narrative reportage typical of New Journalism: 'They reflect an increasing tendency toward documentary forms, [...] toward the exploration of public issues'.[49] Some of Dhlomo's short stories – and 'Farmer and Servant' among them – present the same features.

The story 'Drought' resembles 'Farmer and Servant' in many aspects. The narrative features two 'progressive' Africans, Kumalo and Mkabela, who unsuccessfully try to convince their fellow villagers to adopt Western schemes for their cattle, that is to sell the cattle at the village market instead of keeping it as bride price;[50] the text, which is incomplete, ends with the eponymous drought in the reserve. To invoke rain, the villagers sing a long prayer, which is actually a word-for-word reproduction of a poem entitled 'Drought', published in *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1948.[51] Part of the poem, however, had appeared in 'Drought, Food', one of Dhlomo's commentaries in *Ilanga Lase Natal*, as early as 1946. The poem is introduced by the following preface: 'During my holidays I came across these lines written by an African [...] at the height of the drought'.[52] The existence of the same lines as a separate poem (fiction), as a prayer inside a short story (fiction), and as a poem inserted in an article on an actual drought and shortage of food (non-fiction) raises interesting considerations on genre mobility, as it confirms the close association between fictional and factual modes in South African black writing of the thirties and forties. In the article 'Drought, Food', Dhlomo expresses the same

[47] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Prison Labour for Farms,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, May 03 (1947), http://pzacad. pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/3-5-47.gif.

[48] Dhlomo, 'Africans on Farms.'

[49] John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 10. 'New Journalism' is a label applied to a nonconformist type of journalism that developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Typically, New Journalism pieces incorporate documentary and fictional devices.

[50] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 425.

[51] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 334.

[52] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Drought, Food,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, February 02 (1946), http://pzacad. pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/2-2-46.gif.

opinion that he voices through the characters of Kumalo and Mkabela in his fictional short story: 'as far as the African is concerned, the position is aggravated by the policy of maintaining a tribal cattle economy alongside an acquisitive money economy. Even if food supplies suddenly became available, thousands would still starve owing to poverty'.[53] Couzens has written that 'The research on [...] cattle which seems to be part of the foundation of the story has structural similarities (e.g. the descriptive scenes) with "Farmer and Servant"; it seems reasonable to couple them'.[54] Indeed, 'Drought' is written in a realistic mode, with an external narrator who rarely comments on the story, resembling some parts of 'Farmer and Servant'. The fact that Couzens mentions some 'research' behind the composition of the two short texts further supports the idea that the two fictional stories also possess some documentary value.

'Drought', moreover, begins with an introduction by an external narrator, who describes the tribal setting of the story to readers in the present tense. Such an opening is typical of Dhlomo's short fiction, which rarely starts in medias res: 'The Nobantu Reserve lies in the heart of Zululand [...]. The overwhelming majority of the people are tribal peasants cherishing old traditions and ways of life. They live in grass huts, are simple and hospitable, and are very proud of their race and colour. Above all they love their cattle'.[55] The narrator further describes the differences among the villagers, who can be divided between tribal and 'Christian' people.[56] The tone of this introduction appears almost factual, contextualizing the story. Similar factual introductions can be found also in the hybrid short stories/articles on traditional Zulu customs such as 'Ukugweba' by Rolfes Dhlomo, which were published in *The Bantu World* in the thirties.[57] The introductory paragraphs of 'The Barren Woman', the first story in Visser's and Couzens's edited *Collected Works*, present analogous features.[58] The narrator describes the importance played by the event of birth in rural districts:

> Barrenness in women was a stigma and disgrace. Even today most Bantu people
> spend large sums of money and endure many hardships to fight it. In the past Afri-

[53] Dhlomo, 'Drought, Food.'
[54] Couzens, p. 335.
[55] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 427.
[56] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 427.
[57] Dhlomo, 'Twenty Short Stories,' pp. 39-43.
[58] See Sara Sullam's contribution in this volume for a discussion of 'The Barren Woman'.

can women were also reputed for their remarkable powers of surviving ante-natal, actual labour and post-natal troubles. Just as warriors regarded death as a matter of course, women took giving birth in their daily stride, as it were – not as an exceptional event requiring special preparation and associated with anxiety.[59]

After this sociological introduction, the narrator comments on his own subject matter: 'The story of Mamkazi is interesting because it involves most of the elements above. It is simple, has no dramatic climax and no element of surprise'.[60] The narrative voice then shifts to the past tense and to an intrusive and judgemental narrative mode to recount the tragic story of Mamkazi, who, deemed barren by her community, manages to have a baby after many attempts. When she discovers that her new-born is dead, however, she exchanges it with another baby from the nursery.

In the introduction to his anthology of South African short stories, David Medalie speaks of the powerful presence of an authoritative narrator within several of the collected stories, and he refers to 'The Barren Woman' in particular:

> The most extreme example of the use of this kind of narrator is perhaps Dhlomo's 'The Barren Woman', where the narrator offers various elucidations of a sociological nature, generalities to do with Time and Nature, and goes to great pains to ensure that the tragic tale of Mamkazi and her barrenness, followed by the death of her child, is understood within the context of these truisms.[61]

Indeed, in the opening of 'The Barren Woman', a strong narrative voice introduces the reader to the context of tribal societies, and to the clash between tribalism and modernity. By presenting the content of the introductory paragraphs as a fact, the narrator can direct the response of readers: the tragic story of Mamkazi is caused by the 'The Bantu love of children' and by the ensuing stigma of barrenness in tribal societies.[62] In an article written in 1932, and tellingly entitled 'Modes of Bantu Thinking', Dhlomo remarks on the need for a 'change of attitude' in tribal people 'to free them from the tyranny of the traditional and the customary'.[63] Beneath the texture of 'The Barren Woman', therefore, Dhlomo's utter rejection of tribalism emerges.

[59] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 395.
[60] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 396.
[61] Medalie, p. xxviii.
[62] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 396.
[63] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Modes of Bantu Thinking,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, July 09 (1932), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/9_7_32.gif.

In this story, readers are also provided with detailed information on the minor character of Ntombi, the 'unofficial, unqualified, but useful district midwife'.[64] Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly stresses Ntombi's insufficient preparation in midwifery. The narrative, moreover, mysteriously ends when Ntombi is about to relate the tragedy of Mamkazi to her fellow villagers. One of the keys to a possible interpretation of 'The Barren Woman' may lie in an article written by Dhlomo. In 'National Health', published in *Umteteli wa Bantu* in 1930, the South African writer devotes a whole paragraph to the problem of infantile mortality, directly addressing the inadequate education of many midwives:

> Successfully to fight against the evils of maternal and infantile mortality, our midwives must possess qualifications that will make it possible for them to learn and recognise symptoms of approaching disease, ably handle cases of puerperal infection and fever, care for babies immediately after work, observe and treat abnormalities and complications before birth.[65]

Tragedy in 'The Barren Woman', therefore, seems to ensue from two different causes: the stigma applied to barren women in tribal societies, which leads Mamkazi to steal a child, and, perhaps, the insufficient education of the midwife of the village. While the first element emerges clearly from the narrative, the second is more difficult to detect. The narrator repeatedly doubts Ntombi's professionality, but he never blames explicitly the midwife for the tragic death of the child. If 'The Barren Woman' is read alongside 'National Health', however, new elements for the interpretation of the fictional text emerge.

Almost every short story written by Dhlomo, therefore, can be linked to one of his articles, commentaries, and editorials for newspapers such as *Ilanga Lase Natal*, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, and *The Bantu World*. Apart from the thematic similarities, journalism enters Dhlomo's short stories also in the factual voice that his narrator at times uses, in particular in the introductions to some of the narratives and in the highly realistic descriptive scenes of 'Farmer and Servant' and 'Drought'. Moreover, a short story like 'An Experiment in Colour' interestingly mixes the fictional mode with a long quotation from an article by Dhlomo himself. While Zander's monograph on the interrelation between fact and fiction in South African

---

[64] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. 396.
[65] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'National Health,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, August 30 (1930), http://pzacad. pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/30_8_30.gif.

literature devotes only a few pages to the discussion of 'An Experiment in Colour', it repeatedly addresses articles and short stories by Rolfes Dhlomo, Herbert's older brother. Referring to him, Zander remarks that 'Writing fictional stories seems to represent rather an extension of factual writing, offering the author the opportunity to treat his issues in a more attractive and effective manner; but his fictional discourse focusses just as much on particular aspects of the South African reality as the factual discourse'.[66] In fact, the same can be argued for Herbert Dhlomo's short stories, which all deal with coeval issues of public interest,[67] and tackle the same concerns as the writer's articles.

The contemporaneity of Dhlomo's short stories further complicates the unresolved question of the failed publication of his fictional prose. Each narrative, implicitly or – more often than not – explicitly, represents an indictment of South African society at the time, and addresses social and political issues. Even the group of texts dealing with the strange and the magical ('An Experiment in Colour', 'Flowers', 'Aversion to Snakes') testifies to Dhlomo's stance as *engagé* intellectual. If he assigned a didactic function of social critique to the genre,[68] it is not altogether clear why Dhlomo did not publish his short stories, especially if we consider his privileged access to the main newspapers of the time – publications such as *The Bantu World*, as we have seen, usually circulated short stories on coeval themes.

As mentioned in the introduction, a proper understanding of Dhlomo's literary career has been distorted by the reception of the works published in book form, directed almost exclusively away from the cities to the tribal past and tribal heroes of South Africa.[69] However, his shorter poems, many of them published in newspapers, some of his plays, and his short stories deal with contemporary, strong protest themes. Consequently, the image of Dhlomo as a poet that emerges from a reading of the long poem *Valley of a Thousand Hills* strikingly differs from Dhlomo the author of his articles, his short stories, and some of his plays and shorter poems, through which he expresses different concerns alto-

---

[66] Zander, p. 127.
[67] Nick W. Visser, 'H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903-1956): The Re-Emergence of an African Writer,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): p. 5.
[68] Iannaccaro, p. 405.
[69] Nick W. Visser, 'South Africa: The Renaissance That Failed,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 11, 1 (1976): p. 45.

gether.[70] Indeed, Dhlomo's 'narrow' and 'elitist' conception of literature as a 'particular kind of elevated utterance'[71] is notably absent from his short stories, which the writer regarded as a complementary mode to journalism for furnishing information on specific aspects of black life in South Africa.[72] A possible key to the understanding of Dhlomo's literary production lies precisely in the problematic issue of genre. The South African writer shifts from one genre to the other, from short prose and poetry to epic poetry and historical drama, seemingly assigning a different function to each discursive mode.

Thus, the link between fact and fiction may serve to re-evaluate Dhlomo's non-canonical and often disregarded short-story writing. A member of the elite of the 'New Africans', Dhlomo used his prose – articles *and* short stories – to convey his concerns and opinions on his social milieu, ambiguous as they may be, and to educate his readers. Not surprisingly, Dhlomo has been characterized by Tony Voss as a 'writer of ideas'.[73] On the other hand, the genre mobility found in his short stories – and those by his brother Rolfes – does inaugurate an interesting trend which would explode with the South African short fiction of the 1950s: 'The Dhlomos mark the transition from the early writers, who established the characteristic type of the black South African writer, the journalist-author, and set the precedent, to the generation which emerged in the fifties, for working in factual narrative modes'.[74] At the same time, some articles by Herbert Dhlomo are written using fictional techniques, so that a cross-fertilization between the two genres takes place. Vivian Bickford-Smith, for example, defines Dhlomo's article 'Stopping the Bus'[75] a 'short story'.[76] The assumption that the writer's essays in literary theory and criticism serve as a guide to his writing[77] can be only partially endorsed: as far as

---

[70] See Marco Canani's essay in this volume for an analysis of *Valley of a Thousand Hills*.

[71] Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, p. xiii.

[72] Zander, p. 127.

[73] Voss, p. 349.

[74] Visser, 'The Renaissance That Failed,' p. 46.

[75] Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, 'Stopping the Bus,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, January 10 (1948), http://pzacad. pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/prosep/10148.jpg.

[76] Vivian Bickford-Smith, *The Emergence of the South African Metropolis: Cities and Identities in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 237. Bickford-Smith remarks that 'Stopping the Bus' can be read as 'fiction, even if based on reality' (personal communication, 10 October 2018). Masilela, instead, defines the piece a 'prose poem' (Masilela, p. 205). I would avoid defining 'Stopping the Bus' a short story, even though I agree that it possesses some fictional traits.

[77] Voss, p. 350.

Dhlomo's short stories are concerned, a very useful interpretative tool is represented by his articles instead. In such an intersection of the fictional with the factual lies both the literary and the political significance of H.I.E. Dhlomo's writing. While his experimentation with genres was not, probably, a fully conscious process, still it represents an interesting case study, which powerfully challenges our notion of 'literariness' and our assumptions as twenty-first-century Western readers.

Bibliography

Bickford-Smith, Vivian, *The Emergence of the South African Metropolis: Cities and Identities in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Chapman, Michael (ed.), *The Drum Decade. Stories from the 1950s*, 2nd ed. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001).

——— (ed.), *Omnibus. A Century of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 2007).

Couzens, Tim J., *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Cowling, Lesley, 'Echoes of an African Drum: The Lost Literary Journalism of 1950s South Africa,' *Literary Journalism Studies* 8, 1 (2016): pp. 9-32.

Dhlomo, Herbert I.E., 'National Health,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, August 30 (1930), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/30_8_30.gif.

———, 'Psychology of the Race Problem,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, February 07 (1931), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/ 7_2_ 31.gif.

———, 'Aspects of the Race Problem,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, March 14 (1931), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/14_3_31 .gif.

———, 'Modes of Bantu Thinking,' *Umteteli wa Bantu*, July 09 (1932), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/umteteli/9_7_32.gif.

———, 'Drought, Food,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, February 02 (1946), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/2-2-46.gif.

———, 'Africans on Farms,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, June 08 (1946), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/8-6-46.gif.

———, 'Prison Labour for Farms,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, May 03 (1947), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/weekly/3-5-47.gif.

———, 'Stopping the Bus,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, January 10 (1948), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/prosep/10148.jpg.

———, 'The African Press,' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, June 20 (1953), http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/nam/newafrre/writers/hdhlomo/mis/20_6_53.gif.

———, *Collected Works*, eds Nick W. Visser and Tim J. Couzens (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

Dhlomo, Rolfes R.R., 'R.R.R. Dhlomo: Twenty Short Stories,' *English in Africa* 2, 1 (1975): pp. 13-70.

Hollowell, John, *Fact and Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

Iannaccaro, Giuliana, '"The great change": Herbert Dhlomo's "An Experiment in Colour",' *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale* 53 (2019): pp. 395-408.

Masilela, Ntongela, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Toronto: Africa World Press, 2007).

Matshoba, Mtutuzeli, *Call Me Not a Man* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979).

Medalie, David (ed.), *Encounters. An Anthology of South African Short Stories* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1998).

Nxumalo, Henry, 'The Story of Bethal,' in *Reconstruction: 90 Years of Black Historical Literature*, ed. Mothobi Mutloatse (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), pp. 135-44.

Peterson, Bhekizizwe, '*The Bantu World* and The World of the Book: Reading Writing, and "Enlightenment",' in *Africa's Hidden Histories. Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 236-57.

Stanley-Silwana, S. M., 'Mteto Becomes a Criminal: Facts in Fiction,' *The Bantu World*, November 19 (1932), p. 3.

Themba, Can, *The Will to Die*, eds Donald Stuart and Roy Holland, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Africasouth, 1982).

Visser, Nick W., 'H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903-1956): The Re-Emergence of an African Writer,' *English in Africa* 1, 2 (1974): pp. 1-10.

———, 'South Africa: The Renaissance That Failed,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 11, 1 (1976): pp. 42-57.

Voss, Tony, 'Refracted Modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw,' in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 339-59.

Wicomb, Zoë, 'South African Short Fiction and Orality,' in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, ed. Jacqueline Bardolph (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 157-70.

Zander, Horst, *Fact – Fiction – 'Faction': A Study of Black South African Literature in English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999).

IV.
INTERMEDIATION

QUESTIONING DEFINITIONS:
THE CHALLENGE OF RHYTHM ANALYSIS

Andrea Fenice

This chapter discusses a new approach to the theory of rhythm analysis, which makes use of several theoretical frameworks, merging perspectives from cognitive linguistics, narratology, semiotics, and literary studies. In narrative studies, the classic approach to textual rhythm derives from the definition of rhythm as anisochrony – the relationship between the time of the story and the time narrated in discourse. This method, although still widely accepted, is considered inherently flawed by several scholars. The main issue with such a definition is that the quantity of time narrated in a given portion of text is not necessarily a good indication of its rhythm. Over the years such perspective has narrowed the analysis of rhythm to a mere discussion about temporal exposition. However, a different approach is possible: a definition of rhythm which draws on the semiotic concepts of salience and textual relief, interconnecting rhythm with the iteration of tensive patterns and the expectations they create in the recipient. I expanded on this method in two directions: on the one hand, devising means for identifying elements and structures *in relief*; on the other, using a cognitive approach to discourse to develop an accurate model of the recipients' attention and reactions to the textual object. The resulting theory is extremely adaptable and effective. Here, as an example, I performed a study of the rhythm of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and its 2016 BBC adaptation for television, showing one of the possible ways for overcoming traditional media boundaries and bringing the study of rhythm out of the box of traditional literature-centric studies.

Rhythm analysis; Narratology; Semiotics; Conrad; The Secret Agent

More often than not, the most difficult part of thinking out of the box is becoming aware of the very existence of that box. This is precisely the case with rhythm analysis in narrative studies. It can be easily claimed that rhythm is among the most intuitive concepts of textual criticism; in fact, one does not need to be a scholar to recognize and discuss the rhythm of a text.[1] Yet, this innate understanding of rhythmic patterns

---

[1] Here, the widest possible definition of 'text' is used, including any form of artistic expression. In fact, despite the fundamental difference between media with a set time flow (cinema and TV, music, theatre, and so on) and others where time is created by reception (literature, visual arts, architecture, and so on), some form of rhythm can always be identified. Clearly, as discussed below, this will result in different definitions of rhythm.

works against the researcher who wants to provide a clear definition: the energetic rhythm of the beats in an *allegro*; the regular rhythm created by rhymes and alliteration in a poem; the excruciatingly slow rhythm used by some film auteurs; the visual rhythms of a gothic cathedral. Can these instances of the word 'rhythm' even be compared with each other, or are different definitions and unrelated concepts unconsciously being compared?

To avoid confusion, a preliminary definition of scope is necessary: this paper will focus on the analysis of rhythm in narrative forms. The aim is to shift the traditional perspective that has been limiting rhythm analysis for decades, showing that an alternative and more productive theoretical framework to investigate this multifaceted concept is possible. The first section will outline the dominant concept of rhythm as Genettian duration, discussing the limitations of such a method and specifying the essential difference between rhythm and narrative speed or pace. Then, an alternative perspective on rhythm analysis will be introduced, drawing from the semiotic approach to texts, and in particular from Daniele Barbieri's theory based on *textual relief*, which allows narrative rhythm to be seen as a complex stratification of textual devices, rather than a mere measure of the amount of time narrated in a given portion of discourse. Finally, an example analysis will show the capabilities of this method. The chosen case study – the 2016 BBC TV adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* – will allow a comparison of literary and filmic devices as far as rhythm is concerned, showing the greater adaptability of the proposed method compared to the classic approach, which is limited to literary texts.

1. Traditional rhythm analysis

The first scholar to conceptualize an organic analysis of *narrative rhythm* – the rhythm of narrative discourse[2] – was Gérard Genette in the third volume of his *Figures.* In what was to become a cardinal text of narrative studies, he discussed duration (*durée*), the relationship between the time of the story and the time of discourse, corresponding to 'a length

---

[2] This apparently pleonastic definition is nonetheless necessary, since the term has been used with a different meaning. For instance, Stanzel uses 'narrative rhythm' to indicate the rhythm of the narrator's direct interventions. See Franz K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 69.

(that of the text, measured in lines and in pages)'.[3] Genette recognizes the extreme importance of such a variable relationship, which he calls anisochrony, and then makes a fundamental remark:

> The isochronous narrative, our hypothetical reference zero, would thus be here a narrative with unchanging speed, without accelerations or slowdowns, where the relationship duration-of-story/length-of-narrative would remain always steady. It is doubtlessly unnecessary to specify that such a narrative does not exist, and cannot exist except as a laboratory experiment: at any level of aesthetic elaboration at all, it is hard to imagine the existence of a narrative that would admit of no variation in speed – and even this banal observation is somewhat important: *a narrative can do without anachronies, but not without anisochronies, or, if one prefers (as one probably does), effects of rhythm.*[4]

Thus, Genette explicitly equates anisochrony with rhythm and recognizes its fundamental importance in any narrative text; he then goes on to detail the different modes that may be encountered in narration: 'a continuous gradation from the infinite speed of ellipsis [...], on up to the absolute slowness of descriptive pause'.[5] Comparing story time and discourse time, five modes can be identified:[6]

Ellipsis: an event is omitted in the narration. Since a portion of story time corresponds to zero discourse time, the speed nears infinite.

Summary: a span of story time is condensed in a lesser discourse time. This is the most common mode alongside *scene* in the majority of narratives, and it constitutes the main rhythmic device, due to the control over speed the narrator can exert.

Scene: the story time and the time of the narrative roughly coincide. In long narratives, *scene* is the main mode. Perfect isochrony, however, is possible only when the narrator is reporting direct speech, since dialogue is by definition in real time.

Slow-down: a span of story time corresponding to a wider portion of discourse. This mode has been added, under different names, by subsequent scholars who have adopted and refined Genette's model.[7]

---

[3] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method, Portion of Figures III*, trans. J.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 87.
[4] Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* p. 88; emphasis mine.
[5] Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* p. 93.
[6] Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* p. 95.
[7] Genette mentions this mode but explicitly refuses to include it in his model, claiming that it is actually a combination of scene and pause (Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* p. 95). However, as noted by Fludernik, 'in narrative discourse, descriptive passages or the portrayal of mental processes

Descriptive pause: a certain portion of text is dedicated to description; thus, the time of the story stops while discourse time proceeds.

Genette's model has the clear advantage of covering concisely all the possible *paces* a narrative can adopt. Despite it being such a neat schematization, there is a point too often overlooked: a definition of narrative rhythm based only on the speed or pace at which a story unfolds, results in a partial and often unsuccessful analysis. As a matter of fact, over the years, narratology has had a problematic relationship with Genettian rhythm.

2. Inside a constricting box

Mieke Bal, for instance, in her *Narratology,* writes that 'rhythm is as striking as it is elusive. Much as narrative media, especially film, work with rhythm, the analysis of it has not been successful at all'.[8] Nonetheless, she goes on reporting Genette's theory with only a few, minor variations. For a long time, it seemed that narratology had been content with this unsatisfactory solution, or rather, not willing to transform its own discontent into new proposals for research in this field. Thus, rhythm ended up being assimilated to duration or often completely ignored. A sort of vicious circle was created: on the one hand, the study of rhythm was neglected, perhaps because the definition was considered outdated and unusable in modern narratological analysis; on the other, the concept itself remained anchored to old standards thus becoming increasingly obsolete. Unable to put aside this charming model and to think out of the box, narratology has effectively packed away rhythm in that very box and left it there for decades. The concept of rhythm in narration has become troublesome, so much so that Monika Fludernik in her *Introduction to Narratology* does not mention it at all.[9] The fact is that, looking from the inside, such a box seems so perfect that one is tempted to leave it as it is, but in fact it has several drawbacks.

---

slow down the pace of the action. The cinematic equivalent would be *slow motion* photography. Chatman refers to this device as *stretch*, Bal as *slow-down*'. Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 33. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

[8] Bal, p. 98.

[9] In fact, the only instance of the word is Stanzel's narrative rhythm which, however, refers to a totally different concept (see footnote 2).

The first issue is that, while the time of the story is indeed time, the time of discourse is a more debatable quantity, which depends on the media; for example, in a novel it is actually a length, or a number of words. To compare it to time, as Genette does, constant reading speed must be assumed. This simplification is usually wrong, since it ignores the reader's relationship with the text, mistaking a space-based medium for a time-based one. Even in literature, the most linear space-based medium, the reading speed considerably fluctuates, based on multiple factors such as textual complexity, the reader's attention and its engagement with the text itself.[10] Those fluctuations are not negligible, since phenomena such as attention or immersion are influenced by the very rhythm of a text and, in turn, such reactions alter the rhythm perceived by the recipient. Approaching the end of a detective story, for instance, a reader is likely to accelerate, driven by the desire to uncover the culprit. This will decrease the time of discourse even though, clearly, the length of discourse remains unvaried. Conversely, a complex passage with convoluted reasoning will inevitably slow down the reading speed. As both examples show, the space=time equivalence is quite debatable. Even more problematic is the fact that, in visual narratives such as comics, there is not even a linear length to consider. Rather, one should talk about *space* of discourse but, then, how to compare a bidimensional image with the *time* of the story? It is apparent that rhythm as duration is incapable of dealing with the contemporary multiplicity of narrative forms.

Furthermore, even the time of the story is a problematic quantity. As Daniele Barbieri points out:

> Our experience as readers makes us suspect that rhythm in narration may be completely independent from the quantity of time recounted. A good narrator can obtain the effect of a fast-paced, intense, pressing rhythm either telling the evolution of human race or describing a swift fighting scene.[11]

The issue put forward by Barbieri is of essential importance: as mentioned before, the Genettian model is excellent, but it is debatable whether it actually describes the rhythm of a narration. All things considered, the amount of time narrated does not seem to be a good measure of rhythm.

[10] While time-based media have a fixed time flow, in space-based media time is created only during reception. The topic is discussed in Daniele Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004), pp. 84-9.

[11] Daniele Barbieri, 'Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini,' pp. 2-3, http://www.danielebarbieri.it/texts/temporitmoraccontoperimmagini.pdf, translation mine.

What Genette originally called *effects of rhythm* actually describe the pace of narration, or narrative speed.[12]

More recent research goes in this direction, trying to expand and refine the concept of narrative speed. An article by Hume and Baetens,[13] for example, focusses on the experience of speed in the reading process and stresses the importance of distinguishing between narratee, implied and empirical reader when considering reactions to rhythmic structures. Marco Caracciolo goes even further, investigating rhythm through the notion of embodiment in narrative discourse; the assumption that 'the structure of our body has a profound influence on the way we perceive, feel, and think about the world'[14] is coupled with recent research showing how readers experience a story by simulating embodied activities. This is made possible by their experiential background, a multi-layered repertoire of mental phenomena, from perception to abstract cognitive and social functions. The experiential background interacts with semiotic objects and events represented in the story creating the interpretative tension commonly called 'engaging with the story'. The result is a definition of rhythm as kinaesthetic reaction of the recipient, a psychophysical response to the regular stimuli of a text. Caracciolo's analysis succeeds in going beyond the limited scope of traditional narratological rhythm but, although innovative, studies such as this tend to be very limited in scope and do not tackle what I deem to be the core issue: if not the time of the story, which element can constitute a good gauge for narrative rhythm in a text?

3. A new rhythm

A possible answer to this essential question comes from semiotics. Rhythm is associated by Giulia Ceriani with the semiotic concept of *pregnance* (*pregnanza*), a further meaning which goes beyond the semantic significance of a sign.[15] Ceriani also underlines the importance of the

---

[12] Later on, while clarifying some of his definitions, Genette himself stated: 'I ought to have entitled that chapter not *Duration*, but *Speed* or perhaps *Speeds*'. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 34.

[13] Kathryn Hume and Jan Baetens, 'Speed, Rhythm, Movement: A Dialogue on K. Hume's Article "Narrative Speed",' *Narrative* 14, 3 (2006): pp. 349-55.

[14] Marco Caracciolo, 'Tell-Tale Rhythms: Embodiment and Narrative Discourse,' *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* 6, 2 (2014): p. 58.

[15] A similar notion is already in Geninasca: when discussing *sasie* (the *seizing of meaning*), alongside the *molar* and *semantic seizing* (roughly corresponding to the denotative and connotative

perceiving subject in this process of meaning-making. As such, rhythm is essentially dualistic: 'rhythm is part of the natural experience of mankind, and at the same time is a culturally-coded information conveyed by language. Its ontological duality accounts for its pregnance'.[16] Rhythm, then, can be seen as a means to group and select meaningful elements, an *isotopy* (a conceptual structure based on the recognition of recurring meaning traits) capable of intervening on experience and projecting a shaping scheme on it. The expectation for this scheme creates a perceptual necessity and 'satisfying such necessity results in the pleasure of recognising a rhythm, the pleasure of an expectant subject joining their object. [...] Thus, rhythm is a cognitive move combined with an emotional involvement'.[17] Otherwise stated, it is 'a salience susceptible of becoming pregnant'.[18] Similarly, Daniele Barbieri introduces the concept of textual relief (*rilievo testuale*), 'a textual feature appearing at all levels, contrasting marked textual zones with zones that are not or less so'.[19] Thus, as in sculpture, textual elements *in relief* stand out against a background and capture the recipient's attention, allowing the recognition of a form and enticing the expectation for its prosecution. Therefore, according to Barbieri, rhythm can be defined as the iteration of a pattern in time.[20]

It goes without saying that, depending on the point of view adopted, patterns can be seen almost everywhere; as with the constellations in the sky, it is the watcher that creates the meaning. Astronomical metaphors aside, not all *saliences* have *pregnance*: what is put in relief is determined by the chosen *isotopy*, by the 'selection of a path of interpretation'.[21] Thus, depending on the interpretative level, different rhythms can emerge, as illustrated by the analysis of a poem: its rhythm does not derive from

---

meaning of a sign), Geninasca introduces the impressive or *rhythmic seizing*, a further meaning specific to the aesthetic experience, which 'ensures the actualisation of a structure [...] experienced as a sequence of phoric tensive states, made up of expectations, surprise, euphoric distension'. Jacques Geninasca, *La parola letteraria* (Milano: Bompiani, 2000), p. 95; translation mine.

[16] Giulia Ceriani, *Il senso del ritmo* (Roma: Meltemi Editore, 2003), p. 29; translation mine. The concept of *pregnance* (with its cognate *pregnant*) has been introduced by the French semiotician René Thom. See René Thom, *Semio Physics: A Sketch*, trans. V. Meyer (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990), p. 6.

[17] Ceriani, p. 116.

[18] Ceriani, p. 121.

[19] Daniele Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004), p. 72; translation mine.

[20] Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo*, p. 65.

[21] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 118.

a single element, but rather from an accumulation of different devices: rhyme scheme and other metric features, recurring semantic fields, lexical clusters, and so on;[22] each of those textual levels has its own rhythmic devices, which can add up or be in contrast, but all concur to the global quantity of relief (*quantità di rilievo*) and thus to the overall rhythm of the poem. Similarly, a narrative text such as a novel has multifaceted devices: not only a story and the pace with which the events are told in discourse, but an abundance of recurring themes, images, symbols, and much more, all creating a multitude of expectation patterns that contribute to the overall rhythm.

Therefore, thanks to the notion of textual relief, one can re-conceptualize rhythm as follows:

Figure 1 – A new approach to rhythm

Rhythm as duration (=speed/pace)   Rhythm based on Relief

$$\frac{T_{Story}}{T_{Discourse}} \quad > \quad \frac{Q_{Relief}}{T_{Reception}}$$

T_{Story} = Story time; $T_{Discourse}$ = Discourse time; Q_{Relief} = Quantity of relief; $T_{Reception}$ = Time of reception

Given a portion of text, the quantity of relief (and the intensity of a rhythm) depends on the number of elements in relief and on the amount of relief each element has. Clearly, not all reliefs are equal. In the narrative form, for instance, major events have higher relief than, say, information about a character's background. As a second example, the death of a main character creates more narrative relief than that of a secondary character. Adopting this value as a measure of rhythmic intensity, rhythm can be uncoupled from the time of the story, thus going beyond the limitations discussed in the previous section. Moreover, substituting the time of discourse with the time of reception, one can include both space-based and time-based textualities in the analysis.[23]

---

[22] For a more detailed discussion on the topic, see the analysis of Giacomo Leopardi's *L'Infinito* in Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo*, p. 45.

[23] This does not mean that the two types of texts behave in exactly the same way. Nonetheless, using the time of reception makes the comparison possible. This issue is thoroughly discussed in Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo*, pp. 59-62, pp. 81-94.

However, the 'formula' reported in Figure 1 is not necessarily to be intended as a tool for quantitative measurement, but rather as an attempt at visualizing the shift in the theoretical paradigm. The new definition expands the scope of rhythm analysis, taking into account textual devices that were excluded in the traditional analysis. Notably, the new definition of rhythm does not cancel the previous one but includes it, insofar as story elements can be seen as a subset of narrative reliefs. Most importantly, the quantity of relief is not a single value, but the sum of the reliefs of several textual features. A text, therefore, does not have *a* rhythm, but several co-occurring ones that contribute to the overall rhythmic effect. Depending on the type of textuality, however, one or more formal levels can emerge as more relevant to the general rhythm. While in poetry, for example, the syntactic level is extremely important, in narrative texts (novels and short stories, but also most drama and films) it is far less relevant, and the narrative structures are often privileged. This does not mean that other levels do not participate in the creation of rhythmic/tensive patterns, but that the narrative rhythm is *prominent*[24] and the others are in the background. In other words, in a narrative text the recipient's attention is mainly devoted to characters relations, sequences of events and other narrative structures, but other features such as symbolic patterns, word choices or other 'style' effects have their importance as well. Therefore, in narrative texts, analysing rhythm means identifying textual relief on different levels and understanding the importance each one has on the prominent (narrative) level.

Having mentioned the role of recipients and the importance of their expectations in the meaning-making process, a final concept from Barbieri's theory is required in order to understand the actual significance of elements in relief: the relationship between rhythm and tension. In short, when elements in relief create one or more rhythmic patterns, such regularities trigger a twofold reaction in the reader: the expectation of another iteration of the scheme and the expectation for the rhythmic form to end or change. Therefore, tension and rhythm are complementary and interlinked: 'tension is produced every time an expectation produced by the text is not satisfied where we expect, thus extending itself. [...] While rhythm is related to harmony, tension is the expression of disharmony'.[25]

---

[24] Barbieri uses the term 'ritmo eminente' (*Nel corso del testo*, p. 81).
[25] Daniele Barbieri, *Il linguaggio della poesia* (Milano: Bompiani, 2011), pp. 101-2; translation mine.

Thus, according to Barbieri, every aesthetic text is built around a variable balance between confirming and frustrating the recipient's expectations. A certain amount of tension will increase expectations and cast the following element in even greater relief. On the contrary, if a textual rhythm is repeated without variation it starts losing its prominence; since there are no new elements, expectations lower to the point that such rhythm ends up in the background: it is there but only a small part of our attention is dedicated to it. A good example of this is the ground bass in music, a specific case of a rhythm intended to remain on the background with the effect of altering and enhancing other rhythms; conversely, if repetition without variation occurs on the prominent level, tension will inevitably drop and the recipients will lose interest. The same principle can be applied to a narrative text: background elements (themes, motifs, symbolic patterns, and so on) can form regular patterns that support and interact with the rhythm of the prominent narrative level, where variations from the expected must occur. In fact, a narrative with only expected elements is possible, but is bound to be extremely dull.

Therefore, in order to be noticed – and thus to be significant in the economy of a text – narrative rhythms need the counterbalance of tension, textual strategies that break regularity, introducing the unexpected and bringing a rhythm back to the foreground. It may be concluded that the core of a successful rhythmic strategy is repetition with variation: a balance of regularity and novelty, expected and unexpected elements.

4. *Adapting rhythm: the 2016 BBC* The Secret Agent

This final section discusses the rhythmic and tensive structure of the latest BBC adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, a three-episode TV series directed by Charles McDougall, which was broadcast in the second half of 2016. The following analysis is carried out using the method outlined above, and is divided into two main parts: first, after a brief outline of the novel's structure and rhythmic strategies, the chronological rearrangement of narrative discourse performed in the adaptation and the effects it has on tensive patterns will be discussed. Then, the role of background rhythms in supporting and enhancing the narrative ones will be highlighted, showing how the TV series uses the capabilities of the filmic medium to adapt one of the main rhythmic strategies of the source novel.

In the novel, the story is told with extreme alteration in the temporal exposition: the narrator makes extensive use of analeptic and proleptic devices to break the time sequence, a strategy called time-shift and often used by Conrad;[26] moreover, the narrator uses ellipses to conceal the main event (the failed bombing and Stevie's death) and Winnie Verloc's suicide, which are to be inferred through subsequent hints. This altered chronology, summarized in Figure 2, is the core of the novel's tensive strategy, creating long-term narrative tension through the withholding of essential information to the reader.

Figure 2 – Chronological order and summary of main anachronic strategies

Chronological order of events													
I	II	III	VIII	IX_1	E_1	IV	V	VI	VII	IX_2	X-XI	XII	E_2	XIII
Temporal ordering in narrative discourse													
		T_1		F_1		F_2	T_2		T_3				
I	II	III	IV	V		VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII		XIII

I-XIII = Chapters
E = Ellipses; (E_1: Failed bombing and Stevie's death; E_2: Mrs Verloc's suicide).
T = Time-shifts around the main ellipsis (E_1).
F = 'Ordinary' flashbacks
(F_1: Heat's recollection of the day of the attack and his investigation of the crime scene;
F_2: Assistant Commissioner's memory of an evening at Michaelis's patroness).

As a counterbalance, the novel creates a refined rhythm based on narrative regularities: on the one hand, the story is told with episodes regularly oscillating around the central ellipsis of the main event; there are three time-shifts, moving forward (T1), backward (T2), and forward again (T3) in the storyline (see Figure 1). On the other hand, a regular scheme of encounters between two characters is used to advance the narrative, creating a peculiar rhythm.[27] This complex narrative structure increases the 'natural' relief given to story elements, building increasing tension and creating recurring patterns and crescendos around the central events.

[26] See, among others, Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 289.
[27] Alessandro Serpieri, 'Introduzione,' in Joseph Conrad, *L'agente segreto* (Firenze: Giunti, 1994), pp. ix-xli, xxxix-xl.

As if that were not enough, the narrator constructs a dense network of thematic and figurative clues throughout the novel, which creates a layer of background rhythms to support the prominent narrative relief. This is one among several background devices which allow the narrator to adjust narrative rhythm, enhancing or reducing the relief of story elements with secondary devices. In summary, the novel's rhythmic strategy is twofold: narrative tensions and rhythms based on altered temporal exposition, coupled with secondary non-narrative rhythms used to reinforce or otherwise alter the prominent narrative one.[28] This outline, although brief, will allow an in-depth discussion of how the adaptation deals with the extreme rhythmic complexity of its source.

Storywise, the 2016 TV version of *The Secret Agent* is comparatively faithful to the novel. It changes some episodes, anticipates or postpones others and adds several subplots, but, overall, it is 'telling the same story'. Similarly to previous adaptations,[29] however, the latest BBC series changes the discursive arrangement of events, following a chronological order; in this regard, it is extremely conventional, completely eliminating not only the time shifts, but also the two ellipses. Thus, the mystery about the events at the Greenwich observatory is removed and the audience is shown Stevie's death when it occurs. However, the screenwriters seem aware of the tensive importance the altered temporal exposition has in the novel. Therefore, they establish substitutive devices to recreate the narrative tension lost in the linear reordering. Having abandoned covert clues and the possibility for detective-story 'whodunit' narrative tension,[30] the series develops a new tensive strategy based on maximizing immediate suspense at the expense of long-term narrative tensions.

One of the major instances is the removal of the meeting between the Professor and Ossipon at a restaurant (Chapter IV), when they read about the bombing and believe that Mr Verloc has blown himself himself up.

---

[28] This outline of the novel's structures is inevitably partial and only serves as a brief description of the main structural devices in order to allow a comparison with the TV adaptation. For a thorough discussion of the novel's rhythmic and tensive devices, with detailed examples, see Andrea Fenice, 'Beyond Suspense – The Rhythm of Clues in The Secret Agent,' *The Conradian* 43, 2 (2018): pp. 54-67; 'Il ritmo dell'Agente Segreto,' *Anglistica Pisana* 14, 1-2 (2017): pp. 63-70.

[29] Most adaptations of *The Secret Agent* adopt a chronological reordering of events, including Conrad's 1922 theatrical adaptation and the previous BBC adaptation for TV (1992).

[30] It is what Sternberg named 'curiosity'; he divided what is here called narrative tension into suspense (a tension concerning future narrative outcomes) and curiosity (a narrative tension due to lack of information concerning the past). Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 65.

In the novel, this creates long-term narrative tension due to the previous ellipsis hiding the explosion and Stevie's death both to characters and reader. In the TV version, the adapters seem aware that the scene would have no tensive value, due to the chronological rearrangement which immediately reveals the truth to the audience and so the scene is removed altogether; thus, although reducing fidelity to the plot, the teleplay manages to preserve narrative rhythm by skipping a scene that would result in a tension drop.[31]

The adaptation also tries to compensate for the loss of tensive complexity caused by the linear chronology; it does so by multiplying the instances of tensive devices. Therefore, more space is given to the conflicts within the Verloc family: Mr and Mrs Verloc have a more complicated relationship than their literary counterparts, and the character of Winnie's mother is transformed into the archetypal interfering mother-in-law, sowing discord in the family and thus enhancing the domestic drama. Additionally, several action sequences and suspenseful episodes are added to the story: we are shown the police hunt and capture the Professor, Winnie go into a panic when Stevie gets lost, and the escaping sequence after Mr Verloc's murder is turned into an actual chase. These are just a few examples of a general trend indicating a veer towards thriller-like suspense, in technical terms, a tendency towards shifting tensive devices from curiosity to suspense, and from long- to short-term tensions. This strategy is illustrated, for instance, by the scene where the Professor is arrested. Wearing his suicidal explosive device, he gets on a crowded omnibus – perhaps a homage to Hitchcock's adaptation, *Sabotage* – where he is caught by Chief Inspector Heat, who confronts the anarchist and tries to arrest him. In the struggle that follows the Professor activates his twenty-second detonator. Heat manages to drag the Professor off the bus, the latter laughing madly and waiting for the explosion that will force them to be 'buried together'.[32] However, the detonator fails and the Professor is arrested. The entire scene is indeed an excellent architecture of narrative tension and a rhythmic crescendo. It begins with the subtle tension of the dialogue going on while the Profes-

---

[31] This was not the case, for instance, in the 1992 adaptation, where the scene was kept, although devoid of any tensive value. An apparently faithful adaptation resulted in a rhythmically incoherent choice.

[32] *The Secret Agent*, directed by Charles McDougall (BBC One online, 2016), S01E02, 0.09.46, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07ltxsr/episodes/guide.

sor is holding the detonator, the danger underlined by the camera cutting on the unsteady wheels of the carriage on the rough road. Then there is a sudden crescendo while the two characters fight, the twenty seconds elapse and the expected explosion approaches. Nonetheless, despite being a successful construction, the scene is a brief insert of suspense with an end in itself, a standalone tensive pattern which does not contribute to a global narrative strategy. The TV series, and especially the third episode, is full of similar and often far less refined examples, usually reducing the span of narrative tensions to a single scene or sequence. Such short-term devices are often based on trite generic conventions and melodramatic tropes, sensational scenes specifically designed to entice the recipient's emotional involvement.

The following are two consecutive examples in episode 3, during Winnie and Ossipon's escaping sequence. At first, after Ossipon has bought the train tickets and is walking away, the ticket clerk calls him back. Accompanied by a tense music, Ossipon slowly approaches the ticket stand; there is a suspenseful pause in the music, and then the most obvious and highly predictable conclusion: 'Your change, sir'.[33] In the next scene, Mrs Verloc is stopped by a policeman checking the boarding passengers. The train is about to depart and, while the questioning drags on, Chief Inspector Heat arrives at the station to arrest Winnie. Finally, she manages to board the train at the last second. Both are self-contained suspenseful scenes that only create 'local' narrative relief.

While the aforementioned examples come from subplots that were added in the adaptation, there are also cases in which this preference for short-term devices comes at the expenses of more complex and long-term tensions. A significant example is the ending of Episode 2, adapting chapter IX. In the novel, it is only at this point that the truth about the Greenwich affair is fully revealed: adopting Mrs Verloc's perspective, the narrator matches her unknowingness of the events with the reader's, maximizing the narrative relief of the revelation. Moreover, chapter IX is the converging point of several structural rhythms: the last time-shift (T3) occurs, while the rhythm of encounters reaches its climax, with three confrontations in a single chapter. In the teleplay, this complex intertwinement of rhythmic and tensive patterns is substituted by a single thread of suspense. Chief inspector Heat arrives at the Verlocs' and

---

[33] *The Secret Agent*, 2016, S01E03, 0.34.16.

tells Winnie the truth about her brother's fate. Only while leaving the house does he meet Mr Verloc and confront him; therefore, the tension is diluted in two scenes rather than summed up in one. Moreover, the final scene shows Mr Verloc slowly walking home accompanied by suspenseful music, while a shocked and furious Winnie is waiting for him. The episode ends on this cliff-hanger, having built a 'final confrontation' atmosphere. Such a device trivializes the complex psychological experience of the two characters, as well as the multi-layered tensive architecture of the original scene, in order to create an intense, but extremely 'superficial' tension, confined to the outcome of the events.

Figure 3 – The Verlocs' Confrontation as a Cliff-hanger[34]
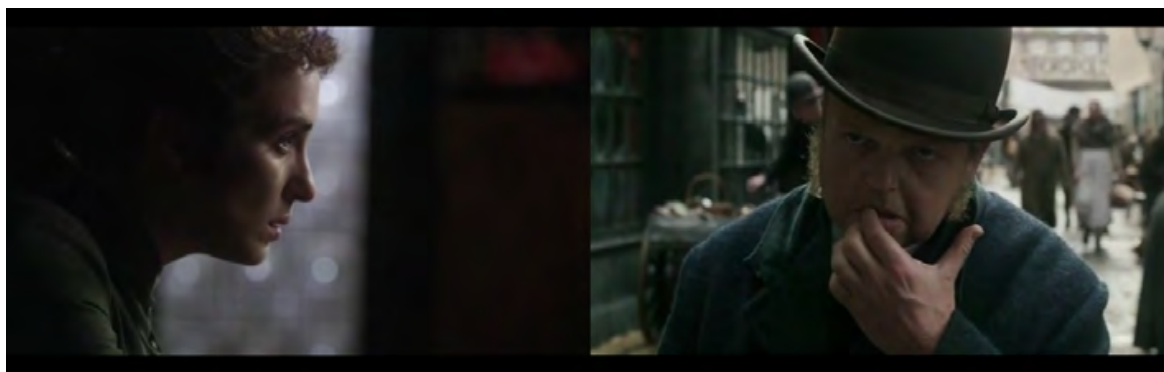
Having shown the simplification made on the narrative level and the attempts at compensating the loss of tension and rhythmic patterns, a couple of examples of background rhythms will be provided: the following paragraphs will focus on visual rhythms used to transfer on the screen the regular pattern of foreshadowing clues and symbolic images which, as mentioned above, is a distinctive rhythmic feature of the novel.

The creation of a symbolic pattern begins with the opening credits of the three episodes, with the repetition of clock images and chemicals, where it is mixed with the summary of previous episodes, creating a successful but artificial suspense, with an extradiegetic origin, enticing the audience's expectations in the peritext by hinting at homemade explosives and time running out. The relief given to those visual elements is narratively meaningful in the first episode, when the bomb is actually being prepared, and is indeed reprised by showing the Professor at work

---

[34] *The Secret Agent*, 2016, S01E02, 0.55.52–0.56.39.

in his laboratory during Episode 1; however, the device is gradually devoid of narrative significance since the bomb has already been prepared in the second episode and, in the third, has already exploded.

Figure 4 – Symbolic visual patterns in the opening[35]
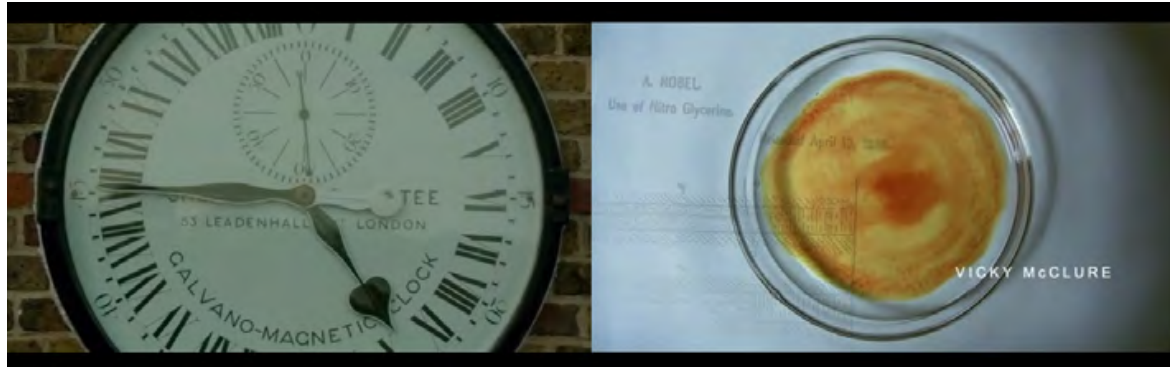
A more effective example of background rhythm is the one engendered by the iteration of circles and spirals imagery, which gradually acquires a symbolic meaning. The pattern is anticipated in the opening (see Figure 4) and introduced in the very first scene, which begins with an effective match-cut, associating the detonator from the opening credits to fireworks, a device that visually reproduces a similar foreshadowing in the novel.[36] Then, Mr Verloc ignites a pinwheel firework, which creates a ring of fire, while an excited Stevie repeats 'circles'.[37] Then, throughout the three episodes, the camera often foregrounds similar images with unusual perspectives, and frames that have no apparent narrative significance (see Figure 5). The background iteration of circles is gradually connected with the prominent rhythms by showing Stevie's obsession for that specific geometric image. Finally, in the bombing scene, an explicit symbolic connection is made by showing an aerial perspective of the perfectly round explosion hole. The touching scene that follows further increases the metaphoric significance of the shape. Circles and

---

[35] *The Secret Agent*, 2016, S01E01, 0.00.01, 0.00.06.

[36] In the novel, Stevie is often associated with fire, an anticipation of his violent demise. For example, 'He was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief's absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase'; 'His expression was proud, apprehensive, and concentrated, like that of a small child entrusted for the first time with a box of matches and the permission to strike a light'. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 13, 144.

[37] *The Secret Agent*, 2016, S01E01, 0.01.05.

Figure 5 – Evolution of the visual symbolic pattern of circles and spirals, some examples
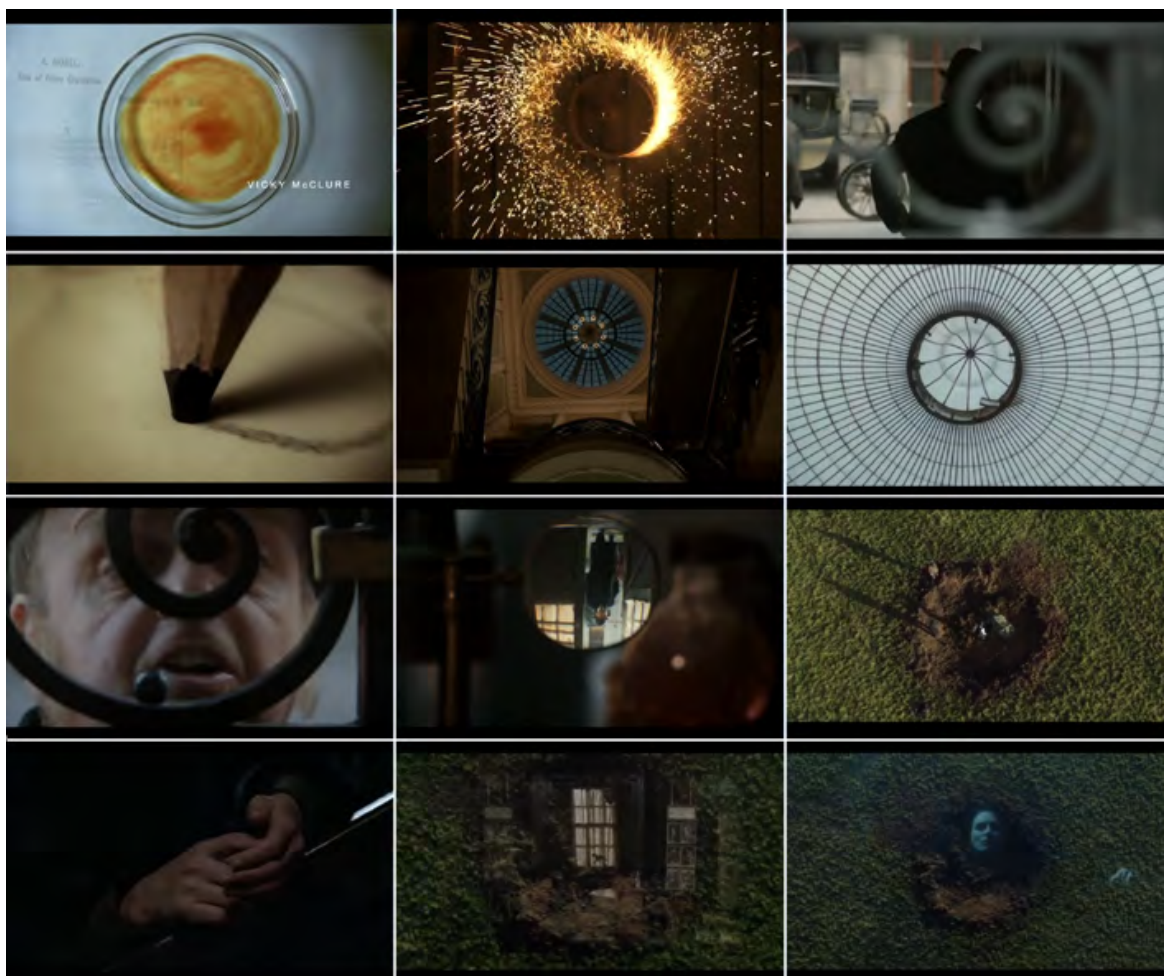
spirals, which have been put in relief by the shot angles, in situations hinting at the twisted madness of the Greenwich affair, are thus charged with an additional narrative value. The interrelation with the narrative level is now overt, to the point that the image of the crater is inserted at the beginning of the third episode, to reinforce the tension of the final confrontation between the Verlocs. Thus, the symbolic pattern serves a specific narrative strategy: enhancing the intensity of tension through the emotional engagement of the audience. This point is finely illustrated by the ending sequence, which is the epitome of the whole symbolic pattern: Winnie absent-mindedly draws circles with her finger on her hand, repeating the word 'circles' as his brother used to do. The device per se is a sufficient iteration of the symbolic rhythm. Given the described 'semantic evolution' of that image, the evocation of a circle now signifies

the spiralling events, Winnie's counterproductive effort to protect her brother, the boy's violent demise, and the craterlike hole the Greenwich affair left in the Verloc household: all the text-specific meaning the sign has acquired in time. Finally, the last shot summarizes the development of the symbolic meaning with a double superimposition – the empty Verloc house fading into the bomb crater, fading again into Winnie's drowned body.[38]

The narrative relief of the final sequence, therefore, is furtherly enhanced by background devices. This is a remarkable adaptation of the novel's multi-layered rhythmic pattern, which uses the visual and symbolic level to increase the rhythmic intensity created on the foreground by story elements.

In conclusion, the chronological rearrangement of events in the 2016 BBC *The Secret Agent* brings along numerous issues, which require extra effort in adaptation not to dissipate tension and rhythmic effects. Having removed the novel's main source of narrative tension – the altered temporal exposition – the TV series relies on a series of alternative devices to counterbalance the loss of narrative relief. The introduction of dramatic subplots and suspenseful scenes succeeds in creating an alternative tensive strategy, although oriented to high short-term tensions, rather than the long tensive arcs constructed by the novel. Meanwhile, on the background, in a faithful adaptation of the novel's rhythmic strategy, an iteration of visual patterns is used to enhance the relief of story elements, supporting narrative rhythm with a crescendo of symbolic clues that become increasingly explicit, and thus reinforcing the rhythmic intensity (= quantity of relief) of the narrative turning points. This example shows the importance of going beyond the classic Genettian approach, which ultimately reduces rhythm analysis to an evaluation of narrative speed. The alternative method proposed – a rhythm analysis based on textual relief and narrative tensions – covers a wider range of textual devices, proving that narrative rhythm is far more complex than a mere relationship between story time and discursive length. Investigating new approaches such as this can revitalize the study of rhythm, opening up a wide range of new possibilities.

---

[38] *The Secret Agent, 2016,* S01E03, 0.54.45–0.55.06.

Bibliography

Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Barbieri, Daniele, 'Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini' (1994), http://www.danielebarbieri.it/downloads.asp.

———, *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004).

———, *Il linguaggio della poesia* (Milano: Bompiani, 2011).

Caracciolo, Marco, 'Tell-Tale Rhythms: Embodiment and Narrative Discourse,' *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6, 2 (2014): pp. 49-73.

Ceriani, Giulia, *Il senso del ritmo* (Roma: Meltemi Editore, 2003).

Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Conrad, Joseph, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Eco, Umberto, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

Fenice, Andrea, 'Il ritmo dell'Agente Segreto,' *Anglistica Pisana* 14, 1-2 (2017): pp. 63-70.

———, 'Beyond Suspense – The Rhythm of Clues in *The Secret Agent*,' *The Conradian* 43, 2 (2018): pp. 54-67.

Fludernik, Monika, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method, Portion of Figures III*, trans. J.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

———, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Geninasca, Jacques, *La parola letteraria* (Milano: Bompiani, 2000).

Hume, Kathryn and Baetens, Jan, 'Speed, Rhythm, Movement: A Dialogue on K. Hume's Article "Narrative Speed",' *Narrative* 14, 3 (2006): pp. 349–55.

Serpieri, Alessandro, 'Introduzione,' in Joseph Conrad, *L'agente segreto* (Firenze: Giunti 1994), pp. ix-xli.

Stanzel, Franz K., *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Sternberg, Meir, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

The Secret Agent, directed by Charles McDougall (BBC One online, 2016), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07ltxsr/episodes/guide.

Thom, René, *Semio Physics: A Sketch*, trans. V. Meyer (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

Watt, Ian, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

AVT: BRITISHNESS IN PADDINGTON

Emanuela Ammendola

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how cultural meanings are nowadays communicated by means of the new media and to what extent our awareness of other cultures develops through multimodal products, among them movies. The translation of movies, which are frequently released on a global scale, often aims to adapt the source text to the target system neutralizing cultural and linguistic elements that in some cases represent a core aspect of the original product. If the main issue of AVT concerns the proficiency in managing different systems of signs and channels of communication, the process gets more complex when the arrangement involves linguistic and cultural elements that cannot or shall not intentionally be adapted to the target system. The subject of the research presented here is the animated comedy film *Paddington* (2014), which offers an ironic self-representation of British people and a fertile ground to determine how stereotypes are perceived by a non-anglophone audience. The purpose is to explore whether the Italian translation of the movie applies a strategy of 'foreignization' rather than 'domestication' of cultural contents and to what extent translation choices affect the reception of the dubbed movie in the target system.

Cultural Perception; Stereotypes; Dubbing; AVT; Paddington

1. A multimodal approach

Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others'.[1] Hofstede's view of culture, as a phenomenon occurring within the boundaries of a community, is the starting point for this chapter, which intends to investigate whether the animated comedy film *Paddington*,[2]

---

[1] Geert Hofstede, Gert J. Hofstede and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw Hill, 2010), p. 5.
[2] *Paddington*, directed by Paul King (United Kingdom: StudioCanal UK, 2014).

directed by Paul King and inspired by the homonymous book series by Michael Bond,[3] can cross these boundaries conveying cultural contents in the English original movie as well as its Italian dubbed version.[4] My choice of this movie has been guided by a quantitative criterion, since it is loaded with references to the British socio-cultural background, in addition to the nature of the audiovisual, addressed to a public of both adults and children. The first part of the chapter will show, by means of a multimodal approach, how far *Paddington* is imbued with extralinguistic culture-bound references,[5] stereotypes and clichés and how a certain idea of Britishness is, directly or indirectly, constructed and delivered through different modes[6] and communicative channels. In the second part, a comparative analysis will highlight similarities and differences between cultural and linguistic meanings conveyed by the English and the Italian versions of the movie, with regard to the source and target audience background and the possible loss of information in the target culture.

The adaptation of *Paddington* for the big screen implies the passage from the written form to the audiovisual one that inevitably involves the use of different semiotic resources, since audiovisual texts 'potentially include oral and written language'[7] and are characterized by the co-occurrence of verbal and nonverbal signs. From the combination of two systems of signs and two different channels of communication four different types of signs result: 'audio-verbal (words uttered), audio-nonverbal (all other sounds), visual-verbal (writing), visual-nonverbal (all other visual signs)'.[8] According to Zabalbeascoa, the audiovisual text prototypically combines these four equally significant components, which are complementary and inseparable in the communicative process. It is the concept of complementarity[9] that represents an instrumental factor for

---

[3] The *Paddington Bear* book series, by Michael Bond, includes 29 books published between 1958 and 2018.
[4] Distributed in Italy by Eagle Pictures.
[5] Jan Pedersen, 'High Felicity: A Speech Act Approach to Quality Assessment in Subtitling,' in *Between Text and Image: Updating Research in Screen Translation*, ed. Delia Chiaro, Christine Heiss and Chiara Buccaria (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), pp.101-6.
[6] Gunther Kress, 'What is Mode?,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis,* ed. Jewitt Carey (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 60-75.
[7] Patrick Zabalbeascoa, 'The Nature of the Audiovisual Text and its Parameters,' in *The Didactics of Audiovisual Translation,* ed. Jorge Díaz-Cintas (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 21-39.
[8] Zabalbeascoa, 'The Nature of the Audiovisual Text,' p. 24.
[9] Zabalbeascoa, 'The Nature of the Audiovisual Text,' p. 31.

the multimodal analysis of the movie as well as its Italian translation since 'it seems difficult to neatly distinguish modes as they frequently overlap, intermingle and combine. The essence of multimodality seems to be that the various modes are integrated and interrelated on a number of levels (syntactically and semantically)'.[10]

Among the contributions to multimodal discourse analysis, *Reading Images*[11] provides a helpful investigation into visual communication, establishing a connection between the internal coherence of a multimodal text and the three Hallidayan metafunctions.[12] Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen introduce three principles of composition – informational value, salience and framing – which are applicable not only to simple images, but 'also to composite visuals, visuals which combine text and image and, perhaps, other graphic elements, be it on a page or on a television or computer screen'.[13] The concepts of informational value and salience appear particularly instrumental in a multimodal discourse analysis aiming to investigate the verbal and nonverbal meanings conveyed by the scenes of the analysed movie. Moreover, informational value and salience, which are connected to size, position, colour and zone of the image where a specific element is placed, are relevant criteria for selecting the visual contents to translate or leave unchanged in the TT.

This interplay of social semantic approach[14] and multimodal discourse analysis[15] lends itself to an exploration of the pluri-semiotic strategies used to convey cultural meanings and their possible shifts depending on the audience. This last issue is also investigated by Kress and van Leeuwen[16] who individuate two kinds of participants in the visual communication: 'represented participants' as the protagonists of the image and 'interactive participants' as the receivers of the image. The supposed response of the receiver may change according to the linguistic and cultural context:

---

[10] Hartmut Stöckl, 'The Language-image Text. Theoretical and Analytical Inroads into Semiotic Complexity,' *Arbeit aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik – AAA* 34, 2 (2009): pp. 206-7.

[11] Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[12] M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

[13] Kress and van Leeuwen.

[14] Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[15] Kay L. O'Halloran (ed.), *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic-functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2004).

[16] Kress and van Leeuwen, pp. 114-24.

> Although language and image do have their specific affordances, what can be 'said' and 'done' with images (and with language) does not only depend on the intrinsic and universal characteristics of these modes of communication, but also on historically and culturally specific social needs.[17]

From both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives, this last assumption represents the departure point for the investigation of the abovementioned Britishness in the Italian version of *Paddington*, which is inevitably linked to the process of AVT. As regards the latter, Juan Pedro Rica Peromingo provides an effective overview on dubbing strategies, helpful for the comparative analysis set out in the following sections.[18] For the exploration of the ST as well as the TT, the socio-communicative goals achieved through the cooperation of multiple semiotic resources[19] will be explored in line with the abovementioned concept of complementarity between nonverbal elements and written or spoken language.

2. Paddington*: a British icon*

Michael Bond's *Paddington* has become an icon for British children since it was first published in 1958, telling the story of a little bear from 'darkest Peru' that is found in London by the Brown family. Peggy Fortnum's illustrations in Bond's book series is a first example of the connection between words and images which is strengthened in the transposition to the big screen. Indeed, the movie reproduces through the audiovisual channel many elements present in the books[20] like the names of the Browns and the finding of the little bear at the station at the beginning of the film, when he is waiting for something to happen with a little suitcase and a label around his neck. These circumstances are connected to Bond's memories of children that during the Second World War were sent out of London for safety with a little suitcase and a label around their wrist.[21] This first reference to British culture in the

---

[17] Kress and van Leeuwen, pp. 123-4.

[18] Juan Pedro Rica Peromingo, *Aspectos lingüísticos y técnicos de la traducción audiovisual (TAV)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

[19] John Bateman, *Multimodality and Genre: A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[20] References are mainly taken from the first book of the series, titled *A Bear Called Paddington*, 1958.

[21] The so-called 'evacuated children' (see Penny E. Starns and Martin L. Parsons, 'The Use and Abuse of British Children during the Second World War,' in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 266-78; Tara Zahra,

movie is given by Aunt Lucy while leaving Paddington on the boat to London (8:45).[22]

Rebecca Mead argues that '*Paddington* isn't just about a bear; it's about an entire cultural milieu. [...] the movie offers a gently satirical portrait of a particular English upper-middle-class sensibility: liberal, but sometimes effortfully so; emotionally restrained, but not lacking in feeling, for all that restraint'.[23] The ironic depiction of Britishness is obtained according to what Hartmut Stöckl calls a 'networked system of core modes, medial variants, peripheral modes, sub-modes and features' concerning the use of semiotic resources to deliver information through the visual and acoustic channel.[24]

The movie begins with some black and white scenes telling the story of Paddington's family, uncle Pastuso and aunt Lucy, and their encounter with a British explorer in Peru. Peru is also the setting for the first colour scenes of the movie that represent Paddington's life with aunt Lucy and uncle Pastuso, and provide a first example of how the message is balanced between words and pictures. Here British culture and civilization are introduced by means of the images showing objects like a miniature of Tower Bridge, a chessboard, a tea kettle and some books left to Uncle Pastuso and Aunt Lucy by the English explorer years before. The second scene taking place in the hut shows a record player giving information and advice to a foreigner in London: 'To greet a stranger in the street; to take the conversation further talking about the weather; Londoners have 107 ways to say that it is raining' (5:02). The last two points are frequently recalled in the movie by Paddington who uses idioms and sayings like 'real brolly-buster, isn't it?' (5:13), 'coming down in stair rods, isn't it?' (13:39) or even in his first letter to Aunt Lucy where he writes 'Dear Aunt Lucy I have arrived in London and so far it has rained, poured, drizzled and chucked it down' (24:49). Clichés about the weather, therefore, are mainly conveyed by means of idioms whose meaning appears linked to the common knowledge shared by British people. Nevertheless, images

The Lost Children (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)).

[22] Minutes in brackets are used to refer to exact moments of the movie, which has a running time of 95 minutes.

[23] Rebecca Mead, '*Paddington* Perfectly Captures a Particular English Sensibility,' *The New Yorker*, 23 January 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/paddington-perfectly-captures-particular-english-sensibility.

[24] Hartmut Stöckl, 'In between Modes: Language and Images in Printed Media,' in *Perspectives on Multi-modality,* ed. Eija Ventola, Charles Cassily and Martin Kaltenbacher (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), pp. 9-30.

accompany and support dialogues as shown in the scene in which Paddington enters the kitchen in a bathtub with a rubber duck on his wet head, saying 'Nice weather for the ducks'. Idioms referring to the weather are mainly found in the first part of the film revealing Paddington's prior belief about British people. However, the rainy weather of London accompanies those scenes in which the little bear feels dispirited and lonely: in the first letter to Aunt Lucy and during his vain search of the explorer Montgomery Clyde. From this perspective, the visual representation of the rain assumes a negative value representing Paddington's mood by means of dark colours and absence of light, in contrast with the last scene of the movie where snow and a bright light are associated with the happy ending.

Another cultural issue represented in the movie is that of politeness and good manners, a behavioural aspect which seems to characterize, once again, the previously mentioned middle class. Working-class British people, for example, may recognize that indirectness is a form which is favoured by middle-class people when making requests, and may even see this concern for the other as characterizing British culture, but they may not in fact use indirectness themselves when requesting, or may even mock using indirectness, seeing it as mannered or over-polite.[25]

It is not a coincidence that English etiquette and idioms about the weather are two of the few things that Paddington knows about the British and, as an outsider, tries to put them into practice once in London. As a matter of fact, upon his arrival he starts greeting people and talking about the weather: 'Ah yes manners – Good morning, really tipping it down, isn't?' and when Mrs Brown offers him her help his mannerly reply is 'oh yes please, if you're sure it's no trouble'. The embodiment of English good manners in the little bear is also shown by his reprimands to Mr Brown's rudeness and carelessness in the tearoom scene ('Mr Brown, that is extremely rude' – 15:23) and at the Geographer's Guild when the bear justifies his angry glare ('My aunt taught me to do them when people have forgotten their manners' – 49:43). The two cultural issues which have been so far discussed appear mainly conveyed through verbal communication, even though the co-occurrence of images provides complementary information that clarifies the contents by means of the visual channel.

---

[25] Sara Mills, 'Language, Culture and Politeness,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture,* ed. Farzad Sharifian (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 129-40.

The characterization of Britishness is strengthened by the depiction of police and security services in London as representation of a general discontent. 'Police Officers Prefer Warmth of Police Station to Catching Criminals'[26] is the title of an article published on 31 December 2009 on *The Telegraph* that concerns the general complaint regarding police officers in London and their inadequate approach to the public. This general idea of ineffectiveness is ironically reported in the movie that

> has pitch-perfect tone for a very English register of resignation. Consider the police officer who, upon hearing Mrs Brown's description of the missing Paddington—three feet six, with a battered hat and duffel coat, and he's a bear—replies dolefully, 'That's not much to go on'. Then there is the pair of security guards quizzing each other on the nutritional value of a packet of biscuits—measuring out their lives with carbohydrate counts. It is a perfect vignette of a failure so profound it passes for pleasure.[27]

The inefficiency of police and security services is one of the key factors in the development of the events as shown in the last part of the movie, as for example in the scene in which Mrs Bird gets the museum security guard drunk in order to let the Browns enter the museum and save Paddington.

References to the cultural issues and stereotypes mentioned so far converge in the series of scenes in which Paddington unintentionally chases a robber (37:35): lack of politeness from an irritated bystander whose umbrella Paddington unintentionally steals; chance of rain, evidenced by the presence of the umbrella; inefficiency of the police that only arrives when Paddington has already caught the thief. Moreover, Paddington reaches the robber flying by means of an umbrella, which seems to be a reference to *Mary Poppins*,[28] another movie commonly associated to English culture in which the protagonist flies thanks to her magical umbrella.

We can say that the chase scenes represent the perfect combination of speech and pictures, which appear to be equally significant in conveying the message and the humour as outlined in the following examples:

[26] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/6916946/Police-officers-prefer-warmth-of-police-station-to-catching-criminals.html.
[27] Mead, online.
[28] *Mary Poppins*, directed by Robert Stevenson (United States: Walt Disney, Buena Vista Distribution, 1964).

Humour in the chase scene

Timeline	Dialogue
38:09	ROBBER: (looking at Paddington dressed as a police officer) Some kind of tiny police bear.
38:33	POLICE OFFICER: (looking at Paddington dressed as a police officer) Charlie Delta. Officer in distress. Urgent assistance required. Go, go go!
38:50	PADDINGTON (unaware of the fact that he is chasing a thief): I've got your wallet!

Humour in the chase scene

Timeline	Action
38:03	Paddington hits a stand with some costumes and comes out dressed as a police officer.
38:18	Paddington finds himself tied to the leash of a dog he had already met in the subway.
38:28	He unintentionally steals the umbrella of the dog's owner and, after an uncomfortable flight, falls on the robber becoming a hero.

However, if images have so far played a complementary role compared to dialogues, the same cannot be said for those scenes which express Britishness independently of the dialogues: from the reproductions of London in the hut (the miniature of the Tower Bridge and the snow globe) to the 'real' images of London such as Buckingham Palace and public phone boxes. Referring to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the differences between these images can be clarified in terms of informational value and salience, since the miniature and the snow globe are meant to introduce London and are placed at the centre of the shot, while Buckingham Palace and public phone boxes are setting elements of scenes in which something else happens. Nevertheless, there are even less explicit elements that indirectly act on the spectator's mind. This is the case of some objects commonly associated to English culture such as the teapot which features several times in the film, even if as part of the setting, and the duffle coat given to Paddington by the Browns representing his belonging to the family. Going deeper into images, meanings get even less explicit and some inferences have to be made to perceive elements from the British background, like for example, the license plate of the taxi which reads 'CAB-8IE', where the number '8' is meant as the 'b' of 'cabbie': the common name for taxi drivers in London. Even though the plate shows a high degree of informational value and salience, being illuminated and placed at the centre of a shot,

the same inference cannot be easily made by a non-English speaker. This last point is strictly connected with the challenge of the translator that precisely concerns his or her proficiency in managing the co-occurrence of language and pictures in an attempt to reduce, as far as possible, the loss of information in the dubbed version.

3. Dubbing Britishness

Translation effectiveness of both language and pictures is the central point of the comparative analysis between the English and the Italian version of *Paddington*. By looking at the source and target dialogues, Britishness is slightly modified in the passage from the English to the Italian text in terms of humour, stereotypes and culture-bound elements. Nevertheless, changes in humour are mainly found through the analysis of the visual channel, while stereotypes such as sayings about the weather and other culture-bound elements are investigated in terms of dialogues. The translation choices in the Italian dubbed version of *Paddington*[29] show that literal translation[30] is the most used strategy as is clear from the following examples:

Timeline	ST	TT	Translation choice
5:13	AUNT LUCY: Real brolly-buster, isn't it?	Tempo da spaccaombrelli, non trova?	Calque
11:27	PADDINGTON: Good morning, really tipping it down, isn't?	Buongiorno butta acqua a più non può, vero?	Literal translation
13:38	PADDINGTON: Coming down in stair rods, isn't it?	Sta piovendo a vagonate, non è cosi?	Discursive creation
24:36	PADDINGTON: Nice weather for the ducks!	Bel tempo per le anatre.	Literal translation
24:54	PADDINGTON: it has rained, poured.	ha piovuto a dirotto,	Omission + TL equivalent
24:56	PADDINGTON: [it] drizzled...	a secchiate...	Discursive creation
24:57	PADDINGTON: ...and chucked it down.	...a vagonate e a cani e gatti.	Literal translation + addition of a calque

[29] The Italian translation provided in the table is a transcription of the dialogues of the Italian dubbed movie.
[30] Rica Peromingo, pp. 43-71.

The expression *a dirotto* is the only Italian idiom about the weather used in the Italian version, while the predominance of literal translation and calques seems to highlight the 'untranslatable' relationship between Londoners and rain by means of expressions which are uncommon in the Italian language such as *a vagonate* or *a cani e gatti*. The latter may reveal the intention of 'foreignizing'[31] the British rain using an expression that sounds strange to an Italian spectator even if it does not occur in the source text. By contrast, discursive creation is used for the expressions 'coming down in stair rods, isn't it?' and 'drizzled'; in the first case the Italian translation conveys the same meaning as the English idiom, while 'drizzled' is translated in such a way as to intensify the meaning of the expression in the TT. Additionally, these examples contain another linguistic element that provide a further connection to British culture: the frequent use of question tags. Although used less frequently in Italian, the English question tags are accurately translated (word-for-word) in the TT where 'isn't it?' becomes *non è vero?/non trova?/non è così?*

The British character of the movie is maintained in the Italian dubbed version also in terms of politeness, as references to English good manners are entirely reported in the target text using a literal or a word-for-word translation, as shown in the following examples:

Timeline	ST	TT	Translation choice
5:04	VOICE ON THE TAPE: It's dusk, and you pass a stranger in the street. Greet him politely.	In strada, quando incroci un estraneo, salutalo educatamente.	Omission + literal translation
9:07	AUNT LUCY: Now take care, my darling. Remember your manners.	Ora stammi bene, tesoro. Ricordati le buone maniere.	Word-for-word translation
11:23	PADDINGTON: Oh, right. Yes, manners. Here goes. Good morning!	Oh giusto. Sì. Le buone maniere. Ci provo. Buon giorno.	Word-for-word translation
14:32	PADDINGTON: Oh, yes, please. If you're sure it's no trouble?	Oh, sì, per favore. Se per voi non è un disturbo.	Word-for-word translation

---

31 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

| 20:02 | PADDINGTON: I beg your pardon? | Come, prego? | TL equivalent |
| 49:43 | PADDINGTON: My aunt taught me to do them when people had forgotten their manners. | Mia zia me lo ha insegnato, quando uno dimentica le buone maniere. | Literal translation |

The Italian line 'come, prego?' is the only case in which the choice of an equivalent expression seems to be more appropriate than literal or word-for-word translation; the purpose is to reproduce in the TT the same effect as the original text.[32]

Nevertheless, some linguistic features linked to the British background are lost as a result of the adaptation to the target culture, such as the unit of measurement that is translated by means of an equivalent in the Italian version, switching from foot to metre:

ST	TT	Translation choice
No, a real one. About three foot six.	No, uno vero. Alto circa un metro.	TL equivalent
He's about three foot six.	È alto circa un metro.	TL equivalent

A further example of adaptation to the Italian culture is the already mentioned duffle coat that in the TT is translated as 'Montgomery'. In Italy the latter is indeed the common way to refer to this item of clothing, after the British Army officer Bernard Law Montgomery who often wore one during World Word II.[33]

It can be said that translation for the purpose of dubbing tends to maintain the British character of the dialogues also in the Italian version, with the exception of some practical issues that are linked to the effective reception of the message by the target audience. The latter indeed includes both adults and children, hence the neutralization of some culture-bound elements aiming to reduce the effort to decode the message.[34]

[32] Rica Peromingo, pp. 43-71; Albir A. Hurtado, *Traducción y traductología* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001) pp. 271-9.

[33] https://www.naticonlacamicia.org/news/un-po-di-storia-del-montgomery.html.

[34] Gian Luigi De Rosa (ed.), *Dubbing Cartoonia* (Napoli: Loffredo, 2010).

4. *Translating the visual channel*

Meanings in the film are constructed using different semiotic modes and a large part of contextual information is inferred by means of the visual channel that often does not need translation in the TT. This is the case of the two black and white scenes occurring in the movie which respectively show a tape recorded in Peru by the explorer Montgomery Clyde and a flashback recalling past events of the explorer's life. While this last case realizes the possibility of expressing different moments on the timeline avoiding verbal explanations, the use of black and white for the tape is used to create a clear contraposition between the 'darkest Peru' of the explorer and the real Peru represented in the immediately following scenes through really vivid colours. With regard to the visual channel, it can be said that images are an effective means to convey part of the source culture in the Italian movie, as shown by those scenes framing typical British objects and reproductions for which translation is not required.

By looking at the translation of humour in *Paddington*, however, it must be remarked that, although the visual channel plays a great role in conveying humour, it is characterized by different degrees of directness affecting the TT reception. Indeed, pictures can transmit a complete meaning (e.g., the scene of the bathroom in which images are the only vehicle to express humour) or to complete the meaning of dialogues and vice versa. The main issue of adapting British humour to Italian audiences concerns, in fact, those scenes in which pictures are completed by words which are meant to be subjected to translation. An example is the scene in which Mrs Brown decides to give an English name to Paddington and, inspired by name of the railway station, immediately says 'Oh it's perfect'. Mr Brown, misunderstanding her thoughts, looks at the ketchup that Paddington is holding and replies 'Do you want to call him Ketchup? Ketchup the bear'. The hilarious effect could not have been possible without the cooperation of words and pictures in the ST as well as in the TT. The same scene offers another example of how humour is produced through the consistency between words and pictures when the little bear tries to eat the ketchup bottle shaped like a tomato and says 'Ah, it's not ripe'. For both lines the Italian translation preserves the humour. However, the original humour weakens in those scenes of the TT where written words, which play a crucial role in the comprehension

of events, are left untranslated. This is an example of what Patrick Zabal-beascoa calls a *visual joke* which

> includes both the entirely 'visual' type, in which the humour is derived solely from what one sees on the screen, and the joke which depends on a combination of words and picture and where the translator can only hope to find some form of compensation in words that will cover the same images, which cannot be altered by convention.[35]

Examples of no translation are the 'lost and found' signs at Paddington Station where 'found' lights up behind the bear only when Mrs Brown offers him her help or the ironical sign 'emergency exit' hung above the door in the bathroom that, even if simple, may have a different effect on a non-English speaker. These two examples, however, represent a minor issue, as they are characterized by a low degree of informational value and salience. In fact, the 'lost and found' sign is a supplement to a scene which is perfectly understandable, while the 'emergency exit' sign adds humour to a scene which is hilarious on its own. A no-translation strategy is also applied to the previously mentioned image of the license plate showing the word 'CAB-8IE'. The coherence between picture and words is here rooted in the British cultural background representing a troubling issue for the translators who leave the reference to London taxi drivers untranslated. In light of this example, it can be argued that less explicit references to British culture, like the reference to Mary Poppins and the complaints about the police, seem to remain undetectable in the TT. This is an example of what Zabalbeascoa defines 'incoherence' between the image and the translation which does not provide subtitles or visual changes.[36]

Different translation strategies are used for the scene representing Paddington travelling on the underground for the first time (33:54). Here the comic effect is obtained by means of signs ('Dogs must be carried' and 'Stand on the right') and Paddington's misunderstanding of these signs. Unlike the abovementioned examples, these signs are subtitled with the purpose of preserving the humour of the original scene, even causing a loss of directness and spontaneity in the Italian version. Nonetheless, the

---

[35] Patrick Zabalbeascoa, 'Factors in Dubbing Television Comedy,' in *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, vol. 1, ed. Henrik Gottlieb, Cay Dollerup and Viggo Hjornager Pedersen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1994), p. 97.
[36] Zabalbeascoa, 'The Nature of the Audiovisual Text,' p. 31.

presence of icons accompanying the signs, the reaction of the bear that stands on his right leg on the escalators holding a dog and the choice of *I Got You (I Feel Good)* as background music make the non-anglophone audience partially perceive the hilarity of the scene even without the need of subtitles. In this context, a further example is the scene in which Paddington enters the Browns' house for the first time after his arrival in London and Mr Brown clarifies that the authorities are responsible for housing the bear in a government facility (18:05). His son, Jonathan, appears evidently worried about his father's words, that are promptly softened and literally translated in the Italian text:

Timeline	ST	TT
18:56	JONATHAN: What? Like an orphanage?	JONATHAN: Cosa? Tipo un orfanotrofio?
19:02	MR BROWN: No, no, no, not an orphanage it would be more like an institution for young souls whose parents have sadly passed on.	MR BROWN: No, no, no. Non un orfanotrofio. Sarebbe più un istituto per giovani anime i cui genitori sono, ahimé, trapassati.

Jonathan's and Mr Brown's words are immediately followed by scary inscriptions ('orphanage' and 'institution for young souls whose parents have sadly passed on') which give a visual representation of the terrifying images popping up in Jonathan's mind while hearing his father. The tragicomic effect of the inscription 'orphanage' turned into an 'institution for young souls whose parents have sadly passed on' is reproduced in the TT by means of subtitles. Nevertheless, the presence of sound effects gives the Italian audience an idea of what these images represent even before reading the subtitles.

To conclude, the account of the translation choices used for the Italian version of *Paddington* has highlighted that the loss in terms of Britishness is mainly due to differences related to the audience's cultural background and that the cooperation of visual and acoustic channels only partially compensates this loss in the TT.

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it could be argued that audiovisual translation offers itself as a potential vehicle of cultural exchange. Nevertheless, the comparison between the English and the Italian version of *Padding-*

ton has shown Britishness in the movie as a social construct that may acquire different meanings in the target culture, since the process of translation is unable to affect the cultural perception of the receiving system. In fact, while the ST seems to aim at proposing a satire of the British lifestyle and social problems with a powerful use of British humour, the TT provides a funny depiction of British life, telling the story of a sui generis family that adopts a bear in chaotic London, ironically reinforcing common stereotypes. In other words, while the British audience has perceived *Paddington* as a satirical self-portrait, being aware of the inconsistency of some stereotypes, the Italian audience has probably strengthened those stereotypes missing some important links to the British cultural background. It must, then, be pointed out that natives' consciousness[37] is deeply rooted in cultural and social customs and practices which may be hard to consider on the part of the foreign audience. Thus, translation is a process through which cultural identities can be formed, represented and changed.[38]

From a socio-cultural perspective, this article has mapped how different modes are used to convey information and has shown how the same semantic resources may acquire different meanings depending on the receiving context. Nonetheless, the multimodal analysis conducted for the investigation of linguistic and cultural loss in audiovisual translation may serve as a starting point towards further investigations on interlinguistic and intercultural adaptation.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

Bateman, John, *Multimodality and Genre: A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Bond, Michael, *A Bear Called Paddington* (London: Collins, 1958).

De Rosa, Gian Luigi (ed.), *Dubbing Cartoonia* (Napoli: Loffredo, 2010).

Halliday, M.A.K., *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

Hofstede, Geert, Gert J. Hofstede and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw Hill, 2010).

[37] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
[38] Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 67-87.

Hope, Christopher, 'Police Officers Prefer Warmth of Police Station to Catching Criminals,' *The Telegraph*, 31 December 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/6916946/Police-officers-prefer-warmth-of-police-station-to-catching-criminals.html.

Hurtado, Albir Amparo, *Traducción y traductología* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001).

Kress, Gunther, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images* (London: Routledge, 2006).

———, 'What is Mode?,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis,* ed. Jewitt Carey (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 60-75.

Mary Poppins, movie, directed by Robert Stevenson (United States: Walt Disney, Buena Vista Distribution, 1964).

Mead, Rebecca, '*Paddington* Perfectly Captures a Particular English Sensibility,' *The New Yorker*, 23 January 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/paddington-perfectly-captures-particular-english-sensibility.

Mills, Sara, 'Language, Culture and Politeness,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*, ed. Farzad Sharifian (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 129-40.

'Nati con la camicia,' https://www.naticonlacamicia.org/news/un-po-di-storia-del-montgomery.html.

O'Halloran, Kay L. (ed.), *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic-functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2004).

Paddington, movie, directed by Paul King (United Kingdom: StudioCanal UK, 2014).

Pedersen, Jan, 'High Felicity: A Speech Act Approach to Quality Assessment in Subtitling,' in *Between Text and Image: Updating Research in Screen Translation*, ed. Delia Chiaro, Christine Heiss and Chiara Buccaria (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), pp. 101-6.

Rica Peromingo, Juan P., *Aspectos lingüísticos y técnicos de la traducción audiovisual (TAV)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

Starns, Penny E. and Martin L. Parsons, 'The Use and Abuse of British Children during the Second World War,' in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 266-78.

Stöckl, Hartmut, 'In between Modes: Language and Images in Printed Media,' in *Perspectives on Multi-modality,* eds. Eija Ventola, Charles Cassily and Martin Kaltenbacher (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), pp. 9-30.

———, 'The Language-image Text. Theoretical and Analytical Inroads into Semiotic Complexity,' *Arbeit aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik – AAA* 34, 2 (2009): pp. 203-26.

Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

———, *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Zabalbeascoa, Patrick, 'Factors in Dubbing Television Comedy,' in *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, vol. 1, ed. Henrik Gottlieb, Cay Dollerup and Viggo Hjornager Pedersen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1994), pp. 89-100.

———, 'The Nature of the Audiovisual Text and its Parameters,' in *The Didactics of Audiovisual Translation,* ed. Jorge Díaz-Cintas (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 21-39.

Zahra, Tara, *The Lost Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2011).

FROM VELVET GOLDMINE *TO* THE HAPPY PRINCE*: PORTRAYING OSCAR WILDE'S OUTSIDENESS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA*

Pierpaolo Martino

Oscar Wilde acknowledged the truth and relevance of masks not only in art but also (and most importantly) in everyday life. His was a theatrical approach to life, which famously turned his existence into a work of art. Today, the strength of Wilde's life and work resides in its capacity to easily translate into non-literary modes: music, visual arts, cinema (languages which are generally perceived as working outside the realm of literature). This very link has also emerged in a number of films produced in the last two decades. In this connection, Todd Haynes's 1998 *Velvet Goldmine* features two kinds of Wildean performance, or reproduction: the character of Oscar Wilde, as well as a number of other male characters, moving within the world of 1970s British glam culture, who because of their interest in artifice, gender-bending and self-construction, can be considered, 'of the Oscar Wilde sort'. In the film, the infant Wilde is significantly brought to earth on a glittering spaceship that moves like a shooting star, for Haynes considered Wilde's genius to be so otherworldly that it could only be extra-terrestrial. Interestingly, in the heritage-obsessed 1990s Todd Haynes's film celebrated Wilde's outsideness, in relation to Victorian culture, rewriting him as the first pop idol of British history. At a different level Rupert Everett's recent film *The Happy Prince* (2018) recounts Wilde's outsideness focusing on his last days as a pariah and an exile, first in France and then in Italy. Everett rewrites Wilde, starting from the very years and experiences which are usually left outside conventional narratives on him. These very experiences will turn Wilde into Saint Oscar, the first homosexual martyr of history. Everett's film focuses on Oscar's magnificent fall, portraying the alterity of a writer whose very outsideness could stand as a lens through which to read and deconstruct our (identity-obsessed and self-centred) age.

Oscar Wilde; Rupert Everett; Todd Haynes; Biopic; Glam

Oscar Wilde acknowledged the *truth* and relevance of masks not only in art but also (and most importantly) in everyday life. Wilde's was a theatrical approach to life, which famously turned his existence into a work of art. Today, the strength of Wilde's life and work resides in its capacity to easily translate into non-literary modes: music, visual arts, cinema; languages which are generally perceived as working *outside* the realm of

literature. This very link has also emerged, as we will see, in a number of films produced in the three last decades, which have variously pointed towards Wilde's iconicity.

It is important to stress how Wilde's iconicity implies a kind of double articulation based on a complex discourse involving past and present. Addressing Wilde in terms of icon implies, first of all, referring to him in terms of 'a person [...] regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration'.[1] There is, undoubtedly, a religious aspect connected with Wilde's iconicity, which today brings admirers to worship both his image and the many dimensions connected to that very image; it is possible to speak, indeed, of a Wilde cult; his image and his epigrams are everywhere on posters, t-shirts, album covers.

According to Rojek, 'as modern society developed, celebrities have filled the absence created by the decay in the popular belief in the divine rights of kings, and the death of God'.[2] In short, in coincidence with the emergence of consumerism the belief in God waned and celebrities became immortal; Rojek makes reference to such icons as John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, addressing them in terms of 'idols of cult worship', idols whose fame is also connected to a tragic dimension, something which, of course, also happens with Wilde. Interestingly, Terry Eagleton entitled a play focusing on Wilde's life *Saint Oscar*,[3] a title which, besides projecting towards the tragic epilogue of Wilde's parable – which, as we will see, is at the centre of the most recent biopic on him – also makes reference to a trend in gay studies and in gay culture in general to see Wilde as the first homosexual martyr of history; something which, if on the one hand it can offer a restrictive view on Wilde's *outsideness,* on the other, through the concept of martyrdom, seems to connect to Wilde's *construction* of himself in *De Profundis*, where the author somehow emerges in terms of a Christ-like figure, as a saint and sinner asking for forgiveness. It is important nonetheless to stress how, in his own time, Wilde was, as Kaye puts it, 'the most self-conscious marketer of his own image';[4] like many postmodern pop icons, he cleverly constructed his status within society with the intention of selling himself and translat-

---

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary, Concise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 704.
[2] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), pp. 13-14.
[3] Terry Eagleton, *Saint Oscar and Other Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
[4] Richard A. Kaye, 'Gay Studies/Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde,' in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Fredrik S. Roden (London: Palgrave, 2004), p. 193.

ing his life and art into economic success; Gagnier insists, in this sense, on the dialogic relationship that Wilde's work takes up with other discourses of a society that was turning art into a commodity.[5] But Wilde's iconicity also (and, in a way, most interestingly) relates to the author's after-life. Wilde not only became a celebrity in his own time, but *wrote* and performed a script which – through a number of cultural appropriations and performances – gave him iconic status in today's popular culture.

In a study entitled *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde. A Cultural Afterlife*, Julia Wood notes how although the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has always commanded interest and fascination, 'it has been since the mid-1990s that there has been a revaluation of Wilde's cultural legacy, as well as a re-examination of public feeling towards him'.[6] During the 1990s there was, indeed, a multitude of events, and publications – books, but also films and music – commemorating the centenary dates of Wilde's life, which in between the two millenniums was to become a paradigm of otherness, that is of difference and resistance to the Foucaultian order of discourse, a paradigm to be performed in a number of different contexts. Interestingly, these performances also took place within the end of the century's fascination for (and 'consumption' of) British heritage films, a process which in a way turned *Oscar Wilde* into a (film industry) commodity; yet in Wilde's discourse this very form of consumerism was also able to activate critical processes, that is spaces of re-articulation of Wilde's paradigm of outsideness. In this connection, Todd Haynes's 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine* features two kinds of Wildean performance, or reproduction:[7] the character of Oscar Wilde, as well as a number of other male characters, moving within the world of 1970s' British glam culture, who because of their interest in artifice, gender-bending and self-construction, can be considered, quoting the E.M. Foster of *Maurice*, 'of the Oscar Wilde sort.'[8]

---

[5] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

[6] Julia Wood, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde. A Cultural Afterlife* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2007), p. 8.

[7] Francesca Coppa, 'Performance Theory and Performativity,' in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (London: Palgrave, 2004), p. 89. As Coppa observes 'Wilde was the first to perform "Oscar Wilde" but he wouldn't be the last', indeed, *Velvet Goldmine*'s male characters are 'in some way playing out a Wildean script'; according to Coppa, 'Wilde's life was a "production" [...] – since a production takes the textual past and makes it mean anew, makes newly relevant to *us*, makes it speak to *us*, in our terms' (p. 87).

[8] E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (London: Arnold, 1971).

In a recent study Simon Reynolds, investigating the complexity of the glam phenomenon, notes how glam describes, first of all, 'a sensibility, a spirit of the age that emerged around the start of the 1970s and flourished for about four years, before petering out shortly prior to the punk explosion'.[9] One of glam's most distinctive features is, according to Reynolds:

> The sheer self-consciousness with which the glam artists embraced aspects like costume, theatrics and the use of props, which often verged on a parody of glamour rather than its straightforward embrace. Glam rock drew attention to itself as fake. Glam performers were despotic, dominating the audience [...] But they also often engaged in a kind of mocking self-deconstruction of their own personae and poses, sending up the absurdity of performance.[10]

Glamsters – and more specifically artists such as Bowie, Marc Bolan, Gary Glitter, Suzi Quatro, Roxy Music – constructed (for themselves) a hybrid gender identity using very specific visual signs. Fashion of course played a central part in this very process of construction. As Clover observes 'glam co-opted fashion before fashion could co-opt it, making the idea of the real seem ridiculous';[11] in a sense, glam invented a style, did not simply adopt one (as, for instance, Mods did). Ironic make-up, glittery clothes, dyed hair, platform shoes were some of the most glamorous signs which were each time combined in fresh and unpredictable ways, ironically responding to the music.

In Haynes's film, the infant Wilde is brought to earth on a glittering spaceship that moves like a shooting star, for Haynes considered Wilde's genius, indeed, to be so otherworldly that it could *only* be extra-terrestrial. Significantly, in the following scene set in a Victorian school, each boy announces what he wants to be when he grows up: among avowals such as 'I want to be a doctor' and 'I want to be a barrister,' the young Wilde stands out when he declares, 'I want to be a pop idol.' Then the film jumps a hundred years forward to investigate the mysterious disappearance of glam-rock star Brian Slade, a fictional equivalent of 1970s' icon David Bowie. What seems particularly interesting in young Wilde's enunciation is his desire/determination to construct himself *as* 'a pop idol' that is to stage that specific *persona*.

---

[9] Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe. Glam Rock and its Legacy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), pp. 2-3.

[10] Simon Reynolds, pp. 3-4.

[11] Joshua Clover, 'Fables of the Self-Construction. A Users Guide to Velvet Goldmine,' *Spin* 14 (1998): pp. 92-9.

In the heritage-obsessed[12] 1990s – which very often experienced the success of biopics based on a conservative idea of history as a simplified model of great individuals, providing a coherent version of identity,[13] strongly at odds with postmodern views of the self as instable and 'fictional' – Todd Haynes's film celebrated Wilde's outsideness, in relation to Victorian culture, rewriting him as a postmodern icon and as the first pop idol of British history.[14] *Velvet Goldmine* is an extremely complex film – recalling Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*[15] – focusing on three (main) male characters: journalist Arthur Stuart, who in the early 1908s, doing some research for an article commissioned by his newspaper, finds himself investigating the abrupt and mysterious retirement of a glam rock star; singer Brian Slade (whose life is investigated by Stuart) and American rock icon Curt Wild (who initiates to homosexual love both Slade and Stuart). With the Curt Wild character Haynes pays a tribute to Iggy Pop (an influential figure for UK glam culture) and of course to Wilde himself.

As it is known, Wilde's brilliant conversation, love of beauty and dandyish pose had turned him into a very special actor within London's society; in this sense he was undoubtedly a forerunner of Pop as an artistic space in which the artist's image is central to the construction of

---

[12] British heritage films produced in the 1980s and 1990s – following a trend started by Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981) – show a tendency to articulate, as Higson puts it, 'a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes'. In short, the heritage films, which very often portray the white community in a semi-rural Southern England – avoid addressing the social and racial diversity of a changing Britain. In doing so, those films reinvent 'an England that no longer existed [...] as something fondly remembered and desirable'. Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12. See also Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London, BFI Publishing, 1999).

[13] Hila Shachar, *Screening the Author. The Literary Biopic* (London: Palgrave, 2019), p. 3.

[14] Michael Bracewell, *England Is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London: Harper-Collins, 1997).

[15] Welles's cult film opens with Kane – a wealthy newspaper publisher and industrial magnate – on his deathbed, uttering the word, 'Rosebud', before dying. A news obituary tells the life story of Kane, whose death becomes sensational news around the world, and the newsreel's producer tasks reporter Jerry Thompson with discovering the meaning of 'Rosebud'. Thompson sets out to interview Kane's friends and associates. He tries to approach his wife, Susan, then goes to the private archive of the late banker Thatcher, then interviews Kane's personal business manager, Mr Bernstein and estranged best friend, Jedediah Leland. Thompson concludes that he is unable to solve the mystery and that the meaning of Kane's last word will forever remain an enigma. What the viewer is offered are a series of fragments, pieces of a puzzle to put together. In a very similar fashion in *Velvet Goldmine* Haynes tries through a complex juxtaposition of images, stories and sounds to compose a filmic portrait of glam-star Brian Slade.

success. More specifically, Wilde's was an attempt to construct an alternative discourse on masculinity, which sharply contrasted with the rational, Western, imperial one so fashionable in Victorian England. As Alan Sinfield notes:

> Wilde's principal male characters do look and sound like the mid-twentieth century stereotype of the queer man. They are effete, camp, leisured or aspiring to be, aesthetic, amoral, witty, insouciant, charming, spiteful, dandified. If these characters are not offered as homosexual (and generally they are pursuing women characters), the whole ambience reeks, none the less, of queerness. Or rather, it does for us. And so does Wilde himself.[16]

Sinfield notes how Wilde's contemporaries 'didn't see queerness in the way we have come to see it […] Wilde was perceived as effeminate, to be sure; but not thereby as queer'.[17] The term effeminacy, up until Wilde, did not mean being womanish, and consequently desiring men, but rather spending too much time *on* and *with* women, and consequently not being sufficiently occupied with proper manly pursuits. Wilde was obsessed with fashion and interior design and he adored stars such as Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtree, who, in their time, were the equivalent of today's pop celebrities; most importantly, in 1887 Wilde became editor of *The Woman's World* which, thanks to contributions from prominent women writers, activists and actresses, tried to change conventional attitudes to women's history and women's life. In short, Wilde was displaying and supporting effeminacy in ways potentially threatening to the establishment. In an article entitled 'The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and "Modern" Women', Stetz notes how Wilde was capable of moving freely between male and female environments; he regularly attended universities, offices, clubs but also women's drawing rooms and workplaces.[18]

Interestingly, in *Masculinity and Culture*, John Beynon contrasts Wilde with Eugene Sandow, who in the 1890s began to publish books on physical training which attracted a considerable readership. Whereas Sandow 'stood for normal masculinity and the improvement of the national and racial stock Wilde represented the abnormal and was the living embod-

---

[16] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. vi.
[17] Sinfield, p. vii.
[18] Margaret D. Stetz, 'The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and "Modern Women",' *Nineteenth Century Literature* 55, 4 (2001): pp. 515-37.

iment of the debauched'.[19] In this sense, Wilde's humiliation was often considered a victory for imperial masculinity and, by implication, for national and imperial health. Yet the twentieth century will witness the crisis of the British Empire and of the kind of masculinity associated with it. Paradoxically, the *defeat*, that is the death of Wilde coincides with the beginning of a century which will imply the defeat of the Empire and the full emergence of Wilde's legacy, and in particular of his performative paradigm of masculinity as something absolutely *escaping* and capable of questioning the Victorian heavily normative approach to gender.

In his book Beynon also identifies a very strong link between Wilde and glam culture:

> In thinking of 'masculinity-as-enactment' it must be remembered that those who do not perform their masculinity in a culturally approved manner are liable to be ostracized, even punished. For example, in the nineteenth century avant-garde artists and bohemians like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley contradicted, eugenistic definitions of masculinity. Similarly, the rock stars of the 1960s and 1970s (from the androgynous David Bowie to the butch Gary Glitter) repeatedly challenged accepted notions of 'the masculine'.[20]

This very link and challenge powerfully emerge, as we anticipated, in *Velvet Goldmine* and is signalled through a cinematic choice which seems interestingly to connect with the world of Wilde's fairy-tales. In the film, indeed, we find a magical object which seems to possess extraordinary powers; it is the large glowing green brooch which is pinned to infant Wilde's swaddling clothes. After the sequence in which a very young Oscar gives voice to his desire to become a pop idol the film jumps to the mid-twentieth century where another young schoolboy – Jack Fairy, who in the film stands for homosexuality – finds Wilde's green brooch half buried in a playground. Wilde's magical object is then stolen from Fairy by Brian Slade, who gives it to his lover Curt Wild (who wears the jewel on the collar of his beat-up leather jacket) who in his turn at the end of the film passes it on the journalist himself. As Coppa observes, all these male characters are 'in their way, incarnations, or should we say productions – of the alien sensibility that first fell to earth with Wilde'.[21]

---

[19] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 44.
[20] Beynon, p. 1.
[21] Coppa, p. 90. On Wilde and performance see also Heather Marcowitch, *The Art of the Pose. Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

Another sign of Wilde's centrality in the film is represented by the inclusion of a number of his epigrams in the script. In one of the most grotesque scenes of the film – which, in a way, also stands as a re-production of Wilde's trials – Brian Slade wearing a shiny gold top hat is cross-examined by a number of journalists; one of them asks him about Slade's musical alter ego Maxwell Demon, an alien and a rock messiah who is killed by his own success. Slade answers him quoting a famous epigram included in Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' (1891): 'man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'.[22] Not only *Velvet Goldmine*, but the glam phenomenon as a whole is in truth a story of masks, of artificial identities, constructed, that is, performed – both at the visual level (through the use of ironic makeup, glittery clothes, platform shoes) and at the musical one through the reintroduction of irony and musical transvestitism – in order to question any rigid and exclusivist approaches to art and gender in culture, in a modality which, of course, powerfully connects with Wilde's aesthetics.

In Haynes's film, Slade's story becomes, in short, a filmic translation of the existential/musical adventure of Bowie as Ziggy Stardust.[23] As Bowie did with Ziggy, Slade stages the murder of his alter-ego Maxwell Demon during a concert; but this very choice has the effect of alienating his fans. It is important to stress how in the film the 1970s are described and re-*constructed* through the personal memories of Arthur Stuart – a glam enthusiast – and through the memories and stories of two characters he interviews, Slade's wife and his first producer. Through Stuart's investigations we discover that Slade's mysterious disappearance (after Demon's fake murder during his last concert) conceals his metamorphosis into Tommy Stone: glam's subversive hero has in short become the author of mainstream songs and the incarnation of a normal and normative masculinity. Interestingly, Coppa sees in this transformation a form of (Wildean) Bunburying – with the Jack/Earnest double identity turning into the Brian/Tommy one – which however 'is chronological rather than geographical. Here, [indeed] it's not a matter of being Jack in the country and Ernest in the city; rather we are given a man who is "Brian

---

[22] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist,' in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 1142.
[23] See Peter Doggett, *The Man Who Sold the World. David Bowie and the 1970s* (London: Vintage, 2012).

Slade" in the 1970s and "Tommy Steele" in the 1980s'.[24] If Haynes seems particularly interested in investigating the Slade-Bowie parallel making an indirect reference to Bowie's 1980s commercial (and for some fans disappointing) turn, the very moment of Stuart's discovery, that is 1984, allows us to create a connection with another cult writer, George Orwell and with his iconic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), a work which interestingly will inspire one of Bowie's best efforts, namely his 1974 album *Diamond Dogs.*

In his film Haynes also highlights some limits of the glam experience, a gender revolution in which women often played the role of simple spectators. This is what happens to Slade's wife (a filmic counterpart of Bowie's first wife Angie), who in the first part of the film is portrayed as co-protagonist of the most successful moment of Slade's career, only to be progressively marginalized. As Kaye observes, 'the film concedes that women sometimes lose out in sexual revolutions: years after the collapse of her marriage to Brian, we see his ex-wife in a darkened bar as she is interviewed by another "survivor" Arthur. She seems subdued, foggy about her ex-husband's whereabouts and about what he meant to her'.[25]

The film is a journey not only in the 1970s but also into Stuart's consciousness. Re-constructing the early years of the decade he discovers the centrality played by glam in his adolescence, which Haynes recounts through a number of fascinating sequences: from Arthur's first experiments in transvestism to the ecstasy experienced listening to an album by Slade while watching the image of his hero on the cover's album, to his enchantment listening to a teacher at school reading excerpts from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to the many conflicts with his parents who are unable to understand Arthur's inner turmoil. In truth, glam has deeply affected the young boy; as a mature journalist he seems to be still inhabited by that world, something which nourishes his restlessness and his inability to deal with his present. One of the film's most iconic moments is represented by Arthur's meeting with Curt Wild in the 1980s; disappointed by Slade's commercial turn he sees in Wild a living and powerful embodiment of the *glittery* world he had so loved; it is Curt Wild himself who gives him the brooch which belonged to Oscar Wilde (which had been a gift from Slade). In this sense, the film becomes a circular journey, its ending brings us to where we started, thanks to a magical object

[24] Coppa, p. 90.
[25] Kaye, p. 219.

which represents the irreducible Wildean alterity and outsideness Stuart finally embraces.

Stuart's investigations and inner quest represent in short a possibility of re-appropriation and re-articulation of an experience – that of glam (but also of Wilde himself) – whose sense and meaning becomes today particularly relevant, offering a model for the performance of a new paradigm of masculinity based on irony, decentring and self-invention, *outside* the imperatives of the order of discourse.

At a different level Rupert Everett's very recent film *The Happy Prince* (2018) recounts Wilde's *outsideness* focusing on his last days as a fallen star, that is, as a pariah and exile, first in France and then in Italy. Interestingly, Everett rewrites Wilde starting from the very years and experiences usually left outside conventional narratives on him. For instance, Ken Hughes's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) had Oscar – interestingly played by Peter Finch with an Irish accent – coolly refusing to speak to Bosie on the railway station platform before he headed off to his unimaginable future, while Brian Gilbert's acclaimed film *Wilde* (1997) ended after a sentimental embrace between the reunited Oscar (famously played by Stephen Fry) and Bosie in Naples. As it is known, Gilbert's 1997 biopic – based on Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography – was one of the most successful British films of the late 1990s; here Stephen Fry played Oscar in a performance which exceeded the screen to become a kind of visual reincarnation of Wilde for the late 1990s.[26] As Wood herself observes in the late 1990s,

> The image of Stephen Fry became sufficiently associated with Wilde's that the two figures were discussed in conjunction, as if they were the same person. In terms of the mourning urge, the substitute or surrogate Wilde, satiated the

[26] In this sense, in 1998 a bronze memorial named *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde*, sculpted by Maggi Hambling, was unveiled in Adelaide Street by Stephen Fry himself. Inscribed with Wilde's famous epigram words: 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars', the memorial depicts him rising from a granite sarcophagus. The idea, as Hambling said, is that he is rising, talking, laughing, smoking from this sarcophagus and the passer by, should he or she choose to, can sit on the sarcophagus and have a conversation with him' (Laura Reynolds, 'Is the Oscar Wilde Memorial a Bench?', *Londonist*, 1 November 2016, https://londonist.com/2015/07/is-the-oscar-wilde-memorial-a-bench). Interestingly, the idea of a permanent memorial was suggested by the late gay film director Derek Jarman. Several prominent figures, including former Labour leader Michael Foot, leading actress Dame Judi Dench and Irish poet Seamus Heaney, supported the cause. The unveiling also saw Dame Judi Dench and Nigel Hawthorne reading an extract from his work *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).

demand for an incarnation of Wilde. Fry, in fact, answered the need for a figure who could play Wilde, not merely on stage or in film, but continually, upon the stage of the centenary.[27]

Besides the physical resemblance Fry also shared Wilde's eclectic approach to writing: he wrote novels, plays (1980 *Latin! Or Tobacco and Boys*), autobiography and worked for television and cinema (not only as an actor, but also as a director of cult films such as 2003 *Bright Young Things*, adapted by him after Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*).

Nevertheless, as Tanitch observes in his encyclopaedic work *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*:

> Fry had a physical similarity to Wilde but not the emotional range as an actor to manage the hubris at the end. He tones Wilde down. There was no flamboy-ance, no energy, no sparkle. He was gentle, shy and softly spoken, a sad, some-what detached Oscar, who identified with *The Selfish Giant*.[28]

In short, *Wilde* was a film which perfectly fitted the late 1990s British heritage trend in which cultural products were very often thought for an easy, pleasant form of consumption; as French wrote in *The Observer*, 'for all its sexual frankness, *Wilde* is a discreet work that amuses and moves us, but never shocks or disturbs'.[29] Buckton points in this sense to the continuity between *Wilde* and the string of adaptations of his literary texts in the following years – namely, *An Ideal Husband* (with two 1999 versions directed respectively by Parker and Cartlidge), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002) and *Dorian Gray* (2009) – noting how this embracing 'of Wilde by mainstream cinema has come to the cost of sacrificing the most cryptic, transgressive aspects of his depiction of sexual identity'.[30] And yet in a short article entitled 'Playing Oscar' Fry himself – besides speaking about his lifelong obsession with Wilde and how he prepared to play him – declared that 'Wilde's courage lay not in his "alternative sexuality" but in the freedom of his mind'.[31] That freedom is undoubtedly a very precious legacy left by Wilde for the centuries to come.

[27] Wood, p. 105.
[28] Robert Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen, 1999), pp. 72-3.
[29] Tanitch, p. 73.
[30] Oliver S. Buckton, 'Wilde Life: Oscar on Film', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, eds Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 354.
[31] Stephen Fry, 'Playing Oscar', in Oscar Wilde, *Nothing… Except my Genius* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. xix.

Commenting on Hughes's and especially Fry's films Everett insists, nevertheless, on how watching these films we are not able to look at what society really did to Oscar Wilde, in terms of punishment, both in prison with hard labour, and after prison, in exile, which in a way could be considered another form of imprisonment. In this sense, Everett's idea of the last great vagabond of the late nineteenth century, the celebrity, famous for being famous, the pop idol on the skids,[32] becomes a very potent and poignant story to try to address, which perfectly complements Haynes's narrative about Wilde's self-invention as a pop icon and of the fall of glam stars such as Brian Slade.

In his film, Everett takes us through the devastating horror of poverty and humiliation, which however Wilde faces with gallows humour and wit. In this sense, in one of the first sequences of the film we see him vomiting in agony on his deathbed before declaiming: 'Encore du champagne!' Here the director has clearly been influenced by Peter Ackroyd's 1983 novel *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and by David Hare's 1998 stage play *The Judas Kiss*,[33] in whose 2012 revival, directed by Neil Armfield, Wilde was played by Everett himself. It is worth noting here how Hare's play focuses on Wilde's days immediately before the arrest and after his release from Reading Gaol. One of the most quoted passages from *De Profundis* is used by Hare as the very last paragraph of *The Judas Kiss*, as it represents the perfect synthesis of the life and meaning of a cultural icon, of a celebrity whose failure and fall gave birth to the myth of the outsider, of the loser, of the artist who by learning to say 'no', turned art into a better place to live, within a postmodern present, which sadly appears as a long, never ending trial against the rights to difference and dissent:

> All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death; and three times have I been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the house of detention, the third time to pass into a prison for two years. Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over

---

[32] Steve Prokopy, 'Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince', Third Coast Review, 29 October 2018,* https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/10/29/film-interview-rupert-everett/.

[33] David Hare, *The Judas Kiss* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998).

my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.[34]

Passages such as these make it clear that *De Profundis* is not just a confessional letter, but Wilde's last great literary performance; in a way even in his last, very difficult days, Wilde, the lifelong performer and man of theatre, found a new world to perform to, where the stars were rent boys, petty thieves and street urchins. He was endlessly being cited for extraordinary empathy with people, apart from being an incredible snob, as well. Indeed, Wilde's most interesting feature is his liminality, his capacity never to take sides and to reject a fixed, centralizing frame of mind, which amounts to a resistance to the irreconcilability of opposite and contradictory realities.[35]

The film's narrative also shows how the charm of Oscar Wilde was his humanity; the cult writer had some of the bad traits most of us, as human beings, have, that is snobbery, greed, vanity and egomania, but he got caught out for it. As Everett himself notes, many people desire to throw themselves over the edge, but most of them have a natural constraint and natural borders before going that far, putting themselves back; Oscar Wilde for some reason, didn't.[36] In this sense, commenting on the film – and comparing it to screen portrayals by Morley, Finch and Stephen Fry – Merlin Holland affirmed how Everett's can be considered probably the most fascinating of the biopics on his grandfather. Where Gilbert's film was very intellectual, in keeping with Stephen Fry's character, Everett's is mostly emotional.[37] If it is true that in Wilde there is both the intellectual and the emotional, at this stage of his life, the author is living on what is left of his emotions, and that is exactly what Everett excels in conveying.

In the film, Everett is both director and main actor of Wilde's drama. As Bradshaw observes 'that of Wilde is a part Everett was born to play, and he does it with exactly the right kind of poignantly ruined magnificence'.[38] Besides, Everett can also be defined an outsider in the world

---

[34] Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, ed. Colm Tóibín (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 158-9.
[35] Terry Eagleton, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde,' *The Wildean* 19 (2001): pp. 2-9.
[36] Prokopy, online.
[37] Dalya Alberge, 'Oscar Wilde's Grandson "Terribly Moved" by Rupert Everett's Biopic', *The Guardian,* 5 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland.
[38] Peter Bradshaw, '*The Happy Prince* Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role

of cinema, who suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality.[39] In this sense, the film establishes a fascinating dialogue between two artists and actors who have always been out of the box. Focusing on the director's stylistic choices we should stress how Everett was inspired by what happens when a brain starts collapsing and how it throws off images and ideas and starts playing with a kind of spatial awareness; more specifically, he was really impressed by his father's death,[40] and seeing how his brain was falling apart and it came up with bubbles of memory. There is, indeed, a sort of feverish dimension, a magical, dream-like quality of the film with a room that seems to shrink and expand (with his brain's last memories) as Wilde dies.

One of the most intense scenes of the movie refers to a real event when in Clapham Junction train station Wilde is changing trains on his way to prison and is being yelled at and spat on by others on the platform for thirty minutes. It was the rush hour and the policeman escorting him was just reading the newspaper while this big crowd gathered around him. In a way, what happened is one of the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Wilde's life. A man, who just recently was the most famous, lauded, wanted, author in London, was reduced to being spat on by a crowd of commuters.[41] This is an extremely strong and dramatic episode, which resembles a moment from the passion of Jesus. Experiences and humiliations such as these, suffered by Wilde during the last years of his life will turn him, as we have seen, into *Saint Oscar*, the first homosexual martyr of history. Besides, Wilde's connection with the Queensberry family was at once a gender and a class transgression; in this sense, in another sequence Everett shows Wilde with a portrait of Queen Victoria by his deathbed; he died one year before her, and the film suggests that

as Dying Oscar Wilde', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde.

[39] Mark Brown, 'Rupert Everett Gears up for the Next Chapter: Moving in with his Mum', *The Guardian*, 27 May 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/27/rupert-everett-gears-up-for-the-next-chapter-moving-in-with-his-mum.

[40] Kristen Page-Kirby, 'It Took a Decade for Rupert Everett to Get "The Happy Prince" Made — and in the End, he had to Do it himself', *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2018/10/19/it-took-decade-rupert-everett-get-happy-prince-made-end-he-had-do-it-himself/.

[41] A permanent plaque commemorating Oscar Wilde on Platform 10 at Clapham Junction was unveiled in July 2019 as part of a combined project by Wandsworth LGBTQ+ Forum and Studio Voltaire. David Robson, chairman of Wandsworth LGBTQ+, explained that at a time when people are still under threat because of their sexuality, the plaque would act as a reminder that hate crime is not tolerated in the rail industry.

Wilde's vindictive treatment was part of the ugly sense of shame and mortification at aesthetic indulgence which the manly and masculine slaughter of the first world war was supposed to redeem.

In the script Everett imagines Wilde, in extremis, befriending a young Paris rent boy and his kid brother, holding them spellbound with the story of 'The Happy Prince'. In happier times, he would recite, to his equally entranced sons, this tale of a statue who allows a swallow to denude him of all his gold to feed the poor. The story was included in the collection entitled *The Happy Prince and other Tales* published in May 1888 which was well-received; as Sturgis writes – in his very recent biography of Wilde – at the time of its publication 'there was general recognition that, although there was much for children to enjoy, the stories were likely to appeal rather more to adults'.[42] Walter Pater himself reviewing the collection wrote that 'there is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales',[43] and yet in these stories, which very often involve an ultimate sacrifice on the part of their main characters, the satire seems, as Ellman puts it, to be 'subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales'.[44]

In this sense, as Bradshaw notes, 'in Everett's hands, "The Happy Prince" tale becomes an ambiguous parable for Wilde's passion and (possible) redemption, the unhappy prince who makes a lonely discovery that love is the only thing worth worshipping'.[45] *The Happy Prince* is indeed a story that somehow reflects Wilde: we have a gilded character who is gradually stripped of everything and ends up being thrown on the rubbish heap. And yet, in a sense, even then, as we anticipated, Wilde experienced a different kind of happiness, one which allowed him to retain his irony and humour.

In short, if Wilde's most important work is 'Oscar Wilde', a play of which he was at once author, director and main actor, then what we have in Everett's film is life as *writing*; in a fashion which in a way exceeds the mere idea of storytelling. Every word, every gesture performed by Wilde in his lifetime, and in particular in his later years, articulated a rich semiotic process, which asserts the centrality of the reader/spectator. The film recounts the great drama of Wilde's life constructing the

---

[42] Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019), p. 364.
[43] Karl Beckson, ed. *Oscar Wilde, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 60.
[44] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 282.
[45] Bradshaw, online.

whole narrative on the powerful intertext represented by the story of 'The Happy Prince'; what characterizes Everett's film is, in this sense, the same fairy-tale-like quality informing *Velvet Goldmine.* As a fairy-tale constantly retold by contemporary cinema, Wilde's *life as writing* becomes immortal. In this sense, Wilde the outsider has thanks to these very filmic portrayals become an eternal icon.

It is possible to conclude noting how Everett's film focuses on Oscar's magnificent fall, portraying the alterity of a writer whose very outsideness could stand as a lens through which to read and deconstruct our (success-obsessed and self-centred) age. Wilde famously wrote in *De Profundis:*

> The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a *flâneur*, a dandy, a man of fashion. […] Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both […] I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.[46]

Wilde's fall has become, as we have seen, a source of inspiration for directors and actors such as Haynes, Fry, Everett but also for musicians such as Bowie and Morrissey who using different discourse modes have performed Wilde's paradigm of outsideness, questioning the very idea of polarity inviting us to cross the boundaries between genders, bodies, art forms and most importantly between failure and success.

Bibliography

Alberge, Dalya, 'Oscar Wilde's Grandson "Terribly Moved" by Rupert Everett's Biopic', *The Guardian,* 5 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jun/05/oscar-wilde-grandson-terribly-moved-rupert-everett-biopic-merlin-holland.

Beckson, Karl (ed.), *Oscar Wilde, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970).

Beynon, John, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

Bracewell, Michael, *England Is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

---

[46] Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, p. 100.

Bradshaw, Peter, 'The Happy Prince Review – Rupert Everett is Magnificent in Dream Role as Dying Oscar Wilde', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/22/the-happy-prince-film-review-rupert-everett-oscar-wilde.

Brown, Mark, 'Rupert Everett Gears up for the Next Chapter: Moving in with his Mum', *The Guardian*, 27 May 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/27/rupert-everett-gears-up-for-the-next-chapter-moving-in-with-his-mum

Buckton, Oliver S., 'Wilde Life: Oscar on Film', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, eds Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 347-55.

Clover, Joshua, 'Fables of the Self-Construction. A Users Guide to Velvet Goldmine', *Spin* 14 (1998): pp. 92-9.

Coppa, Francesca, 'Performance Theory and Performativity' in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 72-95.

Doggett, Peter, *The Man Who Sold the World. David Bowie and the 1970s* (London: Vintage, 2012).

Eagleton, Terry, 'The Doubleness of Oscar Wilde', *The Wildean* 19 (2001): pp. 2-9.

———, *Saint Oscar and Other Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987).

Forster, E.M., *Maurice* (London: Arnold, 1971).

Fry, Stephen, 'Playing Oscar' in *Oscar Wilde, Nothing... Except my Genius* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. xix.

Gagnier, Regenia, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

Hare, David, *The Judas Kiss* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998).

Higson, Andrew, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Kaye, Richard A., 'Gay Studies/Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde,' in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Fredrick S. Roden (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 189-223.

Marcowitch, Heather, *The Art of the Pose. Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

Murphy, Robert (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

Page-Kirby, Kristen, 'It Took a Decade for Rupert Everett to Get 'The Happy Prince' Made — and in the End, he had to Do it himself', *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2018/10/19/it-took-decade-rupert-everett-get-happy-prince-made-end-he-had-do-it-himself/.

Prokopy, Steve, 'Interview: What Oscar Wilde Means to Rupert Everett, and the Most Poignant Scene in *The Happy Prince*', *Third Coast Review, 29 October 2018*, https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/10/29/film-interview-rupert-everett/.

Reynolds, Laura, 'Is the Oscar Wilde Memorial a Bench?', *Londonist*, 1 November 2016, https://londonist.com/2015/07/is-the-oscar-wilde-memorial-a-bench.

Reynolds, Simon, *Shock and Awe. Glam Rock and its Legacy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

Rojek, Chris, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

Shachar, Hila, *Screening the Author The Literary Biopic* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

Sinfield, Alan, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994).

Stetz, Margaret D., 'The Bi-Social Oscar Wilde and "Modern Women,"' *Nineteenth Century Literature* 55, 4 (2001): pp. 515-37.

Sturgis, Matthew, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019).

Tanitch, Robert, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen, 1999).

Wilde, Oscar, 'The Critic as Artist,' in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994).

———, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, ed. Colm Tóibín (London: Penguin, 2013).

Wood, Julia, *The Resurrection of Oscar Wilde. A Cultural Afterlife* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2007).

DIS-COVERED. BOOK COVERS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE NARRATIVES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH AND WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS

Luisa Marino

In the Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website, maintained by Daria Tunca of the University of Liège, it is possible to find the most complete and updated list of translations of Adichie's books. A note explains, 'Adichie's work has been translated into more than thirty languages', showing how in the last sixteen years the writer has entered the international literary scenario, neither just as a member of the so-called third generation of Nigerian female writers, nor just as a feminist writer trying to show the limitations of a patriarchal society. Thanks to her books, but also to her ability to use several forms of communications (TED talks, lectures, blogging), Adichie can nowadays be considered a transnational author, whose words can reach heterogeneous audiences and whose narrations can be addressed to very different reading publics through translation. Literary translation is surely one of the most effective ways to make narrations circulate among different linguistic, social and cultural environments, but the publication of a literary translation involves aspects that go beyond the act of repurposing a text into alien languages and cultures. As commodities, and not just as works of art, books are subject to marketing choices that can affect the ways in which readers are confronted with the narratives they presented. Drawing on these premises, the article aims at presenting a general overview of the book covers of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists*, analysing, comparatively, some of the editions in the source language (English) and some translations into Italian and Portuguese. In so doing, it intends to address the role of paratexts in conveying and/or affecting the representations of African women's narratives in some of the literary panoramas that host Adichie's books.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Book Cover; Paratext; Translation; Women's Narratives

> La copertina giusta è come un bel cappotto, elegante e caldo,
> che avvolge le mie parole mentre camminano per il mondo,
> mentre vanno a un appuntamento con i miei lettori.
> Jhumpa Lahiri, *Il Vestito dei Libri*

1. Introduction

At a time when the increasing availability and affordability of e-books and reading devices is introducing a strong component of virtuality in the relationship between books and readers, the exploration of paratexts as a place of 'physical' negotiation between readers and authors has become even more intricate than before.[1] Technology, digital stores, internet advertising and e-commerce have changed the ways in which books are produced and marketed but also the ways in which readers (or potential readers) are confronted with texts and their translations. This means that, in the study of books as both works of art and commodities, the analysis of their paratextual apparatuses will provide scholars further instruments to investigate texts as places in which cultures are constantly (re)discussed. Furthermore, as Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar points out, 'analysing the paratextual elements of translated texts will furnish [scholars] with interesting information on several points where the texts themselves remain silent'.[2] Since a book that enters the book market becomes the representation of the 'cultural ideals and aesthetics of a distinct historical moment',[3] it can offer insights not just on the cultural panorama in which it is produced, but also on the cultural panoramas in which it is 'consumed'.

Considering book covers as the most immediate manifestation of a paratextual apparatus, this chapter aims to present a general overview on the book cover translation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*[4] and *We Should All Be Feminists*.[5] More specifically, it intends to address the role of paratexts in conveying and/or affecting the representations of African women's narratives in some of the literary panoramas

---

[1] Toni Marino, *Il testo provvisorio. La comunicazione paratestuale e i processi di lettura* (Roma: Aracne, 2017), p. 73.

[2] Şehnaz Tahir-Gürçağlar, 'What Texts Don't Tell: The Use of Paratexts in Translation Research,' in *Crosscultural Transgressions. Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*, ed. Theo Hermans (Manchester: St Jerome, 2002), p. 59.

[3] Ned Drew and Paul Sternberg, *By Its Cover* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), p. 8.

[4] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (New York: Anchor, 2014).

[5] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor, 2015).

that host Adichie's books. In her book *Il Vestito dei Libri* (2017) the writer Jhumpa Lahiri reflects on the value of book covers and book cover design starting from the covers of her own books. She refers to book covers as 'translations' of the book, that is, as an interpretation of the messages of the book (and its subsequent re-codification) into another system of signs, which addresses the reader first of all on the visual level.[6] In this perspective, and through the frame of translation, book covers can be defined as 'weak thresholds',[7] or crossing areas, that is, places of continuous negotiation between the text and the social, cultural and editorial (i.e., economical) context in which it is published. Drawing on Gérard Genette's ground-breaking studies on paratext and literature, on seminal studies on paratexts and translation[8] and on the works of scholars who dealt with book cover design,[9] I intend to explore what kind of strategies publishers are using in some countries to market a writer who has come to be known both as a global author and as a '"viral" public figure'[10] outside the literary sphere.

In order to a have a clearer idea about the ways in which book covers are contributing to spread Adichie's narratives within and beyond the borders of the English-speaking countries, this contribution will look at Adichie's case-studies both analysing book covers as independent peritextual elements and investigating their relationships with Adichie's popularity, considered as an epitext. In fact, on the official website chimamanda.com, and on The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website maintained by Daria Tunca (with the support of the University of Liège), Adichie is not presented simply as a writer who has been translated all over the world but as a public *persona*, whose appeal and capacity to reach several audiences, even beyond the literary means, cannot be ignored as long as we believe that literature does not exist in a vacuum. So, moving from Genette's definition of paratext as a combination of epitext and peritext, and using the methodological framework of paratext studies and Translation Studies, I will present Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a

[6] Jhumpa Lahiri, *Il Vestito dei Libri* (Modena: Guanda, 2017), kindle edition, pos. 120.
[7] Marino, p. 26.
[8] Gérard Genette, *Paratext: Threshold of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Valerie Pellat (ed.), *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013); Tahir-Gürçağlar, pp. 44-60.
[9] Drew and Sternberg; Marco Sonzogni, *Re-Covered Rose. A Case Study in Book Cover Design as Intersemiotic Translation* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011).
[10] Serena Guarracino, 'Writing "so raw and true": Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*,' *Between* 4, 8 (2014): p. 2.

public *persona* and as a pop icon. Then, the analysis of the book covers of *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminist* will unveil the relationship between the epitextual and the peritextual dimension in the marketing of Adichie. In order to offer a comparative and contrasting analysis of Adichie's book covers, I will deal with both covers from the English-speaking publishing market and from the Italian, Portuguese and Brazilian ones.

2. A writer turns into a pop icon: an epitextual reading of Adichie's celebrity

Over the last twenty years, the Nigerian literary scenario has witnessed the considerable increase of books written by female authors who have started not only to produce texts that tackle social, cultural and political issues like gender bias and the role of women in Nigerian patriarchal society, but also to take a stance on these issues as public figures (for example in public speeches or during interviews) as if they were promoting a new form of literary activism. This turning point in Nigerian literature is having some resonance within and outside the English-speaking community of readers, both thanks to literary translation (which enables the vehiculation of foreign literatures) and to the way in which African writers in general are being marketed all over the world.

Among the Nigerian writers who are continuing Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali's literary tradition, using women's bodies and body image to investigate society, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is today probably the best known, due to the great impact she is having even outside the literary sphere. Born in Enugu in 1977, Adichie belongs to what literary critics Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton have defined the 'third generation' of Nigerian writers, that is a 'generation of writers born mostly after 1960, the emblematic year of African political independence from colonialism'.[11] Unlike the first and second generation, third generation writers have not experienced colonialism directly, so their writing is more concerned with 'nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination';[12] that is to say their narratives are not just concerned with the retrieval and re-affirmation of a long silenced identity. Indeed, third generation Nigerian writers provide an important insight on 'cultural

[11] Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, 'Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations,' *English in Africa* 32, 1 (2005): p. 14.
[12] Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 16.

construction [intended] as a process that is simultaneously global and local'.[13]

The nomadic dimension, and the experience of borders and of trespassing borders suggested by Adesanmi and Dunton, have strongly affected both Adichie's life and writing career. In fact, she left Nigeria at the age of nineteen to study communication and political science in the US and there she began to gain visibility as a writer after the publication of her short story, 'You in America' (2002), on the American literary magazine *Zoetrope*. The publication earned her a nomination for the Caine prize and, even if she did not win, the following year her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was accepted for publication by Algonquin Press (an American independent publisher), launching Adichie's fortunate relationship with some of the best known publishing houses in the English-speaking world. However, even though after that first publication she wrote two more books, was nominated for many literary prizes in UK and US, and even won some of the most prestigious ones (like the Orange Prize and the Anisfield-Wolf Prize), her popularity exploded in 2009, when she spoke in a TED Talk entitled 'The Danger of a Single Story'.[14] If we refer to the data on the TED website, Adichie's 2009 Talk has reached 27,756,114 views[15] and has been translated, so far, into forty-nine different languages by TED volunteers. These numbers might help us to picture how well the writer was known internationally when she gave her second TED Talk in 2012, titled *We Should All Be Feminists*.[16]

Today Adichie's official website, chimamanda.com, notes: 'her 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of A Single Story*, is now one of the most-viewed TED Talks of all time. Her 2012 talk *We Should All Be Feminists* has started a worldwide conversation about feminism',[17] but this is just a hint at what becoming a public *persona* has meant for the writer. Her capacity to address very different audiences and to use different registers to reach

---

[13] Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 4.

[14] *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED Talk Video (2009) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story. TED is a non-profit organization whose aim is to share and spread ideas through brief talks (usually no longer than 18 minutes). See https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization (last accessed 7 March 2020).

[15] https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story   (last accessed 10 July 2021).

[16] *We Should All Be Feminists*, TEDx Euston Talk Video (2012) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists?language=it.

[17] https://www.chimamanda.com/about-chimamanda/ (last accessed 7 March 2020).

people has made her the right person to deliver talks in colleges and universities all over the US, as 'commencement speaker' or 'class day speaker'. However, her consecration as a celebrity has probably become even more tangible some time after her TED Talk videos had grown viral, when references to her *persona* or to her works have become part of popular culture. So, for example, in 2013, the singer Beyoncé released the song 'Flawless' based on part of Adichie's 2012 TEDx Talk; in 2015, in an episode called 'The Princess Guide', Adichie appeared in the series *The Simpsons*, where one of the characters displayed her collection of short stories *The Things Around Your Neck*; in the same year *Time Magazine* included her among the '100 most influential people' in the world; in 2017 Maria Grazia Chiuri, the first woman to run Dior fashion house, decided to open her first fashion event making models wear a T-shirt bearing the slogan 'we should all be feminists'.

More than simply to get acquainted with Adichie as a writer, a celebrity and a pop-icon, these details help us approach the concept of epitext explained by Gérard Genette in his *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. In this seminal book, the French essayist provides a definition of the word paratext and then distinguishes between epitext and peritext according to what functions as an appendage to text and what not. He affirms a paratext is

> what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, [...] a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.[18]

Drawing on these premises, Genette makes a further distinction between epitext and peritext, that Caroline Summers refers to respectively as 'texts circulating independently from the book itself, such as interviews, letters and marketing material' and 'features of the text in its published form such as prefaces, notes, and cover material'.[19]

These definitions help us to consider the analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book cover not just as an investigation on the material representations of marketing choices that answer to the book industry,

---

18 Genette, pp. 1-2.
19 Caroline Summers, 'What Remains: The Institutional Reframing of Authorship in Translated Peritexts,' in *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation*, ed. Valerie Pellat (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), p. 14.

but also as the visual result of a strong relationship between peritext and epitext, that is, all the mediatic apparatus that stands beyond the book as a physical object and that contributes to determine its fortune.

3. Peritext in translation: Americanah *and* We Should All Be Feminist *cross boundaries*

A book can be many books. One of the greatest values of books is probably their reproducibility across times, languages and national borders, but as commodities books get old. This means they sometimes need some re-embellishment for their looks to remain appealing and tempting. In fact, every time a potential reader picks up a book from the shelves of a library or of a book shop, the paratext or, more specifically, the book cover as one of the most visible manifestations of the peritext may be the first (or even the only) encounter s/he has with the narratives embedded in the text.[20] Furthermore, when it comes to translated books, it is not just the translator who negotiates the 'otherness' of the source text/culture. It is also the publisher, whose job and goal is both to find and to create a reading public, who uses this 'otherness' to both attract the reader and make him/her comfortable with the unfamiliar narrations of the source text/cultures.[21] Paratexts are some of the most impactful resources publishers have to accomplish this mission. In this perspective, book covers play a fundamental role in the act of finding and creating a reading public. In *Design è Traduzione*, Giovanni Baule and Elena Caratti define book covers as 'transition devices' and as 'anticipation devices'.[22] Indeed, while creating a bridge between the linguistic and the visual level, book covers allow the transition of messages from a verbal to a non-verbal system of signs. In addition, by means of an interpretation of the text, they offer (or are likely to offer) a condensed representation of what the text is about, a preview on its contents: book covers anticipate the access to the verbal text providing readers with the first instruments to interpret it.

Moving from these assumptions, this section will deal with the analysis of the front covers of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). Being aware that the analysis of the

[20] Summers, p. 14.
[21] Summers, p. 15.
[22] Giovanni Baule and Elena Caratti (eds), *Design è traduzione. Il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016), p. 56.

sole front cover is not sufficient to determine to what extent paratextual elements are influencing the selling and purchasing of Adichie's books internationally, it can be nonetheless a valuable starting point to investigate what kind of trends publishing houses are following to market such narratives and to what kind of readers these narratives are being addressed.

One of the reasons that made these two books the focus of this analysis was the fact they were published after Adichie's first TED Talk (2009) had become viral. So, I will analyse the peritextual aspect of book covers without neglecting the relationships between the peritext and the epitext. Furthermore, the analysis takes into account the Italian and the Portuguese translations of Adichie's books as they were published only a few months after the release of the English editions. This seems to reinforce the idea that there was a consistent economic effort and investment beyond the marketing of this writer. Therefore, it could be useful to look at Adichie's marketing without overlooking the impact her popularity has probably had on the promotion of her books. The front covers of both *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists* will be presented following the chronological order in which they were published. This will allow us to have an idea of the evolution both the visual representation (and interpretation) of the messages of the texts and their transmission (and reception) have gone through.

Americanah is Adichie's third novel, published in 2013 by the New York-based publisher Alfred A. Knopf. It is the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who finds no place in the difficult social, economic and political Nigerian scenario and, for this reason, decides to move to the US to pursue her happiness and, eventually, to spend the rest of her life there with her first love, Obinze. In fact, she is the first to move with the idea to establish in America and to wait for her boyfriend, but, unfortunately, reality is not actually comparable to Ifemelu's dreams. In the US, the woman starts to reflect on what it means to be black in a Western society and what difficulties one must face in a country deeply concerned with the issue of race. The obstacles she goes through, the ultimate separation from Obinze and the impossibility of finding a place to belong will be for Ifemelu the beginning of a painful inner-journey during which she will have to grab on to her origins, in order not to lose hope, or herself.

The first edition of *Americanah* was published as a hardcover book both in the US and the UK. Since neither edition bears images on the front cover, it can be hard to define these book covers as 'visual trans-

lations'[23] of the books they represent, following what Marco Sonzogni points out in his book *Re-covered Rose. A Case Study in Book Cover Design as Intersemiotic Translation.* As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, the two front covers are almost identical, the only difference being that the American one clarifies the literary genre the text belongs to. The choice to evoke in the title the red and blue of the American flag is all readers are given to pre-visualize the text,[24] so they are likely to imagine the story will take place in the US or the main characters will visit the US for some reason. It is less probable that they will figure out, through the verbal and non-verbal inputs given by the title, that the book is about a Nigerian woman who moves to the US for some reason, and that all her life comes to be affected by this choice. Only a few readers probably know that in Nigeria the word 'Americanah' refers (in both a mocking and contemptuous way) to a person who, after having lived in the US, pretends to be Americanized or has gone through an actual process of Americanization. However, what is peculiar of these first hardcover editions is that the name of the author occupies more or less two thirds of the whole cover, almost as if the thing to be marketed was the author herself, not her latest book.
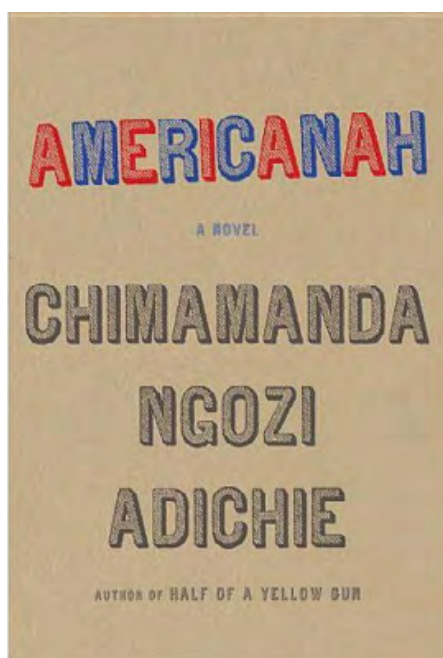
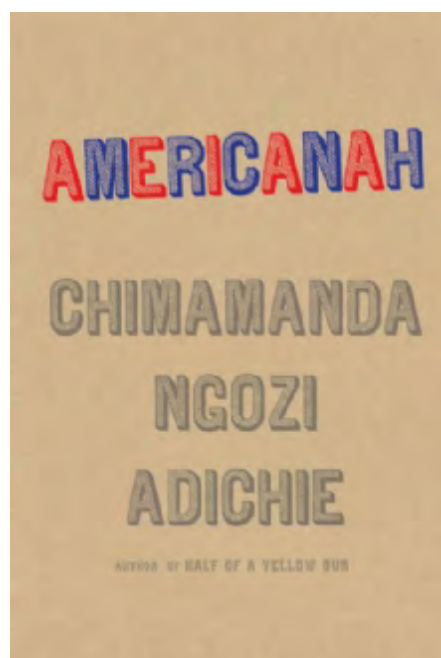Figure 1: *Americanah* (hardcover). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013

Figure 2: *Americanah* (hardcover), London: Fourth Estate, 2013

---

[23] Sonzogni, p. 6.
[24] Baule and Caratti (eds).

The case of the first Nigerian hardcover edition is even more peculiar in terms of visual communication. As shown in Figure 3, a positive assessment by Chinua Achebe (one of the best known Nigerian authors) appears on the top of the cover, followed by a feather pen which occupies almost one third of the page and seems to introduce the title of the book to potential readers. The pen creates a vertical line that connects, ideally, Achebe and Adichie's names almost as if to suggest the intention of the publisher to present Adichie as the continuator of Nigeria's literary tradition.

The covers analysed so far, where the author's name is the most evident element on the page, seem to reinforce the idea that the strategy used by the publishing houses was that of attracting the potential reader by focusing on the popularity of the writer. This would mean they were promoting the book basing its marketing campaign mainly on the epitextual dimension.

In 2013 *Americanah* was republished in paperback and the following year its first translations entered the international literary scene. Figure 4 shows the first Nigerian paperback edition (2013). Nigerian publisher Farafina commissioned Adichie's book cover to Nigerian visual artist and author Victor Ehikhamenor. This front cover celebrates through both images and colours Ifemelu's two worlds: on the one hand, the woman portrayed at the centre of the cover represents the character's legacy and origins. Referring
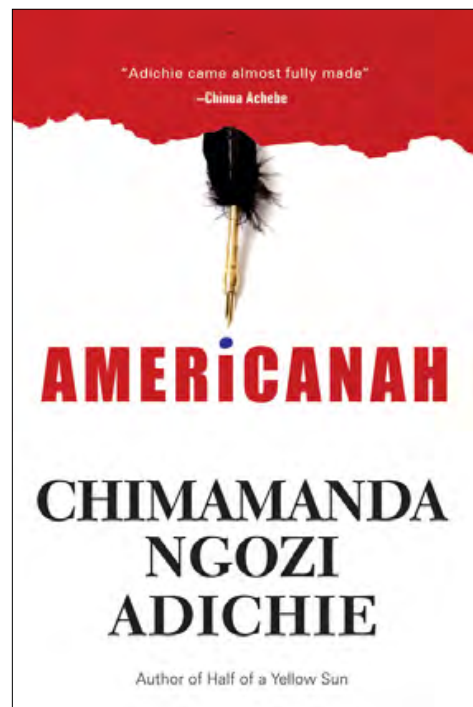

Figure 3: *Americanah* (hardcover). Lagos: Farafina, 2013

Figure 4: *Americanah* (paperback). Lagos: Farafina, 2013

back to African tribal art and to Nigerian spirituality and mythology, the artist portrays a woman who both recalls to the mind tribal masks and shows a connection with the *ogbanje/abiku* beliefs of Igbo and Yoruba spirituality by displaying a white figure on the woman's face. On the other hand, the blue and red colours of the American flag recall the diasporic experience of the character. The Farafina paperback edition is the first to display a woman with striking Afro hair and this is a detail to take into account if we want to consider book covers not only as 'anticipation devices',[25] but also as small arenas in which to visually debate hair politics and, to a larger extent, beauty standards, as we will see further on in this analysis. This paperback edition demonstrates the intention of the publisher to both tease potential readers by constructing their 'horizons of expectations'[26] and offering a preview on the issues debated in the text.

Figure 5 and 6 show, respectively, the first and second English paperback editions. The 2013 English edition (Fig. 5) harks back to the first hardback editions (Fig. 1 and 2), but this time the title is given much more visibility as it covers more than a half cover while the author is marketed also through the reference to the Orange Prize she had won. So, in this case the relationship with the epitextual dimension is revealed by the reference to the prize, while the title of the book predominates in the space of the cover. This visual choice could be related to the fact that the publisher was trying to shift the attention of the potential reader from the writer, who had been extensively marketed with the hardcover edition, to her latest work.

Figure 6 displays the 2014 English paperback edition, which completely revolutionizes the visual (pre)representation of the text.[27] Here the blurry image of a black woman with closed eyes and half-open lips occupies the left half of the front cover. In this case, the publisher's choice conveys not just a misleading, sexually connoted image of the protagonist of the story but also a stereotyped image of the (black) woman, whose body happens to be immediately put in the spotlight. This edition is, however, also the first one to bear on the front cover praises taken by two English newspapers: the *Mail on Sunday* and *The Times*, meaning both Adichie and her literature were being assessed even by the non-literary popular press by that time.

[25] Baule and Caratti (eds), p. 56.
[26] Summers, p. 15.
[27] Baule and Caratti (eds).
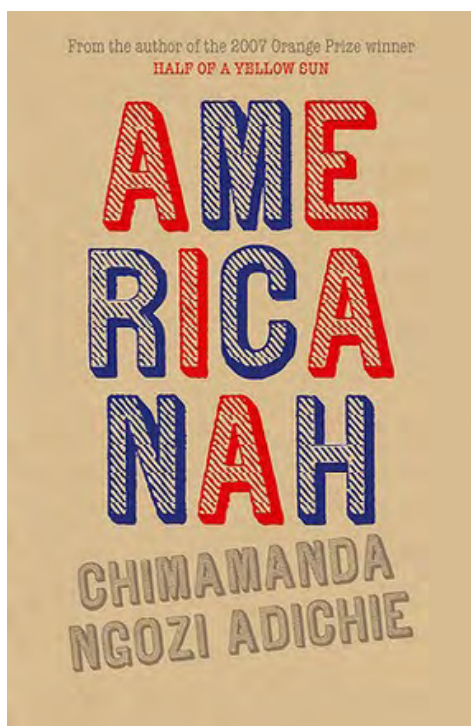
Figure 5: *Americanah* (paperback). London: Fourth Estate, 2013
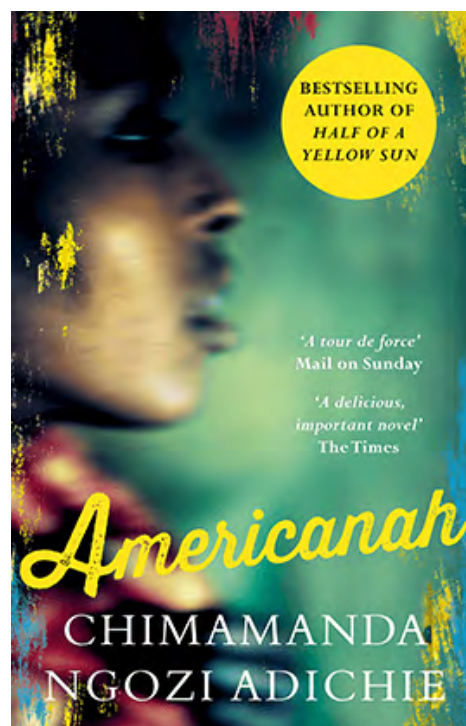
Figure 6: *Americanah* (paperback). London: Fourth Estate, 2014

The American 2014 paperback edition of *Americanah* (Fig. 7) focuses definitely on hair, lingering on one of the most important *topoi* of the whole narrative by displaying four braids fluctuating on a white background, where the text seems to play a prominent role.

In fact, in this transnational *Bildungsroman* in which the writer textualizes personal and fictional experiences of migration, hair is a recurring metaphor which leads the reader through all the attempts at Americanization the protagonist has to face and the subsequent return to her (Nigerian) origins.

Ifemelu, as readers come to know, wears natural kinky hair, and her hair has never bothered her before moving to

Figure 7: *Americanah* (paperback). New York: Anchor, 2014

the US. In the US she realizes she is 'different' precisely because of her hair. She is black, a non-American black, and in the US she discovers that hair can have strong political meanings. In Kobena Mercer's words: 'where "race" structures social relations of power, hair – as visible as skin color, but also the most tangible sign of racial difference – takes on another forcefully symbolic dimension';[28] in a society framed by racial constructs, hair and 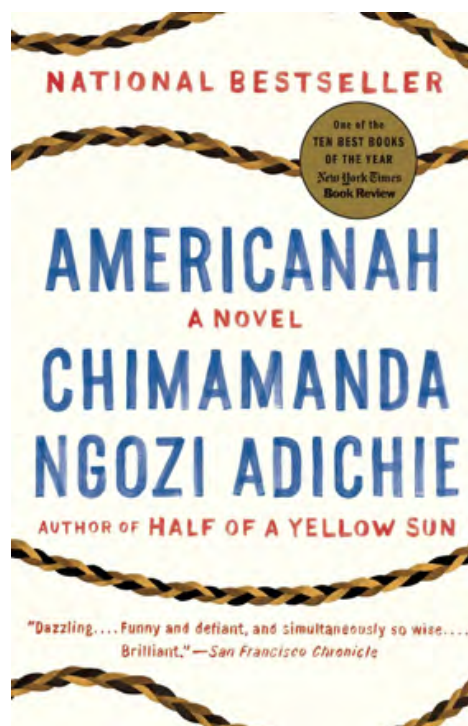hairstyles are neither just a matter of look, nor just a personal interpretation of style and fashion. Even if both skin and hair are human biological manifestations, the fact that hair can be cut, dyed, relaxed, styled, covered, that is manipulated, makes it a space where beauty standards can be problematized: who defines them and for whom? In the US Ifemelu understands that natural kinky hair or some hairstyles like tiny braids carry 'the stigmata of blackness'[29] in a way that is too visible for her to fit in a social class where the polarization beautiful/ugly is still too connected to the binary opposition white/black. That is the reason why she is 'compelled' to relax her hair in order to get her job; she is 'compelled' to 'deracialize' her hair in order to fit into a specific social class. In this perspective, Ifemelu's hair and hairstyles also interrogate black Americans' ideologies of (self) representation in a racialized environment where black subjects are often compelled to comply with aesthetic politics that devalue the 'natural beauty of blackness'.[30] Hair are, in a sense, also the reason why readers meet Ifemelu, as the book opens with the character searching for a braiding salon to get her hair braided before going back to Nigeria after having spent 13 years in the US. Yet, readers will find out braids are not just a way to style kinky hair: first of all, they express the desire of the protagonist to go back to her origins, to rediscover the value and the pleasure of belonging, and feeling part of a community. The day she gets her hair braided in a beauty salon in the outskirts of Princeton, Ifemelu finds out that the place is more than just a salon where people go to get their hair styled: it is a crossroad of stories where women from Senegal, Mali, Nigeria and other African countries can share their past and speak about the country where they decided to live without being necessarily grateful and compliant for what they got there. It is a place where many invisible stories of subtle violence and racism are held together like locks in a braid. It is a place of resistance.

---

[28] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 101.
[29] Mercer, p. 101.
[30] Mercer, p. 97.

In terms of visual communication, hair is the most visible element of both the hardcover and the paperback editions of *Americanah* in Italy. The hardcover edition was published by Einaudi in 2014 in the 'Supercoralli' series, a series born in 1948 with the aim of publishing new classics, that is books destined to become classics. As Figure 8 shows, the cover has three small images in black and white with three typical ways of styling afro hair. More specifically, from left to right readers can visualize cornrows (braids styled close to the scalp), dreadlocks and braids. Both verbal and non-verbal signs are here placed on a white jacket as is usual for the Supercoralli series. In 2015, due to the great success of the book and to the increasing popularity of the author, Einaudi published a paperback edition of *Americanah* in the 'Super ET' series (Fig. 9), dedicated to the publisher's best sellers. In this case, the choice of the image through which to address hair politics is slightly different. The young woman who wears natural kinky hair and a casual outfit recalls much more closely the protagonist of the story, who moves to the US as a young university student. Moreover, it does not necessarily remind the reader of the cliché of the sensual black beauty, as the first Einaudi edition does through what seems a specific intention to cut the frames in a way that lingers on the neck and lips of the woman portrayed.

Figure 8: *Americanah* (hardcover). Torino: Einaudi, 2014

Figure 9: *Americanah* (paperback). Torino: Einaudi, 2015
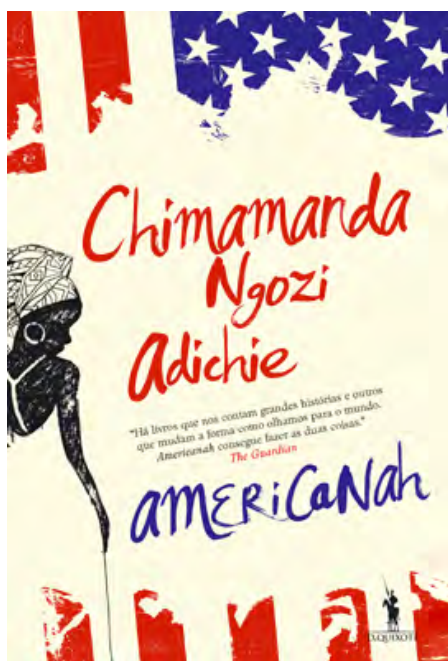
Figure 10: *Americanah* (paperback). Alfragide: Dom Quixote, 2013

Figure 11: *Americanah* (paperback). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2014

The cases of the Portuguese and Brazilian paperback editions (Fig. 10 and 11) are slightly different. The 2013 Dom Quixote Portuguese edition, shown in Figure 10, recalls the motif of the American flag and is the only one, among the front covers analysed here, to display a woman wearing a turban. If it is true that, on the one hand, turbans are among the accessories immediately associated to African women in Western imagery, on the other hand, turbans can also be seen as quite a radical way to address hair politics. In fact, while the Portuguese publisher may have wanted to address the Portuguese reading public by using a cliché representation of African women in an image which complied with public expectations, it should not be forgotten that turbans are often used as devices to hide afro hair, meaning they are sometimes the consequence of hair shame politics. As Adichie herself confesses in a video posted by the Tenement Museum of New York in 2014,[31] she started to wear turbans when she decided not to relax her hair anymore but still felt uncomfortable and unattractive in showing her natural hair. From this perspective, turbans can be read as a way to address hair politics as much as natural kinky

---

[31] *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Tenement Talk*, Tenement Museum channel (2014) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY1RK6aAPws.

hair, and as a way to take a stance on hair shaming as a poisonous consequence of non-inclusive beauty standards.

The 2014 Brazilian paperback edition published by Companhia das Letras presents a further way to represent hair (Fig. 11): in this case, a white silhouette wearing natural afro hair is laid on a blue background. No further details are given to identify the silhouette, thus every reader can potentially mirror him/herself in the white space. In this way the publisher seems to invite a reflection on the origins and the inclusivity of beauty standards in a country which is also closely concerned with the issue of race.

So far, we have seen how publishers have decided to market a novel that deals with several topics and accompanies the reader through the same inner journey undertaken by the protagonist. The second book on which this article will briefly focus belongs, instead, to a different literary genre. For this reason, it can help us to highlight other issues in the analysis of the passage from the verbal to the non-verbal sign system (and vice-versa) while we take into account the several front covers through which it is presented.

We Should All Be Feminists was published in book form in 2014 as an adaptation of the most celebrated TEDx Talk of 2012. This suggests since the very beginning how much Adichie's popularity affected the decision of the publishers to publish such a text, what kind of answers they expected from the readership and what impact it would have on the book market. *We Should All Be Feminists* is an essay in which Adichie presents in a humorous but impactful way what it means to her to be a feminist in everyday life and how being feminists means re-discussing the models according to which both masculinity and femininity have been built as social practices. Being the adaptation of a talk, the essay is very concise and to the point and while it does not claim to be inserted among the texts which deal with feminism from a theoretical point of view, it has highlighted the importance of addressing the question in everyday life, referring to everyday situations, struggles and challenges.

As an essay and not a work of fiction it is probably less useful to consider the book covers of *We Should All Be Feminists* as intersemiotic translations of the text they embed. Yet, what is interesting about this text is that when it was launched, all marketing efforts had already taken place thanks to the TEDx Talk video. From this perspective, the function the cover had in this case was that to 'remind the reader of what [s]/he

already [knew] of the text'[32] as Marco Sonzogni points out in *Re-covered Rose.* The book was published for the first time in 2014 by the English publisher Fourth Estate as a paperback (Fig. 12), while the first American paperback edition (Fig. 13) dates back to 2015 (an e-book version had been published in 2014). Both covers are essential, bearing just the name of author and the title. Since the title is self-explanatory, neither images nor verbal materials like praises and blurbs were inserted to help the reader pre-visualize what the text is about.[33]
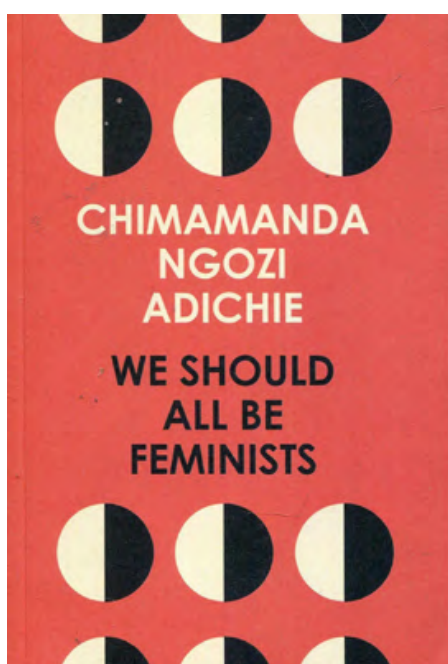
Figure 12: *We Should All Be Feminists* (paperback). London: Fourth Estate, 2014
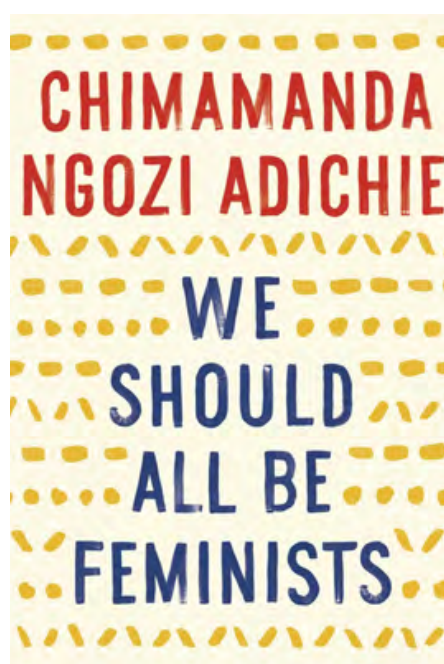
Figure 13: *We Should All Be Feminists* (paperback). New York: Anchor, 2015

The strategy used by the Italian publisher of the book, Einaudi, is quite individual. In this case, colour is not the expedient used to catch the eye of a potential reader as the book is catalogued as 'saggistica' (essay), and this series does not normally display coloured non-verbal signs. Moreover, an eye-catching use of colour could have proven uneffective in this case, as it would have been probably less possible for a casual reader to encounter the book, unless s/he had browsed in the essay section of a library or a book shop. So, what the publisher does with this book cover is displaying on the front cover one of the most impactful sentences

---

[32] Sonzogni, p. 16.
[33] Baule and Caratti (eds).

of the text (Fig. 14). It is probably not by chance that the sentence chosen to play the role of 'readers' hunter' shows nine verbs in nine lines. The verbs 'Vorrei' (I wish), 'Cominciassimo' (we should begin), 'Sognare' (to dream), 'Progettare' (to plan), 'Dobbiamo cambiare' (we must change), 'Insegniamo' (we teach) are all performative verbs, and the repetition of some of them throughout the passage higlights not only the importance of being active in fighting gender inequalities but also the fact that this fighting is transversal and intersectional.

Both the Portuguese (Fig. 15) and the Brazilian (Fig. 16) publishers of the text chose instead bright colours as a strategy to tempt the potential reader from a visual point of view, communicating in this way the urgency with which Adichie wanted to spread her messages. While examining these cases, it is inter-

Figure 14: *Dovremmo essere tutti femministi* (paperback). Torino: Einaudi, 2015

esting to notice how, in both front covers, the effect conveyed by the title of the essay results slightly different from that conveyed by the title of the source text. In fact, while in English the modal 'should' indicates a moral duty, in European Portuguese 'Todos Devemos Ser Feministas' indicates a much stronger duty, an obligation, which in English may be rendered with 'All of us must be feminists'. On the other hand, in Brazilian Portuguese, 'Sejamos Todos Feministas' (Let's all be feminists) translates the auxiliary 'should' as an invitation, even if by means of an imperative form (sejamos).

To conclude, in 2018 the Nigerian publisher Narrative Landscape Press published 'The Adichie Collection', a box set containing both Adichie's fiction and non-fiction books. With this edition of *We Should All Be Feminists*, the Nigerian publisher also opted for a simple front cover in which no images were used to offer pre-visualizations of the text.[34] As Figure 17 shows,

---

[34] Baule and Caratti (eds).

Figure 15: *Todos Devemos Ser Feministas* (paperback). Afragide: Dom Quixote, 2015

Figure 16: *Sejamos Todos Feministas* (paperback). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2015

however, the peculiarity of this edition (for the whole collection) was that of decorating the covers using Ankara designs. Ankara designs, or wax print designs, are printed fabrics which have grown popular in Nigerian textile culture and in other Western African countries over the last years. Even if the design of this cover does not relate to the concept of 'anticipation devices' pointed out by Baule and Caratti in their book, it can indeed be related to that of 'transition devices'.[35] In fact, what the publisher chooses to do in this case is to try to celebrate and create a bridge with a certain Africanness. This relates very much to what Adichie tried to achieve with her book, *We Should All Be Feminists*, as she attempted to address the issue of feminism from an African perspective, that is, from an Afro-centric point of view.

Figure 17: *We Should All Be Feminists* (paperback). Lagos: Narrative Landscape Press, 2018

---

[35] Baule and Caratti (eds), p. 56.

4. What gets to be marketed and what is left behind

The analysis of some of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book covers has shown the role paratexts have in framing and re-framing female narratives in-between the textual and the visual dimension and across languages and cultures. With *We Should All Be Feminists* we have seen how a writer's popularity can influence the way in which her/his book can be marketed within and outside his/her country; that is how the epitextual dimension can affect the promotion of a book in the book industry. With *Americanah* we have also explored the ways in which book covers can address seminal issues by means of visual representations of the narratives developed in the book, and how these ways are likely to change in order to adapt to the values of the receiving culture.

The translated editions discussed here have highlighted that the impact of a text in the target literary market depends not just on the ways in which a book is presented, as an object, to its potential consumer, but also on the weight of the publisher in the book market. Thus, great firms are likely to be much more impactful in the market than small, independent publishing houses and can also invest more resources in advertising and distribution. On the other hand, they tend to publish authors who are already known on the literary stage or have a large following even outside the literary sphere, as their books are more likely to reach a wider audience. Adichie's case is one of them. Both *Americanah* and *We Should All Be Feminists* have been published by firms such as Alfred A. Knopf and Fourth Estate (Harper Collins) in the US and the UK; Einaudi, one of Italy's best-known publishing houses which is now part of the Arnoldo Mondadori Group; Dom Quixote, one of Portugal's largest publishing houses, and Companhia das Letras, the biggest publishing house in Brasil.

These details cannot be disregarded if we want to address the question of who gets marketed and who gets left behind in the Nigerian literary panorama today. Thanks to her books and to her visibility as a pop icon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is contributing to bringing to light a prolific literature like the Nigerian one, in which women have become both the focus of the narration and the ones who dare to narrate themselves. Yet, she is not the only third generation Nigerian female writer. To name just a few, Lola Shoneyin, Sefi Atta, Sarah Ladipo Manyika, Yejide Kilanko, Chika Unigwe are not being marketed with the same effort as Adichie,

either in English-speaking countries or elsewhere. Yet they have almost Adichie's age and published books in the same years she did, even though they are not as famous as public figures outside the literary sphere. This observation could introduce a wider reflection about how much popularity counts for the book industry when it comes to marketing a Nigerian (and, to a larger extent, an African) female author.

The fact that Adichie is offering an Afro-centric perspective on issues like feminism, beauty standards and the role of women in the society is a first step towards a much stronger visibility for Nigerian (and African) narratives about women written by women. Yet, it cannot be ignored that considering Adichie's the voice of a whole generation, a whole nation or, even worst, a whole continent could be the materialization of what she herself feared as the danger of a single story.

Bibliography

Adesanmi, Pius and Chris Dunton, 'Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations,' *English in Africa* 32, 1 (2005): pp. 7-19.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013).

———, *Americanah* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

———, *Americanah*, (Alfragide: Dom Quixote, 2013).

———, *Americanah* (Lagos: Farafina, 2013).

———, *Americanah* (2nd edition, Lagos: Farafina, 2013).

———, *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

———, *Americanah* (New York: Anchor, 2014).

———, *Americanah* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2014).

———, *Americanah*, trans. Andrea Sirotti (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

———, *Americanah*, trans. Andrea Sirotti (Torino: Einaudi, 2015).

———, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

———, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor, 2015).

———, *Dovremmo essere tutti femministi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2015).

———, *Todos Devemos Ser Feministas* (Afragide: Dom Quixote, 2015).

———, *Sejamos Todos Feministas* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2015).

———, *We Should All Be Feminists* (Lagos: Narrative Landscape Press, 2018).

———, https://www.chimamanda.com (last accessed 7 March 2020).

———, *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Tenement Talk* (2014) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY1RK6aAPws (last accessed 13 March 2020).

———, *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website* http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/adichie/index.html (last accessed 7 March 2020).

———, *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (last accessed 10 July 2020).

———, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2012) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists?language=it. (last accessed 7 March 2020).

Baker, Mona, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (London: Routledge, 2006).

———, 'Reframing Conflict in Translation,' *Social Semiotics* 17, 2 (2007): pp. 151-69.

Baule, Giovanni and Elena Caratti (eds), *Design è traduzione. Il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016).

Drew, Ned and Paul Sternberg, *By Its Cover* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

Genette, Gérard, *Paratext: Threshold of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Griswold, Wendy, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Guarracino, Serena, 'Writing "so raw and true": Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*,' *Between* 4, 8 (2014): pp. 1-27.

Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

Lahiri, Jhumpa, *Il vestito dei libri* (Modena: Guanda, 2017).

Marino, Toni, *Il testo provvisorio. La comunicazione paratestuale e i processi di lettura* (Roma: Aracne, 2017).

Mercer, Kobena, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Pellat, Valerie (ed.), *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013).

Ponzanesi, Sandra, *The Postcolonial Cultural Industy. Icons, Markets, Mythologies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Sonzogni, Marco, *Re-Covered Rose. A Case Study in Book Cover Design as Intersemiotic Translation* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011).

Summers, Caroline, 'What Remains: The Institutional Reframing of Authorship in Translated Peritexts,' in *Text, Extratext, Metatext and Paratext in Translation*, ed. Valerie Pellat (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), pp. 9-31.

Tahir-Gürçaglar, Sehnaz, 'What Texts Don't Tell: The Use of Paratexts in Translation Research,' in *Crosscultural Transgressions. Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*, ed. Theo Hermans (Manchester: St Jerome, 2002), pp. 44-60.

TED, Ideas Worth Spreading, https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization (last accessed 7 March 2020).

TRESPASSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA: ABORIGINAL FEMALE DISCOURSE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MAÏNA

Eleonora Sasso

In the last decade, an interesting cultural phenomenon occurred in Canadian film as a result of the flowering of an indigenous Inuit cinema. In the so-called 'cinema of minorities' non-Inuit viewers are taken into a cultural and contextual limbo, where they find themselves positioned in a culture which they can hardly relate to and faced with legends they are not acquainted with. From this perspective, interlingual subtitling can be described as a foreignizing, or overt, type of translation since the foreign nature of the source text is foregrounded. This chapter takes as its starting point the conceptual metaphor 'subtitling is cultural heritage' in order to advance a new reading of subtitling, one which sees this medium as a new audio-visual narrative category which is able to preserve the ethno-cultural diversity in Canada. Such a film with subtitles as *Maïna* (2013) not only envisions its own detailed blueprints of Inuit communities, but is also an audio-visual narrative examining the relationship between media and minority cultures. All extra-linguistic geographical and ethnographic references such as limestone totems, string games, stone landmarks, oil lamps, igloos, facial tattoos, and throat songs are presented through a constant interaction between image (still and dynamic), language (speech), sound (sound effects) and music (performed). I intend to track through these references and look at the issues – the role of subtitling in the preservation of cultural specificity, subtitling strategies for rendering culture-bound terms, etc – which they raise. But my central purpose is to re-read the aforementioned film from a cognitive perspective projecting such a conceptual metaphor as 'Inuit women are survival women'. I analyse the linguistics of subtitling in order to demonstrate that native femininity may be conceptualized in subtitling and that Inuit oral narratives are reproduced faithfully by audio-visual media. Through such an Inuit movie as *Maïna* (2013), I suggest, subtitling may be considered an extreme form of foreignization in audio-visual media.

Subtitling; Inuit Cinema; Aboriginal Femininity; Cognitive Linguistics; Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, an interesting cultural phenomenon occurred in Canadian film industry as a result of the development of an indigenous Inuit cinema. In the so-called 'cinema of minorities', that is to say films

featuring and produced by minority-language communities, non-native speakers are taken into a cultural and contextual limbo, where they find themselves positioned in a culture which they can hardly relate to and faced with legends they are not acquainted with. As attested by Martin Morrow from CBS News, 'We're witnessing the flowering of an indigenous Inuit cinema. It's the most exciting thing to happen in Canadian film this decade'.[1] *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2002), *The Snow Walker* (2003), *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), *The Necessities of Life* (2008), and *Before Tomorrow* (2009) are only a few examples of the movies fostering and promoting the cultural and linguistic diversity of Inuit people. Filming in Nunavut, a place of rugged beauty, means embracing aboriginal minorities and their ritualistic forms of interaction trespassing the boundaries between the *majority* and *minority groups.*

Watching an Inuit movie is a dynamic and unforgettable experience, involving a process of renewing attention to create and follow the relations between words, images, and subtitles. Due to the polysynthetic nature of the Inuit language,[2] characterized by a very rich morphological system according to which words begin with a root morpheme to which other morphemes are suffixed, intralingual subtitling can be described as a foreignizing, or overt, type of translation since the foreign nature of the source text is always foregrounded. As a multimodal and interlingual form of discourse, subtitling Inuit films in Canada means thinking out of the box, including minority cultures, becoming aware of the existence of alien communities or, to put it in George Melnyk's words, 'embracing that internal foreignness which prevents Canadians from accumulating a simplistic or exclusionary sense of self'.[3]

This contribution takes as its starting point the linguistics of subtitling as theorized by Jorge Díaz-Cintas, as well as the *cognitive notions of conceptual metaphors, shifting, image schemas*, and *blending* in order to advance a new reading of subtitling Inuit films, one which sees this AVT modality as a category which is able to preserve the ethno-cultural diversity of indigenous minorities in Canada and thereby project powerful conceptual metaphors. If it is true, as Díaz-Cintas maintains, that

---

[1] Martin Morrow, 'The Longest Winter,' *CBC News*, 26 March 2009 https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/the-longest-winter-1.831643.
[2] Arthur Thibert, *Eskimo* (*Inuktitut*) *Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2004).
[3] George Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 263.

'subtitles are ultimately an instance of written text',[4] then it is possible to analyse the narrative, stylistic, and cognitive conventions of subtitles. It is my aim to investigate the linguistics and semiotics of subtitles in *Maïna – An Unusual Love Story* (2013), a multilingual film shot in two minorities languages, Innu and Inuit, with English subtitles and English voice-over narration in order to demonstrate that cultural diversity and linguistic minorities may be conceptualized in subtitling by revisiting conventions and applying creative strategies. As a multilingual film attempting to reflect the pursuit of realism, *Maïna* represents an incredible challenge to the subtitler whose job is to facilitate the reading exercise for the viewers. I intend to track through these references and look at the issues – the role of subtitling in the preservation of cultural specificity, subtitling strategies for rendering culture-bound terms, cohesion and coherence in subtitling, segmentation, punctuation, etc. – which they raise.

But my central purpose will be to re-read the film by applying cognitive science to subtitling. Such notions of cognitive linguistics as blending,[5] image schemas,[6] pops and pushes[7] are useful to conceptualize the strategies used in subtitling aboriginal languages which are always aimed at preserving cultural diversity and thereby avoiding ethnocentric violence.

2. Voice-over narration of aboriginal femininity

A film with subtitles such as *Maïna – An Unusual Love Story*, a Union Pictures film produced by Canadian director Michel Poulette, is a truly epic tale of adventure and romance in a time before European contact.[8] For

---

[4] Jorge Díaz-Cintas and Aline Remael, *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 103.

[5] Conceptual blending consists of combining various input spaces into a blended space. Conceptual blends are the mechanism by which we can hold the properties of two spaces together, as in metaphorical or allegorical thinking.

[6] Image schemas are mental pictures that we use as basic templates for understanding situations that occur commonly. We build up image schemas in our minds, and we tend to share particular image schemas with the community in which we live, on the basis of our local bodily interaction with the world.

[7] The world of a text/film consists of one or more deictic fields, which are composed of a whole range of expressions each of which can be categorized as perceptual, spatial, temporal, relational, textual and compositional in nature. When a deictic shift occurs, it can be either 'up' or 'down' the virtual planes of deictic fields.

[8] *Maïna* is a Canadian drama film released in 2013 at the Shanghai International Film Festival. The film, starring Roseanne Supernault, Graham Greene, Tantoo Cardinal, Eric Schweig and Natar Ungalaaq, was named Best Picture at the 2013 American Indian Film Festival and Roseanne Supernault was named Best Actress.

the first time in Canadian film history, the clash between two Aboriginal communities, the Innu First Nation from Quebec whose activities were centred on hunting caribou, moose and deer, and their northern neighbours, the Inuit people inhabiting the Arctic regions of Greenland, Canada and Alaska, traditionally hunting whales, seals and polar bears, is foregrounded.

The story follows a young, rebellious, brave Innu woman, Maïna, the daughter of the Innu leader Mishtenapuu and the spiritual medicine woman Tekahera, who journeys to the Arctic in search of a missing member of her tribe, Nipki, and falls in love with a man from a rival clan. Not only does the movie project the Romeo and Juliet parable of thwarted love with a radical new twist by repatterning old Shakespearean schemas into Canadian Aboriginal ones, but it also makes the protagonist question the validity of her convictions revealing the fear and misconception those aboriginal cultures have for each other.[9] As a matter of fact, in the film, the Innu wrongly believe that when the Inuit have nothing to eat during the winter, they eat their children. This misconception is represented many times throughout the movie by the members of the Innu tribe who consider the Inuit a cannibalistic people probably due to the harsh conditions of the polar regions. The fear of the unknown projects horrific images of the Inuit whose cultural differences are accepted only by Maïna.

As far as DVD language settings are concerned, there are three language versions: an Innu/Inuktitut version with English narration and subtitles, an Innu/Inuktitut version with French narration and subtitles, and a completely French dubbed version. As a scholar of English studies, I have chosen to analyse the English subtitled version in order to demonstrate how creative and peculiar the audiovisual translation (AVT) strategies applied in Inuit films are. Through Maïna, a proto-feminist aboriginal girl, daughter of two mothers, female hunter, spirit-offender, wolf girl, witch, dream-visitor, healer, cultural mediator, the process of English voice-over is perfectly combined with subtitling. Maïna's off-screen voice appears to be an interior monologue so interlaced with narration that the blend is indefinable. The para-verbal features of Maïna's speech (intonation, accent, voice quality rhythm,

---

[9] Joyce MacPhee, '*Maïna* Features Cultural Conflict and Resolution,' *Nunatsiaq News,* 4 April 2014 https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674move_review_maina_features_cultural_conflict_and_resolution/

speed and pausing) contribute in delineating what Bosseaux defines as 'the semiotic fabric of films'.[10]

There are scenes in which voice-over narration is carried out by English-speaking Maïna, played by Roseanne Supernault. Even though Maïna's spoken language is Innu, her inner thoughts are vocalized in English. In these voice-over scenes, she has a suave voice, somewhat flat with very few modulations, i.e., a limited rise and fall in the voice pitch. Her speech pattern is characterized by a very fast pace with hardly any variations aimed at summarizing quickly her feelings and thoughts. Functioning as a type of dramatic narration, Maïna's voice-over narration is a diegetic soundscape lasting from a minimum of 9 seconds to a maximum of 22 seconds. One of the most suggestive scenes characterized by voice-over narration is Maïna's initiation to totemism during which she expresses her desire to be chosen by an exceptional totem:

> I had decided to be the most courageous of them all. I was the chief's daughter and I had to prove that I was different and that I deserved a totally different destiny. Spirits of the tree, of air, of bird but I wanted more. And then I was chosen beyond my own expectations. It was the wolf's spirit that will guide me and entrust me with a secret mission and I already knew that I would do anything to honour that trust. From that moment the path of my life was visible to me. I knew something exceptional was waiting for me at the end of my journey (00:10:31-00:10:53).

Defined as 'the easiest and most faithful of the audiovisual translation modes',[11] the process of voice-over appears to be the sole solution to render Maïna's inner thoughts and reflections on the languages spoken by Innu and Inuit. In such a multilingual film, in which Innu and Inuit are subtitled in English, Maïna's narration in English of her inner thoughts and feelings represents a cognitive relief to the strenuous activity of spotting the lexical differences between ancient and modern Inuit. For example, at 00:05:27, Nipki tells every member of the village that 'Maïna killed the wolf!' employing the Innu word *maikan* for wolf. But fifty minutes later the Innu word *maikan* is substituted by the Inuit lexical item *amarok* ('wolf'). Many others (the Innu word for seal is *atshik* corresponding to

---

[10] Charlotte Bosseaux, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer Characterization in the Musical Episode of the TV Series,' *The Translator* 14, 2 (2000): p. 345.

[11] Georg Michael Luyken, Thomas Herbst, Jo Langham-Brown, Helene Reid, and Hermans Spinhof, *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience* (Manchester: European Institute for the Media, 1991), p. 80.

the Inuit *natseq*) are the lexical differences that the viewer may be able to detect while watching this multilingual movie which appears to be representing what Snell-Horby has called 'the hybrid text of globalization'[12] reflecting the world's linguistic evolutions and mixes as well as actively promoting multilingualism in film.

From a cognitive perspective, Maïna's voice-over speech is the organizing element of the film, namely the *dominant*,[13] a sort of super-foregrounded figure, around which the rest of the subtitled text is dynamically organized. Deictic shift theory, which investigates how the deictic centre is created, shifted and used dynamically by filmmakers in the movie, by screenwriters in the script, and by subtitlers in the subtitled text is an illuminating framework to describe Maïna's voice-over feminist discourse. She is the only female hunter of the Innu tribe, the only member of the Innu tribe who is so brave as to rescue Nipki, an Innu girl who loves a man from the frozen land, the only one among Inuit people who is able to heal Natak's father from a foot injury and to hunt seals when the Inuit have almost nothing to eat. For such unusual capacities, for thinking and acting outside the aboriginal boxes she is believed to be a witch by Inuit people, she is accused of having offended the spirits, either not respecting the ancestral rules or not accepting the Inuit custom to have a sexual intercourse with Natak's friend. Numerous deictic shifts arranged around the character of Maïna occur. They can be either up or down the virtual plane of the filmic deictic field. In other words, the film begins with the deictic field centred on Maïna hunting a wolf in the forest and being surprised by Saitu, her promised groom, who addresses her such harsh words as 'Women don't hunt. / You have offended the spirits' (00:02:21). Then the film shifts its deictic centre down to Maïna's thoughts and expectations in life ('I had decided to be the most courageous of them all', 00:09:30). This example of pushing the deictic centre inside the mind of the character occur 20 times throughout the film and is balanced by alternating subtitles with voice-over, that is to say what cognitive linguistics call pops and pushes.[14] After pushing the deictic centre down into Maïna's mind, the filmic attention shifts from the character's inner thought to the dialogues among the members of the tribe.

[12] Mary Snell-Hornby, 'Re-creating the Hybrid Text: Postcolonial Indian Writings and the European Scene,' *Linguistica Anteverpiensia* 2 (2003): p. 175.
[13] Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 14.
[14] Stockwell, p. 47.

This continuous popping back out and pushing into Maïna's voice-over speech is a successful strategy to keep the viewer's attention by moving the spotlight according to narrative needs.

3. Subtitling the clash of Innu and Inuit cultures

On her dangerous journey northward to save Nipki from his Inuit captors Maïna is also held prisoner by the Inuit leader Natak and starts learning the language and customs of Inuit people: 'I began to understand the mysterious language from the men of the frozen land. Sometimes I asked Nipki for help. He learned faster than me being younger' (00:38:42). From a cognitive perspective, Maïna is a trajector[15] tracing a path from an initial position (the Innu village in Quebec) to a final resting position, the so-called landmark (the Inuit camp in the Arctic) leading her to accomplish her destiny. While travelling northward Maïna projects in her mind mental pictures, *image schemas*,[16] that she uses as basic templates to understand the situation on the basis of her bodily interaction with the new Inuit world and customs. Maïna projects such image schemas as journey, survival, escape as exemplified by such locative expressions as on the rivers, in the woods, in your land. The image schemas underlying these prepositions all involve a dynamic movement in reaction to the clash with Inuit culture. Merely obsessed by the false belief that Inuit are cannibals, Maïna projects the conceptual metaphor Inuit are Men-Eaters as expressed by the repetition of the action chain pattern *kidnapping* → *killing* → *eating* in which Inuit are active agents who initiate the horrific plan with Maïna and Nipki as receivers of the act of killing.

> 39:00:00
> 1   They've brought you along
>   to eat you.
> 2   They want to eat me?
>   I'll defend myself.
> 3   They will kill you first.
> 4   Then they will eat you.
> 5   If it were true,
>   they would start by eating you.
> 6   There's more of you to eat.

[15] Within the image schema, the element that is the figure is called the trajector and the element it has a grounded relationship with is called the landmark.
[16] Stockwell, p. 16.

All evidence suggests that the segmentation and line breaks are aimed at avoiding any undue ambiguities and that two-line subtitles are segmented at the highest syntactic nodes. See, for example, two-line subtitles 1 and 5, consisting of sentences too long to distribute them within one line: segmentation is arranged to use one line for each clause trying to force the brain to pause its linguistic processes for a while, until the eyes trace the next piece of linguistic information.

After discovering that Inuit are not cannibals, Maïna undergoes a deep change of heart and starts appreciating all extra-linguistic geographical and ethnographic references to Inuit culture, defined by Rabadán as 'referential vacuums',[17] such as limestone totems, string games, stone landmarks, oil lamps, igloos, facial tattoos, and throat songs which are presented through a constant interaction between image (still and dynamic), language (speech), sound (sound effects) and music (performed). One night while watching the northern lights produced by the aurora borealis that she identifies with the spirits dancing in the sky, she summons help (*Wicii*) and the spirit of her witch mother appears:

00:47:25
1   I don't know who I am anymore.
2   You are becoming yourself...
3   ...a little more every day, Maïna.
4   Stop rowing against the tide.

Since each subtitle appears on screen as an individual and isolated item, the subtitler employs continuation dots as a bridge at the end of one sub to facilitate reading when a sentence is not finished. In this example, the triple suspension dots employed are simply aimed at preserving the form of suspense induced in the original script. Subtitling appears to be a form of narration, a narrative discourse presenting a series of lexical, syntactical and typographical characteristics. Tekahera's sentences are punctuated following the conventions of discourse and the continuation dots seem to respect the prosodic features of spoken language serving a purpose in supporting and qualifying the speaker's message.

Once at the Inuit camp Maïna is confronted with a scary, colourless land as well as with the unwelcoming alien mind styles of the Inuit people. The most significant subtitled scenes are those shot inside the igloo

---

[17] Rosa Rabadán, *Equivalencia y traducción: problemática de la equivalencia translémica inglés-español* (Zamora: Universidad de León, 1991), p. 164.

where almost in the dark, illuminated by an oil lamp, *qulliq*, Inuit people invoke spirits, sing traditional Inuit oral songs which are able to cause things to happen, to somehow try to control the workings of the world, or even they dance together to summon the wind spirit. Inuit people almost ignore the presence of Maïna, excluding her from any ritualistic custom, not allowing her to perform what Díaz-Cintas defines as 'the kinesic heritage of different communities'.[18] Like any form of iconography, Inuit's body-postures and gestures communicate information non-vocally and are often culture-bound. Natak's gestures, facial expressions, and language may be explained as kinesics. The challenge for the subtitler resides in the detection of coherence between movement or closeness and intonation, word choice, as well as other linguistic features such as culture-bound words (*Inukshuk*, caribou, *kamik* and so forth) that are, of course, codetermined by the narrative situation and the scene as a whole. Only Natak's sister, Assivak, is kind to Maïna, consoling her when experiencing cultural shocks (Maïna does not understand Inuit promiscuity), showing her how to trace temporary tattoo lines on her face, teaching her how to sing throat songs, and sewing seal skins together. According to Assivak:

> 00:39:00
> 1   Natak runs after the wind.
> 2   He wants you
>   because you are different…
> 3   …but he gets angry because
>   you are not like the others.

Once again the use of continuation dots is highly indicative of a rhetorical segmentation arranged to secure line-breaks violating the logic of the sentence (the *because*-clause in number 2 is segmented ungrammatically) giving priority to emotions. But what is even more essential is that there is a certain degree of asynchrony in the presentation of the subtitles. Throughout the film, subtitles disappear a fraction of a second before the Inuit speaker has actually finished talking. This strategy is used to avoid the viewer's tendency to read the subtitle again because studies show that when a sub remains on screen longer than the time the viewer actually needs to read it, there is a tendency to read it again.[19]

---

18 Díaz-Cintas and Remael, p. 52.
19 On this topic see Bernard Derasse, 'Dubbers and Subtitlers Have a Prime Role in the Interna-

Reading subtitles means fully assimilating and understanding a message in a very short span of time without losing concentration or slowing down. The low degree of familiarity viewers can be assumed to have with the Inuit language and with subtitling are also factors that have an impact on how to determine the in and out times of subtitles. Reading the subtitles of a movie in a minority language may well affect viewers' reading speed because they are not able to spot differences with the source language. For this reason, the spotting[20] of the Inuit dialogue is always aimed at facilitating the reading exercise of minority languages characterized by very long sentences which have to be split over several subtitles.

The poor synchronization between Inuit dialogues and English subtitles is mainly due to the polysynthetic nature of the Inuit language. The time English subtitles remain on screen depends on the delivery of the original dialogue and the assumed reading speed of the target viewers. Inuit words and phrases are much longer than their corresponding English translations. See for example the Inuit words pertaining to the semantic field of colours (black = *krernertok*; blue = *tungortok*; red = *aupaluktok*; white = *kakortok* and so forth), directions (east = *unani*; north = *kannernark*; west = *wagnark*) and numbers (one = *atauserk*; two = *malrok*; three = *pingasut*; four = *sitamat* and so forth) which appear to be longer than their English equivalent, taking proportionally more time to utter them. Other Inuit expressions as *niri-junga* (I eat) or *taku - junnaq - tunga* (I can see) whose numbers of characters are double or even more than double the numbers of characters in English, may well render the idea of asynchrony between Inuit spoken dialogues and English subtitles. If English subtitles appear at the precise moment the Inuit person starts speaking, then they sometimes do not disappear in sync with the end of the utterance.

For this reason, the reading time cannot be assessed on an absolute basis but it is conditioned by such factors as vocabulary and the presence or absence of action. Continuation dots help to indicate that the Inuit speaker is still uttering words of a very long sentence in the previous sub. Punctuation is crucial for optimal subtitling since it reinforces the

---

tional Distribution of Television Programmes,' *EBU Review. Programmes, Admistration, Law* 38, 6 (1987): pp. 8-13; Jan Ivarsson and Mary Carroll, *Subtitling* (Simrishamn: TransEdit, 1998), and Herman Brondeel, 'Teaching Subtitling Routines,' *Meta* 34, 1 (1994): pp. 26-33.

[20] Spotting, also known as timing, consists of determining the precise moments when a subtitle should appear on screen and when it should leave the screen.

rhetorical cohesion of subtitles and secures a foreignizing translation of Inuit language. Three dots may be seen as indicators of the polysynthetic nature of the Inuit language which is quite useful for the viewers of a film, completely enclosed in Inuit and Innu idioms: the characters, the language, the environment and the mythology are totally Innu and Inuit, cultures currently belonging to less than half of one per cent of Canada's population.

Cognitively speaking, *Maïna* does incorporate cultural blending combining various input spaces into a blended space. Originally investigated by Fauconnier and Turner,[21] a blending is a kind of meeting point between two conceptual structures, known as input spaces, which are mapped into generic spaces where shared information becomes evident. In the facial tattoo scene, there occurs a transposition of an Inuit method for expressing cultural identity (skin sewing, the traditional form of tattooing), to a member of the Innu tribe.

> 01:21:21
> 1   I wear the marks of the Inuits...
> 2   ...even though
>   I am from the Innu tribe.

But even more than Inuit marks, Maïna continues to challenge tradition by making a blended tunic, made of seal and caribou, thereby mixing up the best of Innu and Inuit cultures.

> 01:26:30
> 1   My tunic is made of seal
>   and caribou.
> 2   It comes from my people
>   and yours.
> 3   You did not choose
>   one or the other.
> 4   You sewed them together.
> 5   You have offended the spirits...
> 6   ...by mixing what comes
>   from the land,
> 7   with what comes from the sea.
> 8   You will never be one of us.

[21] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, 'Blending as a Central Process of Grammar,' in *Conceptual Structure, Discourse, and Language*, ed. Adele Goldberg (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1996), pp. 113-29.

This tabooed garment, which according to the tribe offends the spirits, confirms Maïna's unconventional mind style, a rule-breaker willing to question the validity of Inuit convictions so as to expand their/our knowledge of minority cultures. Maïna's radical mode of repatterning Inuit and Innu schemas into new ones echoes the foreignizing strategy of audiovisual translation blending together different languages and cultures through a linguistics and semiotics of subtitling which reproduces the minority cultures with utmost fidelity. If conceptual blends are the mechanism by which we can hold the properties of two spaces together, then *Maïna* and its audiovisual translation are blended spaces mixing languages from worlds with different truth-value statuses, thereby creating not just a new mental space but a new universe in the film industry.

The impressive success of *Maïna,* which received six Canadian Screen Award nominations in 2014 (Best Picture, Best Art Direction/Production Design, Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Original Score and Best Make-Up), is also due to its vivid representation of primordial drives and emotions which are quintessentially envisioned in the epigraphic static writing superimposed on an aerial view of a river flowing violently at 00:00:45: 'The oldest and strongest emotion / of mankind is fear, / and the oldest and strongest kind / of fear is fear of the unknown'. This quotation from Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*[22] appearing at the very beginning of the movie introduces the conceptual metaphors of *Maïna,* a filmic adaptation of the well-researched novel by the French-Canadian novelist, Dominique Demers: fear is an enemy, fear is an opponent, unknown people are enemies, the unknown is a monster. The quotation from Lovecraft's essay appears to be the spotlight[23] of the movie, the focus of the viewer's attention for summarizing the real essence of human nature.

Maïna's adventure across the Inuit land is an emotional journey against social prejudices and racial taboos giving voice to women thinking differently in a world controlled by aboriginal rules and traditions. More a cultural mediator than a feminist representative, Maïna appears to be a model of intellectual independence and cultural openness, the leading qualities which are able to change the viewers' mind style no matter their sex, race and culture.

---

[22] H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), p. 21.
[23] As explained by Stockwell: 'Cognitive psychologists have used the metaphor of the "spotlight" as a means of understanding the focus of attention. Whatever is in the spotlight at a certain moment will receive all the interest and processing focus of the viewer or reader' (p. 18).

Maïna projects the parables of female emancipation and acceptance of cultural differences. In this story of an Aboriginal woman fighting against tribal bigotry and male oppression to achieve her destiny, the viewer may find the meaningfulness of this movie. By selecting the most meaningful scenes of *Maïna*, I intended to show how subtitling may be a useful AVT modality to preserve cultural diversities and linguistic minorities. Not only is this movie different from any other Inuit movie (the clash of different clans, the existential journey of an Aboriginal woman, an Innu woman acting as a cultural mediator and so forth), but the subtitling strategies applied appear to be as original as the storyline of the movie. Cognitive stylistics appears to be the most eligible method to explain the AVT modalities employed in *Maïna*: voice-over narration, segmentation, and punctuation. For her unique experience and unusual qualities Maïna may be analysed from a cognitive perspective, an approach offering us a means to understand issues of audiovisual value, as well as to have a clear view of text, context, circumstances, knowledge and beliefs. Ultimately cognitive science applied to texts explains the mental processes involved in reading texts, subtitles and watching a movie. Maïna's journey to the Arctic traces a mental path towards a metaphorical landmark, the Inuit village in which she achieves her destiny of blender of Innu and Inuit cultures. If it is true that stories are at the heart of cognitive understanding, then *Maïna* is an emblem of how to trespass gender and cultural boundaries.

Bibliography

Bosseaux, Charlotte, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer Characterization in the Musical Episode of the TV Series,' *The Translator* 14, 2 (2000): pp. 343-72.

Brondeel, Herman, 'Teaching Subtitling Routines,' *Meta* 34, 1 (1994): pp. 26-33.

Derasse, Bernard, 'Dubbers and Subtitlers Have a Prime Role in the International Distribution of Television Programmes,' *EBU Review. Programmes, Admistration, Law* 38, 6 (1987): pp. 8-13.

Díaz-Cintas, Jorge and Aline Remael, *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner, 'Blending as a Central Process of Grammar,' in *Conceptual Structure, Discourse, and Language*, ed. Adele Goldberg (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1996), pp. 113-29.

Ivarsson, Jan and Mary Carroll, *Subtitling* (Simrishamn: TransEdit, 1998).

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000).

Luyken, Georg Michael, *et al.*, *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience* (Manchester: European Institute for the Media, 1991).

MacPhee, Joyce, '*Maïna* Features Cultural Conflict and Resolution,' *Nunatsiaq News*, 4 April 2014 https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674move_review_maina_features_cultural_conflict_and_resolution/

Melnyk, George, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

Morrow, Martin, 'The Longest Winter,' *CBC News*, 26 March 2009 https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/the-longest-winter-1.831643.

Rabadán, Rosa, *Equivalencia y traducción: problemática de la equivalencia translémica inglés-español* (Zamora: Universidad de León, 1991).

Snell-Hornby, Mary, 'Re-creating the Hybrid Text: Postcolonial Indian Writings and the European Scene,' *Linguistica Anteverpiensia* 2 (2003): pp. 173-90.

Stockwell, Peter, *Cognitive Poetics. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Thibert, Arthur, *Eskimo* (*Inuktitut*) *Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2004).

V.
BODIES

RECONFIGURING THE DEAD BODY.
SHAPES OF THE AFTER-LIFE
IN GUNTHER VON HAGENS AND SEAMUS HEANEY

Anna Anselmo

This article focuses on the revisitation of the dead body as exemplified, theoretically, by Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* and, experientially and textually, by the bodies that emerged out of North-Western European bogs celebrated in Seamus Heaney's *bog poems* sequence (1969, 1972, 1975). Von Hagens' work, demiurge-like in nature, defamiliarizes the dead body by turning it into a self-confessed art object that defies the life-death dichotomy and begs for a third option. Bog bodies, on the other hand, are the fruit of peculiar microbiological conditions whereby the dead body is mummified and made available for retrieval, observation, study and, ultimately, exhibition – a visual-verbal art object. The article first lays out its theoretical framework by providing working definitions of both Gilles Deleuze's *devenir* and remediation. It then questions the ontological status of the dead body as revisited by von Hagens, self-appointed demiurge, and the Bog, Northern-European laboratory. It further focuses on the layers of remediation that the defamiliarized dead body undergoes: from *Body Worlds*' self-proclaimed status as pedagogic art to Heaney's verses lingering on the giveness and materiality of bog bodies, the dead body is shown as defying the life-death dichotomy, constructing its unprecedented after-life.

Bog Poems; Bog Bodies; Body Worlds; Remediation; Devenir

1. Deconstructing the binary machine

The present essay deals with two cultural phenomena: Gunther von Hagens' exhibition, *Body Worlds*,[1] and four of Seamus Heaney's bog poems. The purpose is not to have these phenomena converse, but to present a sustained analysis of both while treating them as parallel, yet distinct manifestations of a similar intention to surpass disciplinary boundaries and to offer syncretic cultural experiences. The essay further aims to show von Hagens and Heaney as examples of the same cultural tendency to question the ultimate binaries of life/death and subject/object.

---

[1] More information on and images of von Hagens' project can be found here: https://bodyworlds.com/.

The fact that this is done in different fields (von Hagens' anatomy and Heaney's poetry), at different times (the late 1990s, and the late 1960s and early 1970s, respectively), through efforts conceptually and artistically unrelated (anatomy and sculpture versus poetry and archaeology) justifies my treating the phenomena as parallel rather than conversant. One further similarity bringing von Hagens' anatomical-artistic work and Heaney's archaeo-poetics together into the present critical diptych is their readability in terms of Gilles Deleuze's notion of *devenir* and of his theoretical suggestions as to what he terms 'the binary machine'.

Regarding the latter point, Deleuze opens the second part of *Dialogues* by listing a few seemingly incontestable oppositions. He states:

> For example, in a literary interview, there is first of all the interviewer/interviewee dualism, and then, beyond, the man/writer, life/work dualisms in the interviewee himself, and again, the dualism between the work and the intention or the meaning of the work.[2]

The interview format, it seems, is not designed for obtaining answers insofar as all the questions have been framed in such a way as to already contain all their possible answers. And vice versa. Deleuze elaborates:

> There is always a binary machine which governs the distribution of roles and which means that all the answers must go through preformed questions, since the questions are already worked out on the basis of the answers assumed to be probable according to the dominant meanings. Thus a grille is constituted such that everything which does not pass through the grille cannot be materially understood. For example, in a broadcast on prisons the following choices will be established: jurist/prison governor, judge/lawyer, social worker/interesting case, the opinion of the ordinary prisoners who fill the prisons being pushed back outside the grille or outside the subject.[3]

Deleuze's definition of how binary logic works and his emphasis on the trap of taxonomical reasoning are the conceptual provocations which pave the way for my argument.

I use both lexicographical inputs and the Deleuzian notion of *devenir* (henceforth 'becoming') to read both von Hagens and Heaney as producing porous cultural work that aims at debunking conventional hermeneutic and ontological categories. The life/death opposition is in-

---

[2] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 19.
[3] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 20.

terrogated, firstly, in the light of the disruptive quality of representation:[4] the clean-cut distinction of dead/living body, the meaning of such dualism, and the very use of the (dead) body for creative purposes are read through more than the basic dead/alive opposition, and the notions of plastination and bog mummification are introduced. Secondly, the subject/object opposition is interrogated, using the two terms in the following acceptations: 'subject' is intended as he or she who can say 'I', in other words, 'A being [...] that thinks, knows, or perceives (more fully conscious subject, thinking subject); the conscious mind, esp. as opposed to any objects external to it. [...] the person or self, considered as a conscious agent' (*OED*); at the same time, it is intended as its paradoxical counterpart, 'a person who is under the control of another or who owes obedience to another'. 'Object' is intended as 'a thing which is perceived, thought of, known, etc.; [...] a thing which is external to or distinct from the apprehending mind, subject, or self' (*OED*). Deleuze's sophisticated theory of the subject is deemed unnecessary, and, therefore, not taken into consideration.

2. *Defamiliarizing the dead: Gunther von Hagens and the anatomical aesthetics of* Body Worlds

The line of demarcation between life and death is usually configured as an unquestionable ontological shift, duly reflected by language. Karin Sanders makes this point:[5] a living, breathing body becomes corpse/cadaver; this process of transformation is at the same time one of dissolution. When a person dies, 'the visible part of him [or her], the body, which lies in the visible world and which we call a corpse [...] is naturally subject to dissolution and decomposition'.[6] An example of how this seemingly unquestionable binary is, in fact, questioned, and fruitfully so, in the realm of representation, lies at the crossroads of science and aesthetics: Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* exhibition.

[4] This article uses the word *representation* as meaning 'The action or fact of portraying a person or thing, esp. in an artistic medium; depiction', as well as 'The action of putting forward an account of something discursively; a spoken or written statement, esp. one which conveys or intends to create a particular view or impression' (*OED*). The use of the Deleuzian notion of representation as laid out, among other works, in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) is not taken into consideration.
[5] Karin Sanders, *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 8.
[6] Sanders, p. 8.

Von Hagens' process is one of defamiliarization of both body and corpse. Indebted to forms of preservation of the dead such as mummification and embalming, his work is self-confessedly aimed at

> [educating] the public about the inner workings of the human body and [showing] the effects of healthy and unhealthy lifestyles. Targeted mainly at a lay audience, the exhibitions are aimed to inspire visitors to become aware of the fragility of their bodies and to recognize the anatomical individual beauty inside each of us. The exhibition intends to: strengthen one's sense of health, show the potential and limits of the body, raise the question of the meaning of life.[7]

Such wilfully heterogenous aims manifest a desire to supersede mere scientific and anatomical data, not only in favour of educational and philosophical questions, but also with the aim to create aesthetic as well as scientific value. These aims further imply a symbolic reconfiguration of the corpse as *living* in the form of a memento, a learning opportunity, and a gateway to more spiritual considerations. Such symbolic slippage – in itself an implication that the cadaver is no longer an ontological fact antipodal to a living body, but an exhibit that has undergone several stages of remediation,[8] therefore a category all unto itself – is complemented by the scientific process the cadavers undergo in order to be exhibited, a process von Hagens himself invented: plastination.

Plastination is a 'process that replaces bodily fluids with synthetic preservatives'[9] and consists of five different steps: step one is 'fixation and anatomical dissection', and implies injecting preservation solutions into the specimen[10] and then removing fatty and connective tissues; step two consists in the 'removal of body fat and water'; 'forced impregnation' (step three) lies at the core of the plastination process and requires placing the specimen in a bath of liquid polymer, which prepares it for 'positioning' (step four), in which 'every single anatomical structure is properly aligned and fixed',[11] and 'curing or hardening' (step five), which protects what has now become a plastinate from decomposition and decay.

---

[7] See https://bodyworlds.com/about/philosophy/.

[8] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[9] Christina Goulding, Michael Saren and Andrew Lindridge, 'Reading the Body at von Hagens' "Body Worlds",' *Annals of Tourism Research* 40 (2013): p. 309.

[10] *Specimen* is the term used on the official *Body Worlds* website: https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/.

[11] https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/.

Plastination configures itself as a revolutionary act of counter-natural chemistry, a barrage against death. Its revolutionary quality is compounded by the theoretical-ontological implications of one of its steps, 'positioning', that is, the arrangement of the specimen in a specific position which is consistent with the educational/aesthetic intent of the exhibition. 'Positioning' is key to von Hagens' project, in that it combines the anatomical artist's seemingly irreducible educational, anatomical, and artistic aims. On the *Body Worlds* website, the positioning phase is described as requiring not only knowledge of anatomy, but a strong sense of aesthetics.[12] Such a deceivingly concise statement contains several elements worthy of analysis: firstly, the remediation of the cadaver with self-professed aesthetic aims points in the direction of the time-honoured tradition of anatomical art, further supported by specific references on the official *Body Worlds* website. In particular, the website mentions the intertwining of art and anatomy in Leonardo da Vinci's work, as well as the anatomical art of the eighteenth century. More than that, von Hagens' plastinates have been analysed as being connected with the work of the seventeenth-century anatomist Frederick Ruysch,[13] who propounded a 'new aesthetic of anatomy that melded the acts of demonstration and display with the stylistic and emblematic meanings of Vanitas art'.[14] The connection between the vagaries of art movements and the works of anatomists has long been recognized.[15]

A second element worth noting regards a survey carried out between May and August 2003 in Munich: *Body Worlds* visitors were presented with a questionnaire so as to map their emotional reaction to the exhibition. The results show how the aesthetic appeal of the plastinates contributes to their definitive defamiliarization[16] and thus makes them palatable. Further research, this time based on visitors' opinions spontaneously shared online, proves that it is precisely the aesthetic-artistic component of von Hagens' work that allows for emotional detachment and the acceptance of the plastinates as other than human: 'it is distance

---

[12] https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/.

[13] José Van Dijck, 'Bodyworlds: The Art of Plastinated Cadavers,' *Configurations* 9, 1 (2001): pp. 103-4.

[14] Julie V. Hansen, 'Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederick Ruysch,' *Art Bulletin* 78, 4 (1996): p. 671.

[15] Van Dijck, p. 111.

[16] Peter Leiberich et al., 'Body Worlds Exhibition – Visitor Attitudes and Emotions,' *Annals of Anatomy* 188 (2006): p. 572.

or the lack of identification that makes death palatable or even pleasur-
able'.[17] More than that, von Hagens creates his exhibits out of donated
bodies and the donors remain anonymous; this contributes to the effec-
tive erasure of self-identity or, as far as the visitors to the *Body Worlds*
exhibition are concerned, even the sense that the exhibits were once, in
fact, living. The dead body is thus metonymically reduced to its dissect-
ed anatomy and reborn as an exhibit; effectively preserved, on the one
hand, and dissolved, on the other.

Von Hagens' work, disturbing and yet acceptable to visitors precisely
because of its unfathomable excesses, subscribes to what Kayser defined as

> art whose form and subject matter appear to be part of, while contradictory to,
> the natural, social or personal worlds of which we are part. Its images most of-
> ten embody distortions, exaggerations, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a
> fashion that it confronts us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside
> down.[18]

This is achieved through the distancing between audience and exhibit
due to the utter defacement of the latter, and the seemingly counter-
intuitive celebration and re-enactment of the quotidian embedded in
the process of 'positioning', for cadavers are placed so as to silently re-
produce images and situations of everyday life. Here does plastination
effectively dissolve the ontological status of the cadaver, which has not
only been turned into an exhibit – therefore virtually recreated as an
art as well as a science object – but is also simultaneously infused with
paradoxical life through its re-enactment of the every-day. A sort of
anatomical still life.

Body Worlds is thus exemplary in its problematization and disruption
of the life/death, body/corpse binary in many ways, as von Hagens' plas-
tinates step 'outside the acceptable',[19] and yet straddle that fine line that
has always been the stylistic marker of the anatomical body, 'regarded
as a hybrid object, one of art as well as science'.[20] The disruption of the
life/death binary in terms of representation is here compounded by the
eminent problematization of the subject/object binary: von Hagens' work
reifies the dead through plastination and display, a process hinging on

---

[17] Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, pp. 314, 315.
[18] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 2.
[19] Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 313.
[20] Van Dijck, p. 110.

both the above-mentioned emphasis on the aesthetic value of the plasti-nates and on the work of spectacularization and dehumanization of the exhibits effected through the removal of skin.

By removing fat, soft tissue, water and skin, von Hagens effects the blurring of ontological categories: 'the stripping of the skin, the expo-sure of veins, sinew, muscle, organs, and the clinical manner in which they were exposed, open and posed, [dissolves] the distinction between mannequin and human'.[21] The corpse is defaced, both literally (it is en-tirely skinless, therefore faceless) and metaphorically, it is stripped of any recognizable sign of its former living and breathing humanity. In his ground-breaking book, Anzieu Didier identified skin as 'a primary datum which has elements of both the organic and the imaginary, which is at once a system for protecting our individuality and a primary in-strument and site of exchange with others'.[22] Skin is the ultimate border between me and not-me: in death, skin finds dissolution along with ev-erything else, while in von Hagens' work, skin alone is dissolved in order to lay anatomy bare. This is a revolutionary representational gesture: the skinned cadaver becomes one with the world surrounding it, through plastination it becomes an object among objects, for the skin that en-closed it and separated it from its surroundings no longer exists.[23]

Von Hagens' work further complexifies the life/death binary by ques-tioning the ontological shift in language that sees the transition from liv-ing and breathing body to lifeless cadaver. The original German name for von Hagens' project is *Körperwelten*; German and French philosophical theories have distinguished between *Körper* – which has remained the only signifier for 'body' in modern-day German – and *Leib*; the former is the body as an object in space, measurable in size and weight, the latter is the living body.[24] Von Hagens aptly qualifies his anatomical works as *Körper*, that is, bodies that are no longer infused with life, metonymically reduced to what they can be made to re-enact and showcase, elements of a scientific/aesthetic agenda which sees them reborn as a paradoxical form of non-life.

[21] Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 310.

[22] Anzieu Didier, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Seagal (London: Karnac, 2016), p. 3.

[23] Erasmo Silvio Storace, *Per un'estetica del cadavere: I Körperwelten di Gunther von Hagens* (Mila-no: Albo Versorio, 2013), pp. 41-50.

[24] Hans-Peter Krüger, 'Persons and Their Bodies: The Körper/Leib Distinction and Helmuth Ples-sner's Theories of Ex-centric Positionality and Homo Absconditus,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, 3 (2010): pp. 256-74.

The English translation of *Körperwelten* is *Body Worlds*, reading the language-specific effacement of the *Körper/Leib* distinction, but more than that, the effacement of the body/corpse opposition. *Body Worlds* shows the disruption of the life/death binary in its very name: 'body' means both the living body and the measurable body, the body that's unquestionably alive and the body/object in space. It is a convenient hypernym, designating at once 'the complete physical form of a person or animal; the assemblage of parts, organs, and tissues that constitutes the whole material organism' (*OED*), a living 'person', and a cadaver. The word 'body' thus contains, yet hides, within itself the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, while concealing the ignominious status of cadavers of von Hagens' plastinated exhibits, and it further consolidates their self-proclaimed identity as artworks. For a cadaver cannot be art, but a body can.

Von Hagens' *Körper* are more than simple anatomical hybrid bodies and their disruptiveness can be further understood in the light of Gilles Deleuze's notion of becoming: 'rather than a product, final or interim, [...] the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogeneous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end-state'.[25] Von Hagens' plastinates are suspended in-between: belonging to no fixed category – neither human nor mere objects, neither living nor dead, neither fully anatomical nor fully aesthetic productions – they are all these things at once, human and objects, anatomical and aesthetic, living in the symbolic slippage of their representation and remediation, dead in the bare facticity of their being originally donated for plastination. They are body-shaped and yet dehumanized and reified to the point of ontological fuzziness. Their status as exhibits is evidenced through von Hagens' decision to foreground the 'process of production [...] rather than hiding it from the audience'.[26] They straddle the subject/object dichotomy as their dehumanization and commodification is complemented by their reproduction of the quotidian, as they are 'staged in extreme [and quotidian] imitations of their key defining activities'.[27] Their in-betweenness is thus ontological, constitutive, and, above all, without resolution or goal.

[25] Cliff Stagoll, 'Becoming,' in Adrian Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 26.
[26] Van Dijck, p. 121.
[27] Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 313.

3. *Literature and the aesthetics of bodies in the bog: remediation and the binary machine*

There is one more instance of body/corpse disruption: the one enacted within Northern European bogs. Coupled with its artistic/literary counterpart, remediation, the bog effects the ultimate defamiliarization and paradoxical rebirth of the dead body. A definition of the bog body and an outline of the natural process it undergoes is as follows:

> any of several hundred variously preserved human remains found in natural peat bogs, mostly in northern and western Europe [...] Such bogs are anaerobic (oxygen-free) environments, a condition that prevents decay. They are also heavy with tannins [...]. The tannins preserve organic materials such as human bodies, including the soft tissues and the contents of the digestive tract.[28]

Bog bodies show several peculiarities: they are both overwhelmed by and resilient to the microbiological conditions in which they find themselves, while they are 'gradually invaded, distorted, and covered', they not only manage 'to survive under the surface of the landscape', but also 'testify to the fact that the past can be *corporeally* preserved and rediscoverable'.[29]

Bog deaths disturb and disrupt by definition: on the one hand, they have been ascribed to various patterns of communal and ritual violence;[30] on the other, they likely fall outside the Christian framework, as bogs are 'perceived as appropriate liminal spaces [...] in which to inter the troubled or dangerous dead',[31] such as suicides or unbaptized infants or murder victims. As a consequence, burial sites remain unmarked and bog bodies are not actually excavated. On the contrary, they have been known to literally resurface, entirely by accident, either at the metaphorical hand of a digger bucket or through the careful eyes of some worker busy at the processing line.[32]

Disruptiveness is the foremost characteristic of bog bodies,[33] described

---

[28] *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (www.britannica.com) defines bogs as follows: 'type of wetland ecosystem characterized by wet, spongy, poorly drained peaty soil'.

[29] Sanders, p. 7.

[30] Peter Vilhelm Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York: New York Review of Books, 1969); Melanie Giles, 'Bog Bodies: Representing the Dead,' paper delivered at the Conference *Respect for Ancient British Human Remains: Philosophy and Practice*, Manchester Museum, 17 November 2006.

[31] Giles, p. 2.

[32] Giles, p. 1.

[33] See Sanders, pp. 7-14.

as 'unique go-betweens [...] straddling not only the binaries of time and space, past and present, text and image, and ethics and aesthetics, but also the disciplinary boundaries between archaeology, history, literary studies and art history'.[34] Like von Hagens' exhibits, they are stuck in the semantic ambiguity of denotation: they are corpses, but the literature (archaeological and otherwise) addresses them as *bodies.* The ontological shift that marks the transition from life to death, from body to corpse is here again eluded: the use of *bodies* as designation lays bare the ambiguities of this special brand of dead by conveniently representing wholeness and fragmentation (complete physical form and the assemblage of parts), life and subjectivity (a person), death and the necessary objectification that follows it (a cadaver).

Mummification can be read as an interruption of the either/or of life and death. Bogs do not merely produce an interruption, but a rupture: the bodies' random emergence, from the peat and the past both, makes them remarkably present and tangible, while calling temporality into question as the stunning degree of preservation of bog bodies eludes dating without the support of forensic technology. In fact, bodies 'are often found in circumstances which lead the public and police to believe they are dealing with a modern – or at least historically recent – murder'.[35] Scholars and professionals who have worked with bog bodies have been deeply affected by their vividness and the violence of death that resonates from them, as well as by their utter disruption of temporality.[36]

The microbiological conditions in bogs preserve skin, hair and nails, the major organs, as well as food and parasitic remains in the stomach,[37] and 'garments or objects made of wool, skin, leather and metal'.[38] Because of their pastness and presentness, their vivid life-like appearance contrasting with their unquestionable status as dead, bog bodies blur

---

[34] Sanders, p. xv.

[35] Giles, p. 1.

[36] Rolly Reed, Head of Conservation at the National Museum of Ireland, is reported as saying: 'I was freaked [...] On a personal level I had trouble... I had a vision of those enormous arms coming round the back of my neck. I was getting flashbacks for a fortnight. I was having nightmares... What hit me hardest, I think, was the fingerprints – perfect fingerprints – the same as a guy's from today. He could have been anybody off the streets of Dublin... it was like touching your own skin'. Elizabeth Grice, 'A Chilling Tale of Ritual Murder,' *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 2006, pp. 19, 21.

[37] Ian Mathieson Stead, J.B. Bourke, and Don R. Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London: British Museum, 1986).

[38] Giles, p. 2.

the boundaries between life and death, disrupt the either/or, the binary machine all at once; and while they offer invaluable insight into the past, they also urge artists and scientists alike to reconsider the present. In the constant slippage they embody – past/present, dead/alive – they offer a convenient semantic vacuum that opens up the possibilities of metaphor, allegory, and symbol.

Seamus Heaney's celebrated bog poem sequence has often been interpreted in terms of time and place (as an oblique reference to the Troubles in Ireland), the emphasis being on sectarian violence and the consequences of English colonialism.[39] The bulk of Heaney's 'Bog Poems' were published in his 1975 collection *North*, but poems using bog and bog bodies as imaginative symbols can also be found in *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972).[40] Heaney's fascination with the bog manifests itself in the very inception of his work,[41] but it is in 'Bogland' (1969) that he sets up the bog as the soft, black centre of binary disruption, a trope that will be inflected in many ways in the bog poems to follow, and that will lead the way to the writing of the disruption of the either/or of life/death and subject/object. The poems I will take into consideration are: 'Bogland', 'The Grauballe Man', 'Bog Queen' and 'Strange Fruit'.

'Bogland' (1969) spells out the descriptive coordinates of the bog: caught in a series of binaries – surface and depth, crust and core, immersion and emersion – the bog itself seems to be subservient to the binary machine. Heaney describes it, firstly, in terms of horizontality and verticality, that is, its vastness ('unfenced country', l. 6) and its vertical vertigo ('inwards and downwards', l. 24, stripped layers that seem 'camped on before', l. 26, 'The wet centre is bottomless', l. 28); secondly, in terms of hard and soft, that is, its crusting 'Between the sights of the sun' (l. 8) and its 'melting and opening underfoot' (l. 17), the wet softness that implies the sinking of objects; thirdly, in terms of its being both killer/kidnapper and mother, that is, in its privative and restitutive qualities. Here is where the bog emerges as more than the sum and the cruel exclusivist logic of

[39] Patrick Wright, 'Empathising with Bog Bodies: Seamus Heaney and the Feminine Sublime,' *Brief Encounters* 1, 1 (2017): p. 2.
[40] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). All quotations are taken from here.
[41] On the origins of Heaney's archaeological poetics and interest in bogland, see Anna Anselmo, 'Toward the Within: Archaeology and Remediation in Seamus Heaney's *Digging*,' *Remediating Imagination: Literatures and Cultures in English from the Renaissance to the Postcolonial*, ed. Gioia Angeletti, Giovanna Buonanno e Diego Saglia (Roma: Carocci, 2016), pp. 141-8.

its binaries: while it swallows up bodies, objects, and animals ('butter', l. 13, and 'the Great Irish Elk', l. 10) and is thus treacherous and deadly, it also preserves these accidental casualties of anthropological rites and fate; further, it not only cradles and conserves whatever is deposited in it, it also gives it back in random and unexpected acts of restitution and/ or discovery. The bog bridges the gap between lost and found, in and out, dead and alive. Thus, Heaney writes of the 'Great Irish Elk' (l. 10) taken out of the peat and standing as 'an astounding crate full of air' (l. 12); he writes of 'butter sunk under / More than a hundred years' (ll. 13-14) which 'was recovered salty and white' (l. 15).

Reflecting on the meaning of bogland in his creative life, Heaney explains how 'memory was the faculty that supplied [him] with the first quickening of [his] own poetry' and how he felt 'a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland'.[42] Bogland is thus pregnant with meaning and history; in 'Kinship', Heaney calls it in turn 'Ruminant ground' (II, l. 9), 'Earth-pantry' and 'bone vault' (II, l. 13); containing death, creativity/motherhood, and the contradiction of chewing, swallowing, and bringing back up.

It is 'The Grauballe Man' (1975) that bridges the gap between life and death by acknowledging bogs and bog bodies as the ultimate act of defiance against 'the rupture wrought by death on the body'.[43] The body of the Grauballe Man presents the poet with more questions than answers: it is 'something entirely different from what [it] had been before, changed from subject to object by the weight of the past'.[44] In fact, Heaney first sees it in a picture, already remediated through the archaeological work of reconstruction carried out by P.V. Glob, a double object. At the same time, the Grauballe Man refuses objectification, caught in the life-giving paradox of the bog: neither alive nor quite dead, Grauballe may be an object of study, but is the subject of his own rebirth, given a new lease of life by the mother-bog/motherland, with Heaney acting as midwife and playing out the disruption of the life and death binary in verse: 'Who will say "corpse" / to his vivid cast? / Who will say "body" / to his opaque repose?' (ll. 25-8). Exploiting the linguistic slippage that captures

[42]   Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 54.

[43]   Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 35.

[44]   Laqueur, p. 32.

the ontological rupture caused by bog bodies, Heaney questions the very nature of life and death: too vivid to be dead, too still to be alive, the Grauballe Man is neither alive *nor* dead, but some other way of being in the world that questions the very language we use as well as the hard-and-fast ontological categories we live by. Grauballe is a foetus (l. 31), his head and shoulder 'Bruised like a forceps baby' (l. 36): showcasing the awkward lines of a new-born ('his twisted face', l. 32), he is a product of the bog, and of himself, intertwined with the very ground that hid him in the gruesomeness of his death and penetrated him to his very core so he could be new again, completely transfigured by tannins, 'poured in / tar' (ll. 1-2) and weeping 'the black river of himself' (ll. 4-5).

Heaney is intensely aware of the disruptive quality of his topic: both subject and object, newly born and long-dead, Grauballe is caught in-between, pure becoming. Both in himself and through Heaney's eyes, Grauballe embodies Deleuze's very dynamism of change: he has been penetrated by what Heaney in 'The Tollund Man' (1972) calls the 'dark juices' (l. 15) of the bog, but the transformative qualities of the peat reach beyond the ground and into the materiality of the word. Grauballe is, in fact, beyond human, beyond the utter and deceivingly clean-cut categories of dead and alive, he is imbued with the paradox of wet-land (another word for bog), existing in water and earth at the same time: his wrists are like 'bog oak' (l. 7), his heel like a 'basalt egg' (l. 9), his instep wobbling between the alliteration and rhyme of 'a swan's foot / or a wet swamp root' (ll. 11-12), floral and faunal; his hips mussel-like (l. 14), concave and convex at once, and his spine the shape of an eel in glistening mud (ll. 15-16). Part water, part earth, in-between life and death and partaking of both, Grauballe is individuated by Heaney's ekphrastic brushstrokes in his intense liminality, in his essentiality as a signifier of change and perpetual becoming.

'Bog Queen' (1975) takes the disruptive quality of the bog body even further by belabouring the Deleuzian concept of becoming, which 'explodes the ideas about what we are and what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us: beyond the boundaries separating human being from animal, man from woman, child from adult, micro from macro, and even perceptible and understandable from imperceptible and incomprehensible',[45] and life from death, I may add. The subject/object divide is

---

[45] Patty Sotirin, 'Becoming-woman,' in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles Stivale (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 99.

blurred in Iron Age bog bodies; people and things were treated analogously when placed in the bog, 'weapons, personal objects, tools, cauldrons and food such as tubs of bog butter, [were] often deliberately damaged, twisted or broken, before being pinned or weighed down, as with the bog bodies'.[46] This already tenuous divide between subjects and objects in bogs leads to the questioning of the very nature of bog bodies themselves, as people or things, human beings that once were or archaeological evidence and, eventually, exhibits. Such tenuous divide is addressed by Heaney, who comfortably inhabits the ambiguity in 'Bog Queen'.

The first person narration already identifies the queen as a speaking, thinking, feeling subject: on the one hand, she is, undeniably, a cadaver, a sacrificial victim, *subject*ed to the vagaries and violence of time, the elements, and (living) human agency ('dawn suns groped over my head / and cooled at my feet', ll. 7-8; 'I was barbered / and stripped / by a turf-cutter's spade', ll. 42-4), an object of anthropological rites, archaeological research, and museum exhibitions; on the other hand, given her own voice by the poet, she is caught in-between subjectivity and objectification, life and death, taking part in both, waiting to be reborn. In a word, becoming. The queen is thus one more perfect embodiment of the paradox of bogs: she was a subject (alive), she was an object (of sacrifice, a cadaver), she is a subject again as she lies waiting (l. 1), a key verb Heaney employs, which implies an active subject in terms of consciousness of self and decision-making abilities. Heaney thus verbally constitutes the Bog Queen as something unique, fundamentally disruptive: an archaeological subject, as opposed to the conventional archaeological object.

More than that, Heaney's ekphrastic exploits solidify the deceivingly ephemeral concept of becoming. While, in common parlance, becoming tends to be assimilated with a linear process *tout court* with a start, a metamorphic middle and an end result, in Deleuzian thought, becoming is not synonymous with metamorphosis or transformation, but rather a relational cross-contagion in which no origins or targets are relevant, and in which no element caught in becoming loses itself or transforms itself, but reaches out beyond itself and is thus caught in the very dynamism of change, existing in the absence of either/ors and in the very presence of addition (and…and…and…). To put it in Deleuze's own words, firstly:

---

[46]   Giles, p. 11.

> Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. Nuptials are always against nature. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc.[47]

And secondly:

> The wasp and the orchid provide the example. The orchid seems to form a wasp image, but in fact there is a wasp-becoming of the orchid, an orchid-becoming of the wasp, a double capture since 'what' each becomes changes no less than 'that which' becomes. The wasp becomes part of the orchid's reproductive apparatus at the same time as the orchid becomes the sexual organ of the wasp. One and the same becoming, a single bloc of becoming.[48]

The Deleuzian example serves to understand how bog bodies, and Heaney's 'Bog Queen' in particular, are caught in becoming. Already in 'The Tollund Man' (ll. 13-18) and, as seen above, in 'Grauballe Man', images of cross-contagion, and an awareness of the intertwining of body and bog are key elements of Heaney's poetical agenda. In 'Bog Queen', images of this sort multiply to signify the double-capture, indissoluble and perpetually dynamic, between the queen and the peat. The queen describes the process of decay and preservation undergone in the bog in terms of becoming-bog and the bog becoming her: the master image being 'My body was braille / for the creeping influences' (ll. 5-6). Underground, in the dark, both bog and queen are bound to the sense of touch, her body becomes a language made up of bumps and crevices and full and empty, in which the surrounding terrain finds room for cross-contagion. The sun above ground warms her head up and cools at her feet, from east to west, and that's how she knows the way she's been laid down; she is penetrated by the 'seeps of winter' (l. 10) – underground streamlets of water and tannins – through skin and fabric, they digest her, capture her in a process of progressive drying up and conservation of tanned, leathery skin. Infiltrated by the juices of the bog, drained and leathered, she is porous, and, in turn, becomes home to roots that 'pondered and died / in the cavings / of stomach and sockets' (ll. 13-15). Not only is she penetrated by the juices of the bog, she offers herself up as home to 'illiterate roots' (l. 12): they are caught in becoming-queen, while she is caught in becoming-root, becoming-bog.

[47] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.
[48] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.

What Heaney crystallizes in the rich abundance and mercilessness of his images is Deleuzian becoming as epitomized in bog bodies: despite references to origins and results in Heaney's verses – the queen's royal status and crown, her silent wait for rebirth out of the bog – the focus is on the ground and the body cross-contaminating; the queen does not become the ground any more than the ground becomes her, but they are in constant conversation, the parts where they touch embodying the very dynamism of change. So 'The question "What are you becoming?" is particularly stupid. For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself'.[49] The 'Bog Queen' does not become anything: while she is bent on rebirth, lying in wait, she is also conversing with the natural environment in which she is embedded, part of a constant and absolute event, that of relationship and contagion. Her brain 'fermenting' (l. 20), becoming-tannin, reminiscent of vineyards and wine; her nails darkened by the minerals in the earth, fruit-like ('Bruised berries under my nails', l. 22). Even when she is finally reborn, torn out of her century-long double-capture with the bog ('The plait of my hair / a slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut / and I rose from the dark', ll. 50-3), Heaney and the reader know that her becoming will never cease: she will be caught in becoming-cadaver for the purpose of medical and archaeological study, becoming-photograph, becoming-exhibit, conversing with display cases and arrangements and lighting and positioning and location, constantly reconfiguring and reconfigured by finally becoming-spectator, seen and seeing.

The last poem here discussed, an emblem of becoming and of the linguistic slippage inherent in bog bodies, is 'Strange Fruit'. Firstly, the poem presents the full ambiguity and ontological rupture in the use of the word 'body': if, based on the arguments and the definition offered above, 'body' is a hypernym, comfortable in that it refers to both living and dead body, but also defamiliarizing because it is more commonly associated with life than death for which the hyponyms corpse and cadaver are more usual, 'body' is also the name for a unity that is made up of parts, that is, the assemblage of organs, tissue, systems that go into the function of the body as a whole. Already in 'Grauballe' and 'Tollund', Heaney zooms in on body parts, his ekphrastic verses focus on head ('Tollund'), and chin and slit throat ('Grauballe'). The poet's attention to

---

[49] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.

detail is both a stylistic feature that predates the bog poem sequence, as well as a necessity for two reasons: on the one hand, Danish bog bodies come to him via P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, thus what Heaney sees is, firstly, pictures (remediated versions of the bodies), and secondly, pictures of parts, details, which constitute the material he draws on in order to write. In fact, as Gail McConnell points out:

> many of Heaney's comments on poetry 'nudge it towards the visual arts … the verbal icon'; 'a search for images and symbols'; 'The poetry I love is some kind of image or visionary thing'; 'a painter can lift anything and make an image of it'. Famously, in 'Feeling into Words', Heaney represents poetry as divination and frames his poetic endeavour as 'a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' as though already pre-formed, found rather than made. While this may sound painterly, Heaney is speaking about an encounter with photography: 'the unforgettable photographs of these victims [in *The Bog People*] blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present'. Indeed, his memory of the elk skeleton found in the bog as a child is less a memory than a memory of a photograph.[50]

Heaney compounds his fascination with the compactness and emotional impact of photography with his profound understanding of the ambiguity of 'body', of bog-made and bog-found subjects/objects that are impossible to pigeonhole into the clean-cut categories of alive and dead. Thus, using language as he would a lens, he thematizes the assemblage-like quality inherent in the word 'body', he looks at body parts. Specifically, a head. The significance of metonymy (a head for a victim, a head for a body) coupled with the importance that the head itself has in some parts of Deleuze's discourse on becoming is a starting point for discussing the blurring of the boundaries between dead and alive, object and subject.

In writing of Francis Bacon's portraits, Deleuze claims that by portraying heads instead of faces, Bacon sets out to 'dismantle the face: to rediscover the head and make it emerge from beneath the face'.[51] In perhaps similar fashion, Heaney writes of what is presumably the head of a young woman found in Roum Fen in 1942 and described by Glob.[52] Her state of preservation is such that she is already beyond the catego-

[50] Gail McConnell, 'Heaney and the Photograph: "Strange Fruit" in Manuscript and Published Form,' *Irish University Review* 47 (2017): p. 434.
[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 19.
[52] Glob, pp. 98-100.

ries of alive and dead: empty eye-sockets 'blank as pools' (l. 8), 'prune-skinned' (l. 2), dark and wrinkled-thick, she is purely symbolic, almost faceless, her becoming-bog and becoming-nature still resonating. Nature has both preserved her head and corrupted her to the point of defamiliarization. The face has left room for the flesh: 'without the face, the body becomes-animal, that is, becomes flesh or meat – something that loses definition as it is removed from its bones'.[53]

Beyond definition, the girl in 'Strange Fruit' is both completely transformed into a part of nature, the metaphor/title to the poem bearing the full weight of the perfect identity between severed head and fruit, and a completely defamiliarized subject/object, impossible to read as alive or dead for it is pure symbol – a talking head, body-less – and exhibit at the same time. Some of the bog bodies studied by Glob ended up dismembered for the purpose of study and exhibition, so Heaney takes up the Roum girl's head as symbolic of ritual violence, remediation and becoming. Ritual violence and time make an object out of her, her sagging, leathery flesh and open mouth reminiscent of Francis Bacon's melting, self-deconstructing faces; she is stripped of that mask, 'laid on from the outside that allows me to pass into human society but only within certain narrow corridors defined by the faciality of my face'.[54] Her emersion, exhumation, study and exhibition have reduced her to a metonymy, her head the only manifestation of her past and present existence, tight as an elastic band across time, and timeless in the (literal) emptiness of her eye(sockets): and yet, bodyless head, she *stares*, she meets the violence of her death and the voyeuristic twentieth-century museum-goer head on ('outstaring axe / And beatification, outstaring / What had begun to feel like reverence', ll. 12-14). It is in her eyeless stare and her open, all-swallowing Baconian mouth that she ceases to be object and claims subjectivity. Within the subject/object divide, with her being subject *and* object, Deleuzian becoming is once more enacted: Heaney writes of her as an 'exhumed gourd' (l. 1), 'pash' (l. 6) – an old regional word for head, the archaism delivering the depth of time she embodies – made 'of tallow' (l. 6), animal fat, soft and hard, malleable. Not only is she a strange fruit, becoming-bog in her prune-skin and prune-stone-like teeth (l. 2), not only is her hair described as 'wet fern' (l. 3), caught in-between animal and vegetable texture, but she

---

[53] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): p. 711.
[54] Bruns, p. 712.

is also becoming-animal as exemplified by the loneliness of her defaced, eyeless face, an absolute 'head', which is, in Deleuze's words, a 'spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit';[55] as evident in the tallow of her head, the soft animal-based substance that makes the Roum girl less of a biped and more of a quadruped.

4. Drawing flies: or, coming to an end

The binary machine has been consistently questioned by science and literature alike. Either/or scenarios have been increasingly problematized and their claim for absoluteness debunked. By looking at Gunther von Hagens' scientific-aesthetic agenda, as well as the peculiarities of bog bodies, both natural and representational, the very real possibility of disrupting binary oppositions such as life/death and subject/object has emerged. While Gunther von Hagens' work walks the fine line between anatomy and the visual arts and plays on the defamiliarization and defacement of the dead body and the effect provoked by its contradictory positioning within the quotidian, bog bodies prove disruptive on multiple levels. The very existence of these bodies and their location – the bog – provide a liminal backdrop against which representation – be it archaeological, museal, and literary – must be read.

Seamus Heaney's reading of bog bodies pivots on such a threshold, but reaches beyond it, and shows bog bodies as disrupting the life/death as well as the subject/object divide. Heaney captures the symbolic essence of these bodies, their being in-between: they are caught in becoming, a pure event, a simultaneity 'whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once'.[56] Heaney sees these bodies as pulling in both directions, past and future, caught in their relational dynamic with the bog. Both von Hagens' and Heaney's work thrive on the rupture of the either/or and re-imagine and re-present the body as going beyond accepted hermeneutic categories, signifying all the more because of it.

[55] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, p. 19.
[56] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 1.

Bibliography

Anselmo, Anna, 'Toward the Within: Archaeology and Remediation in Seamus Heaney's *Digging*,' in *Remediating Imagination: Literatures and Cultures in English from the Renaissance to the Postcolonial*, ed. Gioia Angeletti, Giovanna Buonanno e Diego Saglia (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2016), pp. 141-8.

Bolter, J. David and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

Bruns, Gerald L., 'Becoming Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): pp. 703-20.

Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

———, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

———, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Didier, Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Seagal (London: Karnac, 2016).

Giles, Melanie, 'Bog Bodies: Representing the Dead,' paper delivered at the Conference *Respect for Ancient British Human Remains: Philosophy and Practice.* Manchester Museum: 17 November 2006.

Glob, Peter Vilhelm, *The Bog People: Iron-age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York: New York Review of Books, 1969).

Goulding, Christina, Michael Saren and Andrew Lindridge, 'Reading the Body at Von Hagens' "Body Worlds",' *Annals of Tourism Research* 40 (2013): pp. 306-30.

Grice, Elizabeth, 'A Chilling Tale of Ritual Murder,' *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 2006: pp. 19-21.

Hansen, Julie V., 'Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederick Ruysch,' *Art Bulletin* 78, 4 (1996): pp. 663-79.

Heaney, Seamus, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

———, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980).

Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963).

Krüger, Hans-Peter, 'Persons and Their Bodies: The Körper/Leib Distinction and Helmuth Plessner's Theories of Ex-centric Positionality and Homo Absconditus,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, 3 (2010): pp. 256-74.

Laqueur, Thomas, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Leiberich, Peter, et al., '*Body Worlds* Exhibition – Visitor Attitudes and Emotions,' *Annals of Anatomy* 188 (2006), pp. 567-73.

McConnell, Gail, 'Heaney and the Photograph: "Strange Fruit" in Manuscript and Published Form,' *Irish University Review* 47 (2017), pp. 432-49.

Parr, Adrian (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

Sanders, Karin, *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Stivale, Charles J. (ed.), *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

Sotirin, Patty, 'Becoming-Woman,' in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles J. Stivale (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), pp. 98-109.

Stagoll, Cliff, 'Becoming,' in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 25-7.

Storace, Erasmo Silvio, *Per un'estetica del cadavere: I Körperwelten di Gunther von Hagens* (Milano: Albo Versorio, 2013), pp. 41-50.

Van Dijck, José, 'Bodyworlds: The Art of Plastinated Cadavers,' *Configurations*, 9, 1 (2001): pp. 99-126.

Wright, Patrick. 'Empathising with Bog Bodies: Seamus Heaney and the Feminine Sublime,' *Brief Encounters* 1, 1 (2017): pp. 1-14.

SKULLS: FROM AIDS TO MEDITATION
TO FASHION ACCESSORIES

Maria Luisa De Rinaldis

Remediation studies have focused on the ways media cross-fertilize and refashion forms of communication, adapting them to current cultures and contexts. This essay discusses some literary genealogies of the all-pervasive skull image present in fashion photography and contemporary design. A trajectory of skull images through the centuries is delineated through a fragmentary sequence of examples starting from Renaissance art and drama. Skulls are discussed as aids to reflection on man's finitude, sites of interrogation and difference. In the age of photography, texts by E.A. Poe, Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf are considered to highlight various ways in which characters are significantly associated with skull images. At the intersection of literature, photography and fashion, the *memento mori* theme is discussed in a specific trend in fashion design in the 1990s, in which bodies are shown as deprived of their material surface and skulls are commodified, used, as later exemplified by Damien Hirst's diamond skull, as mere luxury accessories.

Skulls; Remediation; Photography; Subjectivity; Fashion

Skulls circulated in fashion images in the late twentieth century and are conspicuously present in contemporary culture in a variety of artistic and consumerist contexts. The spectacle of spectrality has gone on across centuries and has been mediated in different artistic forms. To use one of Walter Pater's antinomies, it is a spectacle that 'repels and attracts'.[1] The present essay will discuss some literary genealogies of the all-pervasive skull image present in fashion photography and contemporary design by considering premodernist and modernist aesthetics of the visual in texts by Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf. As is well known, skulls as memento mori have a long tradition. To think outside the box, an intermedial

---

[1] Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2002), p. 92. See also Benjamin Bennet-Carpenter, *Death in Documentaries. The Memento Mori Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); among recent studies focusing on the topic from different perspectives see Ben Bradley, Fred Feldman and Jens Johansson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Luca Bendani and Paz Diman, *Skullture. Il teschio nella cultura contemporanea* (Milano: 24Ore Cultura, 2015).

perspective is adopted so as to trace a trajectory of the image from its use in the Renaissance to remediations in fiction and fashion.

Remediation studies have focused on the ways media cross-fertilize each other and refashion older forms of communication adapting them to current cultures and contexts. In line with the seminal analysis developed by Marshall McLuhan, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have explored the dual logic of remediation, consisting in an oscillation 'between immediacy and hypermediacy', that is, between 'the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves'. These 'two logics of remediation', they state, 'have a long history, for their interplay defines a genealogy that dates back at least to the Renaissance and the invention of linear perspective'.[2] Nineteenth-century photography in fact remediates painting and linear perspective; later on, fiction and photography will encounter fashion. In the 1980s, authoritative fashion editor and curator Diane Vreeland poses the question 'Where would fashion be without literature?', a question that Paola Colaiacomo situates at the birth of modern Fashion Studies.[3]

A trajectory of skull images through the centuries and in various media can only be delineated here through a fragmentary sequence of isolated examples. Disseminated in Renaissance art and drama, skulls seem to play a dual role; on the one hand, they are a memento mori, symbols of vanitas that allude to the contiguity between life and death, and to nostalgia for lost unity. On the other hand they are signs of division and difference. The skull is an autonomous object represented in isolation in a 1521 drawing by Albrecht Dürer (whose work greatly developed the topic), while gentlemen with skulls were represented in many forms of Renaissance art, providing an iconography of the *memento mori* topos that will be expressed in drama as well. An early example is provided by an engraving by Lucas van der Leyden, *Young Man with Skull* (1519), reproducing a richly dressed youth, a nobleman or a courtier, who holds a skull near his waist, and points to it while pointedly not gazing at it. The skull is held in a similar position in Jacob Binck's *Self-Portrait with Skull* (1530), in which a different perspective suggests a more direct rela-

---

[2] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 20-1; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
[3] Paola Colaiacomo, *Natasha's Dress. Languages of Literature, Languages of Fashion* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), p. 22. Colaiacomo investigates crucial intersections between Modernism, fashion theory and the trauma of the first World War.

tionship between face and skull.[4] In a 1529 painting by Lucas Furtenagel, representing the painter Hans Burgkmair with his wife Anna, the relationship is even more oblique, since the woman holds a mirror that reflects two skulls instead of the two living bodies.[5] The skull is distorted in Hans Holbein's well known painting *The Ambassadors*, which introduces the vogue of the death's head in English portraiture.[6] The two French noblemen are represented near a table in a space where the floor recalls a decoration in Westminster Abbey. All objects in the scene express the humanistic potential to master the world except for the distorted shadow on the floor, recognizable as a skull only if looked at from a certain perspective. The perspective is in fact plural, divisive; the self is in a condition of ontological instability, shifting from the position of subject and owner to that of a powerless object.[7] The skull is also represented twice; in fact, it appears on a much smaller scale on the brooch in one of the protagonists' caps. This counter perspective suggests an oscillation between the skull's symbolic weight as a memory of finitude and its 'material' ornamental use. By the end of the sixteenth century skull-shaped objects were very popular and were reproduced on watches and rings. Besides being a memento mori, they were also used as 'a protection from death'.[8]

The image presented in painting and figurative arts is reworked in the drama of the period. In the tradition of memento mori, *Hamlet* provides 'the first appearance of a fully dimensional skull on the Elizabethan stage'.[9] In the graveyard Hamlet promptly reacts to the two skulls thrown by the gravedigger, imagining that their former identities could be those of Cain, or of a politician, or of a lawyer, until a skull is unques-

[4] Roland Mushat Frye, 'Ladies, Gentlemen and Skulls. Hamlet and the Iconographic Traditions', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, 1 (1979): pp. 18-20.

[5] Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge. Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 228.

[6] Frye, p. 21.

[7] Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 93-5. Sofer discusses Stephen Greenblatt's analysis of Holbein's painting, emphasizing the decentred gaze and the subject/object duality, and Marjorie Garber's different reading of the skull as a Christian emblem in which the duality between life and death collapses.

[8] P.S. Spinrad, 'Memento Mockery: Some Skulls on the English Renaissance Stage', *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 10 (1984), quoted in Sofer, pp. 228-9, n. 4. This attitude was soon derided as, for example, the advice given by Philip Massinger shows: 'Sell some of your clothing and buy yourself a death's head and wear it on your middle finger' (quoted in Sofer, p. 229, n. 12). On skulls as stage properties see also Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 187.

[9] Sofer discusses this assumption in n. 4, pp. 227-8.

tionably presented to him as Yorick's skull, interlinked with his own history. Traumatically caught between the memory of the past and the present, Hamlet takes the skull in his hand:

> HAMLET Let me see. [Takes the skull] Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?[10]

Hamlet here juxtaposes past and present, registering the pain of the difference between the two.[11] The skull is a medium through which to reflect upon one's own finitude, decay and de-formation; at the same time it stirs emotional engagement: skulls may be ambivalent, as Margreta de Grazia has observed, and 'perform the opposite of what they profess, richly and fully embodying things rather than emptying them out'.[12] Hamlet's physical, sensory interaction with the skull projects an intersubjective and interpersonal self.[13]

In the eighteenth century Laurence Sterne uses the image in ways that contested current canons of rational order. 'Alas Poor Yorick!', he writes in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) before the black page when Parson Yorick dies; in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, Yorick will be taken to be Shakespeare's Yorick in person in a passage that combines humour, emotion and death:

---

[10] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5.1.155-63.

[11] On a gendered interpretation of complaint also in relation to Hamlet see Katharine Goodland, *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (London: Routledge, 2005). Goodland also discusses rhetorical conventions of complaint and specifically antithetical thought. See also 'The forme of Poeticall Lamentations' in George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Edward Arber (London: Murray, 1869), pp. 61-4.

[12] Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (eds), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1.

[13] For a discussion of Hamlet's intersubjective emotions see Richard Meek '"For by the Image of my Cause I See/ The Portraiture of His": *Hamlet* and the Imitation of Emotion,' in *Hamlet and Emotions*, ed. Paul Megna, Brid Phillips, and R.S. White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 81-108. Goodland has discussed early reformist anxieties 'over any communicative possibilities between the living and the dead' (pp. 3-4). The medieval Catholic notion of Purgatory, eliminated in Reformed theological thought, had provided, in fact, in Goodland's words, 'a region of memory and emotion for the living: as the place of the dead, the physical embodiment of the past, it was also the space where the living negotiated their guilt, dreams, hopes, fears and sorrows' (p. 26).

> Good, my lord! said I; but there are two Yoricks. The Yorick your lordship thinks of has been dead and buried eight hundred years ago; he flourish'd in Horwen-dillus's court – the other Yorick is myself, who have flourish'd, my lord, in no court – He shook his head – Good God! said I, you might as well confound Alexander the Great with Alexander the Copper-smith, my lord! – 'Twas all one, he replied.[14]

Sterne's use of 'Yorick' as his own authorial mask suggests innovative, postmodern reinventions of self and writing.[15]

The Victorians were hugely engaged with their own past and with the Renaissance, which was variously 'resurrected'. In a design by John Tenniel published in *Punch* in 1865 Queen Victoria, the age's 'arch-melancholy'[16] after the death of Prince Albert in 1861, was represented as a new Hermione coming back to life. Mourning clothes and veil for the death of her husband were replaced by full court dress, signalling the desire she be 'stone no more'.[17] The Victorians' obsession with relics and objects that belonged to the dead testify to an effort to domesticate the idea of death.[18] As shown by Michel Foucault in his study of the 'clinic', in the nineteenth century the transformation of the medical gaze inaugurated a new 'science of the individual' since, under clinical observation, death became visible on the living body and was associated with knowledge. It is at the moment of one's disappearance that 'an obstinate relation to death prescribes to the universal its singular face, and lends to each individual the power of being heard forever; the individual owes to death a meaning that does not cease with him'.[19] In the age of the 'crisis of death', as Roland Barthes has shown, it was the medium of photography that re-introduced a death whose 'paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one

[14] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, by Mr Yorick* (London: Becket, De Hondt, 1768), vol. 1, p. 71.

[15] See Kenneth Monkman, 'Sterne, Hamlet and Yorick: Some New Material,' in *The Winged Skull. Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. 112-23; Luigi Cazzato, 'Laurence Sterne and His Paradoxical Aesthetics of the New,' *Textus* 18 (2005): pp. 153-72.

[16] Jay Dickson, 'Surviving Victoria,' in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture 1889-1939*, ed. Maria Di Battista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 23-46.

[17] John Tenniel, 'Queen Hermione', *Punch*, 23 September 1865; William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. J.H.P. Pafford (London: Methuen,1984), 5.3.99.

[18] See Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[19] Timothy Rayner, *Foucault's Heidegger: Philosophy and Transformative Experience* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 44; Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Clinique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

separating the initial pose from the final point'.[20] If death 'authorizes' one's life[21] and renders it legible, and consumable in the future, Barthes analyzes the immobilization of time that makes life and the self present in photography. A photograph is a presence that faces our inability to experience duration. Photography is the experience of the self that has become 'a spectre', 'other', but would like to annul the difference between self and image:

> What I want in short is that my (mobile) image [...] should always coincide with my (profound) 'self'; but it is the contrary that must be said: 'myself' never co-incides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn, [...] and 'myself', which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, 'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar: if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing![22]

In transforming the subject into a kind of museum object, the photograph is related to a surgical procedure that disperses the individual; the image cannot but be 'sinister and repellent' as it is 'disinternalized', unrelated to consciousness and interiority: 'when I discover myself in the product of this operation what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say Death in person'.[23]

In the age of mechanical reproduction, literature inscribes the relationship between self, image and death in a variety of forms. Inaugurating a literature of the portrait that expresses duality and unstable identities, Edgar Allan Poe's stories are full of deaths 'of a special order', showing his obsession with 'the no man's land between death and life'.[24] A death's-head is what the protagonist faces in 'The Sphinx', a short story first published in 1846. The protagonist is entrapped in fear due to an epidemic of cholera in New York; he goes away to escape it and visits a friend, but there is no way out: 'The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death. That palsying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I could neither speak, think, nor dream of any thing

---

[20] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 92.

[21] On the process of 'authorization' that death exercises over one's life see Walter Benjamin's comments in 'The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,' in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 368-9.

[22] Barthes, p. 12.

[23] Barthes, pp. 14-15.

[24] Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.103.

else'.[25] While reading a book, sitting at an open window, his eyes fell upon a 'naked' hillside (bare of trees) and then 'upon an object – upon some living monster of hideous conformation, which very rapidly made its way from the summit to the bottom, disappearing finally in the dense forest below'. Doubting his own sanity, he describes with an abundance of details 'the shape of the monster' which appears to be of a great size and has a death's head impressed on its trunk:

> The mouth of the animal was situated at the extremity of a proboscis some sixty or seventy feet in length, and about as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant. [...] Extending forward, parallel with the proboscis, and on each side of it, was a gigantic staff, thirty or forty feet in length, formed seemingly of pure crystal and in shape a perfect prism, – it reflected in the most gorgeous manner the rays of the declining sun. The trunk was fashioned like a wedge with the apex to the earth. From it there were outspread two pairs of wings – each wing nearly one hundred yards in length – one pair being placed above the other, and all thickly covered with metal scales; each scale apparently some ten or twelve feet in diameter. I observed that the upper and lower tiers of wings were connected by a strong chain [...] the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing was the representation of a Death's Head, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast, and which was as accurately traced in glaring white, upon the dark ground of the body, as if it had been there carefully designed by an artist.[26]

The protagonist projects his own fears of dissolution on the reality around him. The shape of the insect is read, and controlled, in geometrical and mathematical terms; in the enlarged description of the threatening monster, the detail of the skull is rather a caesura, as it covers 'nearly' 'the whole surface' of the breast against 'the dark ground of the body'. Moreover, it appears in glaring white, as a glamorous presence, well designed by an artist. An inverted dream of annihilation of distances and boundaries, the protagonist's vision approximating death disintegrates under the controlling gaze of the narrator's friend. He will reveal the true nature of the vision, consisting in a much smaller insect, a hawkmoth, with a characteristic skull-shaped form on its trunk. Via a mediating ephemeral image, death is shown on the surface of the living 'monster', which has served as 'monstrator'.

---

[25] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Sphinx,' in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 2 (New York: Redfield, 1857), p. 433.
[26] Poe, pp. 434-5. See Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, & Edgar Allan Poe* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Reshaping a literature of the portrait to fix an aesthetic of transparency, dematerialization, Pater's writings expose thin and diaphanous bodiliy barriers so that we see the skulls 'within'. In his essay on Leonardo, he comments on Leonardo's drawings:

> But note in these, as that which especially belongs to art, the contour of the young man's hair, the poise of the slave's arm above his head, and the curves of the head of the child, following the little skull within, thin and fine as some sea-shell worn by the wind.[27]

The Medusa is interpreted by Leonardo 'as the head of a corpse, exercising its powers through all the circumstances of death', while Leonardo's art is in turn interpreted as the art of one who plays on 'the harp [...] shaped in some curious likeness to a horse's skull'.[28] Mona Lisa, vampire and femme fatale, 'has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave':

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life.[29]

The accelerated sequence of images generated by the viewer prevents any stable meaning of Mona Lisa's identity but that of her repeated dissolution, her many deaths.

In 'Gaudioso, the Second', an unfinished portrait written in the 1890s, Pater presents the aesthetic hero trafficking with death.[30] Gaudioso, that is Domenico Averoldi, bishop of Brescia as Gaudioso the Second, embodies ambivalence in the very name, combining worldly pleasure and 'sanctity'. He is shown firstly as a man of the world immersed in social

---

[27] Walter Pater, 'Leonardo da Vinci,' in *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 121.
[28] Pater, 'Leonardo', pp. 111, 114.
[29] Pater, 'Leonardo', p. 132.
[30] 'Gaudioso' – manuscript copy at the Houghton Library, Harvard, MS Eng 1150 (8) – was first published by Gerald C. Monsman in 2008.

relations, as a dandy, and then in his turning to ecclesiastical life. Fearing the falsity of his devotion, he is tested with a task for the Venerable Congregation of Relics whose scope is separating the bones of the ancient martyrs from those of the pagans buried in catacombs and subterranean places, validating the relics and redistributing them in different places. Domenico's task is to exhume dead bodies and bones and bury them again after re-writing their inscriptions on external walls:

> Behold him, then, submissively at work, day by day, in mouldering ossuaries, charnel-houses, and such places, in those many dark crypts of the old Brescian churches, crypt below crypt, where the 'Saints' Tragedy' of the first Christian centuries played out and where amid the buried or misused relics of the voluptuous pagan Brixia [...], the precious bodies of the Martyrs still lay, sleeping! – 'sacramental dust' – he was ordered to think, preserved to immortal life.[31]

Surrounded by the material impure, his 'dainty fingers grew used to the touch of those rotting discoloured bones, the tardy process of corruption through prolonged centuries quickened now in the quicker air, and achieved in an hour'.[32] The physical relation with the dead body instead of being a mere memento mori serves rather to praise worldly life. Domenico's confessor is himself a living skull: his head is 'like a well-preserved skull or a good carving thereof', a memento mori 'to be ever at hand' while Domenico accepts the redeemed, visible material world. The skull image is presented as both natural and artificial. Pater goes on to focus on artistic death's heads used as memento mori:

> Devout people of that age would sometimes procure themselves as a memento mori a death's head of ivory or giallo antico or of crystal (as if you peeped into heaven warily through the eyeless thing): you may still see such in this or that cabinet of the curious among the gentlemen's shoe-buckles and the fine ladies' fan.[33]

Made in the past of diverse materials, skulls are, in the narrator's own time, one of the many objects available for consumption that one wants to buy and keep in a sort of private museum. Cabinets of curiosities tes-

---

[31] Pater, 'Gaudioso, the Second,' in Gerald C. Monsman, 'Pater's Portraits: the Aesthetic Hero in 1890,' *Expositions* 2, 1 (2008): p. 92. This text is discussed in relation to impure aesthetics in Maria Luisa De Rinaldis, 'The Sacred in Pater's Aesthetic: Ambivalences and Tensions,' *English Literature* 2, 2 (2015): pp. 383-99.
[32] Pater, 'Gaudioso', p. 91.
[33] Pater, 'Gaudioso', pp. 92-3.

tify to how much the Victorians were accustomed to an idea of spectacle and to an aesthetic of separateness and fragmentation.[34] Different items ranging from skulls to ladies' fans were 'exposed' in an arbitrary and mutable way.

Virginia Woolf's short story 'The Lady in the Looking Glass', dated 1929, is a dense narrative dealing with the problem of screening interiority and provides an example of X-ray portraiture: 'People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime'.[35] Isabella Tyson, the protagonist, is a fiction of the narrator's mind. Her image is reflected only for a moment in the long mirror in the hall, reflecting the room inside (where the narrator sits) and the garden. What the narrator sees are either reflected images, subject to the distortion of perspective deriving from the position of the mirror and from the narrator's subjective gaze, or imaginary visions. The room inside and the images in the mirror are of a very different kind: the inside observed by the narrator is full of movement and life, of 'passions and rages and envies and sorrows coming over it and clouding it, like a human being', while what is reflected in the mirror is immobile, 'in the trance of immortality': 'It was a strange contrast – all changing here, all stillness there'. The reader sees the image of the woman going down the grass in her thin summer dress, carrying a basket, then she exits the portion of space reflected in the mirror. She is imagined by the narrator while going to pick up some flowers or one of those objects she liked to collect, and that filled her house and life. The narrator tries to 'prise her open', to see 'her profounder state of being' through imagination, while the protagonist is reticent, silent. She is imagined as a rich lady, in her leather shoes, which are 'fashionable' and 'exquisite' like all the clothes she wears, loving travel and friends. Her mind is read through the 'looking-glass' of the narrator's fiction until she is again in the hall, immobile near the looking-glass:

---

[34] See Jennifer McDonell, 'Browning's Curiosities: *The Ring and the Book* and the "Democracy of Things",' in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians. From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. Jen Harrison and Jonathon Shears (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 67-82; Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988).

[35] Virginia Woolf, 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,' in *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, Arcadia ebook 2015. For a discussion, see Stephen Howard, 'The Lady in the Looking Glass. Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, 2 (2007): pp. 44-54.

> She stopped dead. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly still. At once the looking glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her – clouds, dress, basket, diamond – all that one had called the creeper and convolvulus. Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them.

The mirror has the corrosive power to reduce the character's reality to the heaviness of a photograph, 'heavy, motionless, stubborn', as defined by Barthes. As Colaiacomo points out, Woolf's short story was, significantly, published in *Harper's Bazaar* (1 January 1930), a women's fashion magazine which circulated images of 'consumption heroines', defined, like Isabella, by their purchases. The character's 'scarcity of life' denounces an '"unfounded" fictional life', which establishes the significant connection between mirrors – seen, however, as destructive – and fashion images. They both aim 'to directly materialize the volatile imagination of an ideal self as an easy-to-reach, disposable commodity'.[36] To represent this 'scarcity of life', nothingness, is Woolf's privileged strategy of resistance to a narrative of the inside.

Skulls continue to decentre the character in *Orlando*, a novel, or a play, in which it has become mere performance, a series of images. In the gallery in his country house Orlando will look at the pictures of his ancestors 'as if he sought the likeness of somebody he could not find'. He then descends into the crypt to find only skeletons:

> The place was so seldom visited that the rats made free with the lead work, and now a thigh bone would catch at his cloak as he passed, or he would crack the skull of some old Sir Malise as it rolled beneath his foot. [...] 'Nothing remains of all these Princes', Orlando would say [...] 'except one digit', and he would take a skeleton hand in his and bend the joints this way and that. 'Whose hand was it?' he went on to ask. 'The right or the left? The hand of man or woman, of age or youth? Had it urged the war horse, or plied the needle?'[37]

When, later in the novel and now a woman, she has doubts about whether to remain with the gypsies or go back to England, landscape is

---

[36] Colaiacomo, pp. 184-5, p. 204.
[37] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando. A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 68-9.

compared 'to a dry bone; to a sheep's skeleton; to a gigantic skull picked up by a thousand vultures'.[38] Orlando will then take her decision.

In the 1990s a specific trend in fashion design, going back to memento mori themes, showed the 'skulls beneath the skin',[39] bodies deprived of their material surface, transparent and unsubstantial. Skull imagery was used as a prop. In David Sim's photograph *Play for Today*, published in *The Face* in 1995, a model seated on a stool holds a skull between her legs. She wears a small lace dress, her body is translucent, pale, a structure of bones. The skull faces the viewer at the very bottom of the picture, while the girl's gaze at the top is oblique and detached. If Hamlet reflects on decay and remembers the past in his interaction with the skull, here there is in-different presence. The skull seems to share the same unsubstantiality belonging to the character.[40]

Stylist Alexander McQueen has extensively used skull imagery to convey his aesthetics of trauma and shock. Boundaries between inside and outside are crossed in the image of a girl wearing a lace top extending over the head to cover the face, as an external enveloping skull.[41] The same strategy is shown in a model wearing an aluminium corset cast from a real skeleton over her dress.[42] Skulls have, moreover, become McQueen's logo, reproduced on various items from scarves to wallets, accessories you can wear and touch. The all pervasive image of the skull appeals to the sense of touch, that is the sense of the ephemeral and the fragmentary, related to a hybrid, impure aesthetic value; tactility, moreover, reorients our relationship with the world from thought to perception. It also implies vital self-mobility, which in turn assures the appropriation of desired things, adjusted, included in one's personal universe.[43] In these personal universes, skulls are no longer sites of difference or interrogation on mortality and the world of the dead. Colaiacomo has shown how fiction and photography 'enter the discourse of the body [...] at their junction with fashion', and how fashion takes on the charge to bypass the modernist problem of exposing the character's truth by

---

[38] Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 144.
[39] T.S. Eliot's comment on Webster in 'Whispers of Immortality' (1918-19), 'Webster was much possessed by death/And saw the skull beneath the skin' (1-2).
[40] Evans, pp. 223-9.
[41] Evans, p. 146.
[42] Evans, p. 224.
[43] Madalina Diaconu, 'Secondary Senses,' in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, ed. Hans Rainer Sepp and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 317-19.

're-editing' it as mere 'view'.[44] Skulls have become props in a theatre of the body, already 'text' in Pater and Woolf, in which they are only accessories, part of its aura. Damien Hirst's diamond skull 'For the love of God', produced in 2007, is the latest example of skull commodification: a platinum cast of a skull taken from a real eighteenth century skeleton was decorated with more than 8,000 flawless diamonds and valued at an exorbitant price. It is a mere luxury object. This essay has attempted to trace the important meanings the skull image has reflected and transmitted through the ages, meanings that are absent in Hirst's version.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Bendani, Luca, and Paz Diman, *Skullture. Il teschio nella cultura contemporanea* (Milano: 24Ore Cultura, 2015).

Benjamin, Walter, 'The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,' in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 361-78.

Bennet-Carpenter, Benjamin, *Death in Documentaries. The Memento Mori Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Bradley, Ben, Fred Feldman, and Jens Johansson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

Briggs, Asa, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988).

Cazzato, Luigi, 'Laurence Sterne and His Paradoxical Aesthetics of the New,' *Textus* 18 (2005), pp. 153-72.

Colaiacomo, Paola, *Natasha's Dress. Languages of Literature, Languages of Fashion* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018).

Cunliffe, Marcus, *The Literature of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

De Grazia, Margreta, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (eds), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

De Rinaldis, Maria Luisa, 'The Sacred in Pater's Aesthetic: Ambivalences and Tensions,' *English Literature* 2, 2 (2015): pp. 383-99.

Diaconu, Madalina, 'Secondary Senses,' in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, ed. Hans Rainer Sepp and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 317-19.

---

[44] Colaiacomo, pp. 200, 203.

Dickson, Jay, 'Surviving Victoria,' in *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture 1889-1939*, ed. Maria Di Battista and Lucy McDiarmid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 23-46.

Egan, Gerald (ed.), *Fashion and Authorship. Literary Production and the Cultural Style from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Elmer, Jonathan, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, & Edgar Allan Poe* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Evans, Caroline, *Fashion at the Edge* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Foucault, Michel, *Naissance de la Clinique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

Goodland, Katharine, *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Gurr, Andrew, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Howard, S., 'The Lady in the Looking Glass. Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, 2 (2007): pp. 44-54.

Khapaeva, Dina, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

Lutz, Deborah, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Meek, Richard, '"For by the Image of my Cause I See/ The Portraiture of His": *Hamlet* and the Imitation of Emotion,' in *Hamlet and Emotions*, ed. Paul Megna *et al.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 81-108.

Monkman, Kenneth, 'Sterne, Hamlet and Yorick: Some New Material,' in *The Winged Skull. Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. Arthur H.H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. 112-23.

Monsman, Gerald C., 'Pater's Portraits: the Aesthetic Hero in 1890,' *Expositions* 2, 1 (2008): pp. 83-102.

Mushat Frye, Roland, 'Ladies, Gentlemen and Skulls. Hamlet and the Iconographic Traditions,' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, 1 (1979): pp. 15-28.

McDonell, J., 'Browning's Curiosities: *The Ring and the Book* and the "Democracy of Things",' in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians. From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. Jen Harrison and Jonathon Shears (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 67-82.

McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

Pater, Walter, 'Leonardo da Vinci,' in *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1893), pp. 103-35.

———, *Plato and Platonism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2002).

———, 'Gaudioso, the Second,' in Gerald C. Monsman, 'Pater's Portraits: the Aesthetic Hero in 1890,' *Expositions* 2, 1 (2008): pp. 83-102.

Poe, Edgar Allan, 'The Sphinx,' in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 2 (New York: Redfield, 1857), pp. 433-37.

Puttenham, George, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Edward Arber (London: Murray, 1869).

Rayner, Timothy, *Foucault's Heidegger: Philosophy and Transformative Experience* (London: Continuum, 2007).

Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

———, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. J.H.P. Pafford (London: Methuen,1984).

Sofer, Andrew, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

Sterne, Laurence, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, by Mr Yorick* (London: Becket, De Hondt, 1768).

Tenniel, John, 'Queen Hermione,' *Punch*, 23 September 1865.

Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando. A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

———, 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass': A Reflection,' in *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, Arcadia ebook 2015.

RETHINKING THE HUMAN: THE USE OF ANIMAL METAPHORS TO LANGUAGE THE UTOPIANISM OF THE BLACK QUEER EXISTENCE

Emilio Amideo

The human/animal divide has been theorised in most Western philosophical tradition as a difference involving the human capacity for *logos*, meant as the capacity to speak and, especially, of possessing reason; something that animals supposedly lack. Through this distinction, the human has been ontologically elevated to a privileged position – one that entails the subjugation of the animal – and the animal is reduced to an irrational, mere instinctual being. The historical construction of the Western *cogito* as the all-rationalist white Euro-American healthy and wealthy male as the privileged subject of knowledge has similarly relegated other subjects – thought of as less than human – to the same subordinate position. Therefore – associated with animals – women, queer and black people have often been thought of as irrational, as a way of justifying various forms of violence perpetrated against them, to include the attempt of depriving them of their rights. Bearing in mind that not only are bodies shaped by discourse but that their material reality can be changed by altering the discourse around them, and drawing on a methodological background influenced by Queer Studies, Critical Race Theory, Animal Studies and Metaphor Theory, this essay intends to explore how in her 2002 short story 'Shell' the Scottish writer Jackie Kay retrieves the legacy of the trope of the animalization of the black African in Western cultures and rewrites it as a way of conjuring up new modalities of human existence. The slow metamorphosis of the protagonist Doreen – a corpulent black lesbian woman and mother – into a tortoise enables her to reject the chrononormative order characteristic of Western contemporary racialised heteropatriarchy to give voice to otherwise silenced forms of the black queer existence. It is precisely her becoming-animal that enables Doreen to regain her right to the *logos* – meant not only as the capacity to recover her voice but, in a Derridean sense, of (re)writing her life – therefore showing the possibility of funding a new humanism based on different principles.

Jackie Kay; Animal Metaphors; Blackness; Queer Existence; Genres of the Human

> it is the very exception of blackness and queerness from the humanist standard that produces the possibility of imagining humanity otherwise.
> Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*

In an opinion piece appeared in *The New York Times* in 1979, the African American writer James Baldwin states: 'A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey'.[1] Baldwin reflects on the role that language plays in society, on how it unquestionably reveals the speaker and on the way it 'far more dubiously, is meant to define the other'.[2] While he explains that representation through language involves the inevitably biased description of the other through one's projections, he concurrently emphasizes how the very structure of language is often transformed in order to express a specific message or convey a particular experience. Language, as Baldwin suggests, is an important political tool that, to use Judith Butler's insight on the reiterative character of gender performativity,[3] does not only make real (and thus confirm) what is culturally created by the social system that produces it in the first place but can also be used to alter socio-culturally stratified perceptions. Language and power enter in fact into a dialogic relationship, since the discursive structures of language 'enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society'.[4] Based on the capacity to have access to a number of social resources (force, money, status, knowledge, public discourses and communication) certain groups can establish a more or less subtle control over the minds and actions of other groups.[5] When this control gets integrated into laws, norms, habits and even general consensus, it takes the form of a hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's terms: 'class domination, sexism, and racism are characteristic examples of such hegemony'.[6] Through this process, groups of people end up perceiving certain

---

[1] James Baldwin, 'If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?', in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p. 780.
[2] Baldwin, p. 780.
[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.
[4] Teun A. van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis,' in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 353.
[5] Van Dijk, pp. 334-5.
[6] Van Dijk, p. 335. See also Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg with Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

beliefs, knowledge and opinions as natural, when in reality these are shaped by a specific sociocultural history.

One of the most salient ways in which power relations are expressed in and naturalized through language is the process of metaphorization. Metaphors are pervasive in everyday life and, far from being mere rhetorical phenomena, they enable individuals to conceptualize and make sense of their experiences.[7] As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson maintain,

> Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.[8]

It is exactly this potential for naturalization (the self-fulfilling prophecy) and the fact that certain pervasive conceptual metaphors (e.g., 'time is money', 'good is up', 'bad is down', 'communication is sending', etc.) produce other metaphors and concepts, thus fundamentally structuring human experience, that enable 'people in power [...] to impose their metaphors'.[9] As types of framing devices, metaphors contribute to our interpretation of the world and to the creation and dissemination of what Arran Stibbe calls the 'stories we live by', that is to say the stories shared by multiple individuals within a culture that, being influenced by dominant discourses, often perpetuate sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, anthropocentric and generally anti-ecological worldviews.[10]

Numerous metaphors are in fact used by dominant groups as a way of discriminating against marginal ones (e.g., women, queer people, black people, immigrants, etc.). These metaphors often involve the animalization of the others or their association with nature, as a way of degrading them according, as I will investigate in the course of this essay, to a Cartesian worldview that reproduces and reinforces dualistic assumptions through 'the separation of male and female, nature and culture, mind

---

[7] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3.

[8] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 156.

[9] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 157.

[10] Stibbe's concept of 'stories we live by' draws both on Lakoff and Johnson and on Mary Midgley. See Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2003). On metaphors as framing devices see also Elena Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

from body, emotion from reason and intuition from fact'.[11] As Tzeporah Berman notes, 'this cultural polarization leads to a devaluation of one side of the dualism and the distortion of both' and, as such, legitimates a logic of domination.[12]

Bearing in mind that not only are bodies shaped by discourse but that their material reality can be changed by altering the discourse around them, the aim of this essay is to investigate how the Scottish writer Jackie Kay, as a representative of a wider tradition of contemporary black queer writers, retrieves the legacy of the trope of the animalization of the black African in Western cultures and rewrites it as a way of conjuring up new modalities of human existence. In other words, her use of animal metaphors becomes an instrument to voice the otherwise silenced experience of black queer people in contemporary racialized and classed heteropatriarchy,[13] and eventually a means to establish a new humanism. This creation of new genres of the human, in Sylvia Wynters's words,[14] extends as a horizon of possibilities, a utopianist then and there, that enables one to escape the racism and the homophobia of the here and the now.[15]

The essay develops according to a trajectory that begins with an investigation of the concept of parahumanity (explored in the first theoretical section that draws on the long tradition of mythmaking and animal metaphors as strategies of resistance within the black diaspora) and continues with an exploration of Jackie Kay's 2002 short story 'Shell', to then conclude with the potential inherent in the postulation of a posthumanist future.

---

[11] Tzeporah Berman, 'The Rape of Mother Nature? Women in the Language of Environmental Discourse,' in *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*, eds. Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 259.

[12] Berman, p. 261.

[13] Jafari S. Allen, 'Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18, 2-3 (2012): pp. 212-48, p. 220.

[14] See, among the others, Sylvia Wynter, 'On Disenchanting Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond,' *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): pp. 207-44; Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument,' *The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): pp. 257-337; and Greg Thomas, 'Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter,' *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* 4 (2006): pp. 1-35.

[15] I am here referring to José Esteban Muñoz's conception of queer utopianism. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

1. Parahuman tales or the stories we (should not) live by

In the very first pages of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes:

> decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another [...] Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: the 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.[16]

According to Fanon, who writes these words in a chapter devoted to the violence of colonialism, the process of liberation, of decolonization, necessarily involves the recognition of the humanity of the colonized, since the enfranchisement from the brutality of slavery and colonialism can only be achieved through the passage from an objectified position ('thing') to a subjective one ('man', as in human being).

There is a long tradition in Western cultures that links colonized people with objects, commodities and even animals, as a way of depriving them of their ontological status as humans; something that, as previously noted, is manifest through a number of metaphors deeply engrained in language use. The historical construction of the Western *cogito* as the embodiment of 'ideals of rationality, consciousness, moral and cognitive universalism' that was 'modeled on ideals of whiteness, masculinity, normality, youth and health', inevitably pathologized and defined as not normal, anomalous or even monstrous all other modes of embodiment (i.e., nonwhite, nonmasculine, nonhealthy, but also zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed).[17] Therefore, associated with animals, colonized people – but also women and both black and queer people – have often been thought of as irrational, mere instinctual beings as a way of justifying various forms of violence perpetrated against them, to include the attempt of depriving them of their rights. Well known is, for example, the positing of the masculine as disembodied universality against a feminine constructed as disavowed corporeality, reflecting the equation according

---

[16] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.
[17] Rosi Braidotti, 'Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,' *PMLA* 124, 2 (2009): pp. 526-32, p. 526. See also Braidotti, 'On Putting the Active Back into Activism,' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 68 (2009): p. 47; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 123; Carmen Dell'Aversano, 'The Love Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond,' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 8, 1-2 (2010): pp. 93-6.

to which women 'are' their bodies.[18] Metaphors that reflect a patriarchal language-system (e.g., 'woman is nature' or 'woman is animal'),[19] but also other common expressions such as 'rape of the land', 'virgin forest', or 'Mother Earth', by associating women with nature and opposing them to men and culture, reinforce dualistic modes of representation that perpetuate the objectification and devaluation of both women and nature.[20] A similar discourse applies to queer people, and also to black people, the latter usually considered commodities or beasts of burden under slavery and colonialism.[21]

During colonialism slaves were in fact classed as property akin to animals, yet, as Monique Allewaert notes, one crucial thing distinguished them from animals: the details of their punishment (including amputations of body parts) needed to be encoded in law.[22] To define this condition of being akin to animals yet not completely so, Allewaert suggests the use of the term 'parahuman' and explains how, 'whereas the animal body was posited as an organic body, the punishments of disfigurement and amputation made the slave body, an always potentially dismembered body'.[23] The fragmentation of the body and identity, a sort of epidermalization, is something that Fanon offers as a re-theorization of the condition of the colonized, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he maintains that the colonized lacked the phanta-

---

[18] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 17.

[19] See Katherine Russo, 'Turning Turtle and the In/visibility of Ecofeminist Metaphors in Italian Translations of Katherine Mansfield's At the Bay,' *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies*, eds. Eleonora Federici and Vanessa Leonardi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 152. See also, among others, Caitlin Hines 'Foxy Chicks and Playboy Bunnies: A Case Study in Metaphorical Lexicalization,' in *Cultural, Typological and Psychological Perspectives on Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. M.K. Hiraga, C. Sinha and S. Wilcox (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), pp. 9-23; and Sara Gesuato and Fabienne H. Baider, 'Masculinist Metaphors, Feminist Research,' *Metaphorik* 5 (2003): pp. 6-35.

[20] Berman, p. 258. See also, among others, Eva Feder Kittay, 'Woman as Metaphor,' *Hypatia* 3, 2 (1988): pp. 63-86; and Meryl Altman, 'How Not to Do Things with Metaphors We Live By,' *College English* 52, 5 (1990): pp. 495-506.

[21] See, among others, Dana Luciano and Mel Chen, 'Introduction: Has the Queer ever Been Human?,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 21, 2-3 (2015): pp. 183-207; and Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

[22] As Allewaert explains, both the Barbados Slave Code (1661) and the French Code Noir (1685), for example, stipulated that the mutilation of slave persons, including the amputation of body parts, was an appropriate punishment for disobedience and rebellion. Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 90.

[23] Allewaert, p. 90.

sy (both in the sense of mental image and of illusion of something un-attainable) of the whole organic body.[24] Since, according to Lacan, the organic body is necessary for the dialectical formation of a subjectivity (i.e., the mirror stage), it results that the latter remained a prerogative of the Western *cogito.*

If Fanon's account is to a certain extent Manichaean, inasmuch as he envisions the possibility to possess a subjectivity only as a result of decolonization (when he states 'the "thing" colonized becomes a man'),[25] a conception of the two elements coexisting (i.e., parahumanity) has al-ways been present in the Afro-diasporic tradition as an instrument of resistance against colonial powers. In this tradition, there are in fact nu-merous stories featuring bodily fragmentation, severed heads, and hu-man beings in relation to animal life across sources like animal folktales and trickster stories, where power structures between master and slaves were usually subverted.[26] These stories are instances of what Édouard Glissant terms practices of diversion, that is to say 'diasporic African's strategic redirection of colonial power dynamics through circumlocu-tionary styles of speech, story, and action' which were 'partly an effort to avoid confronting colonizers in unwinnable head-on conflicts'.[27] Di-version is also called indirection in other contexts and includes also the encoding of geographic locations, such as 'heaven', 'the river', and 'home', in spirituals sung on plantations as a way of providing directions for meeting points from where to plan revolts or escapes to the North, or simple acts of sabotage such as lying to the master or pretending to misunderstand his orders, cheating, stealing from him, self-mutilation in order to escape work, and are even manifest nowadays in the extreme simplification of Creole or black American speech which, precisely for their simplicity, increase ambiguity and misdirection.[28]

---

[24] See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Allewaert, pp. 103-6.

[25] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 2.

[26] In animal folktales and trickster stories weaker animals (e.g., the rabbit or the monkey) sym-bolizing the slaves are actually able to outwit stronger ones (e.g., the lion or the fox), which represent the plantation master or his associates. Among the numerous collections of black dia-sporic animal folktales and trickster stories see Frederik Hetmann, *Märchen des schwarzen Ame-rika* (Berlin: Fisher, 1974); Roger D. Abrahams, ed., *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Maria Tatar, eds., *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Liverlight, 2018).

[27] Allewaert, p. 107.

[28] E. Patrick Johnson, 'Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,' in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), p. 452.

Both physical dismemberment and psychological fragmentation become in these stories instrument of resistance inasmuch as, by being also integrated into/and re-signified by the Obeah practices of slaves and maroons,[29] they enable the imagination of life otherwise. As Tavia Nyong'o writes with reference to the African slaves: 'bought and sold, killed and quartered, collateralized and securitized, used, impregnated, aborted, discarded. Bodies that were speculated in became speculative bodies', through a process that he terms 'afro-fabulation'.[30] He explains:

> Acts of afro-fabulation operate as a queer hack of the codes of an anti-black world, and rely for their success on a vernacular awareness of, and confrontation with, the manner in which gender and sexual norms operate to reproduce systems of racial hierarchy.[31]

By drawing on the affective, pre-cognitive character of Bergsonian 'fabulation' (also translated as 'mythmaking function') and on Saidiya Hartman's and Donna Haraway's conceptions of 'critical' and 'speculative' fabulation respectively,[32] Nyong'o elucidates how the black (queer) experiential knowledge (i.e., the 'vernacular awareness'), through affects such as belief, emotion and attachment, manages to open up the road to creativity, to the possibility of imagining life otherwise while embroiled in an anti-black and anti-queer world.

In their capacity to re-shape our reality and to enable the emergence of new concepts, both (animal) metaphors and the fragmentation of body and identity play a pivotal role in the way a number of contemporary black queer writers not only envision a different reality from the one they live in but are also able to articulate their experience and make it legible in a society still affected by systemic racism and homophobia.[33] It

---

[29] See Allewaert, p. 95.

[30] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), p. 101.

[31] Nyong'o, p. 4.

[32] See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,' *Small Axe* 12, 2 (2008): pp. 1-14; and Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[33] Examples of such works, both fictional and theoretical, include Thomas Glave's parallelism between black queer people in Jamaica with the figure of the octopus, and Shani Mootoo's speculation on the way queer people learn to live in heteronormative societies through a sideways movement that simulates the advancing of a crab. See Thomas Glave, 'Jamaican, Octopus,' in *Among the Bloodpeople: Politics and Flesh* (New York: Akashic Books, 2013), pp. 91-105; Shani Mootoo, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2014); Emilio Amideo, *Queer*

is through the proposal of a series of speculative arguments in the form of the subjunctive, as a mood that opens up to doubts and possibilities,[34] that afro-fabulations may stretch the limits of the historical archive, which is otherwise made of accurately selected and transmitted 'facts', in order to undo its violence.[35]

2. Afro-fabulations in Jackie Kay's 'Shell'

Born of a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father, and adopted by a white Glaswegian couple, Jackie Kay has always tried to give equal visibility to both her Scottish and her Nigerian heritage in her artistic production: 'I feel strongly Scottish and strongly Nigerian', she declared in a recent interview.[36] A commitment that she continues to pursue through her role as Scots Makar, since her nomination in 2016, by highlighting the multi-ethnic and multi-language character of contemporary Scottish society: 'my ambition is to reflect the true face of today's Scotland. Syrian refugees, Doric Scots, Nigerian Scots, Muslim Scots, Gaelic Scots... We're all Scots and poetry can help bring us together'.[37]

In her short story 'Shell', from the 2002 collection of short stories *Why Don't You Stop Talking*, Kay recovers the trope of the animalization of both black Africans and women in Western culture and rewrites it in order to create an alternative reality capable of shattering unitary conceptions of subjectivity (as represented by the Western *cogito*) through a figurative transformation from human into animal.[38]

Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

[34] Hartman, p. 11.

[35] Nyong'o draws also on Gilles Deleuze who intends fabulation as the artistic practice of inventing a people to come. In Deleuze's words: 'Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of "fabulation" in which a people and art both share. We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning'. Gilles Deleuze, 'Control and Becoming,' in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 174. On Deleuze's conception of 'fabulation' see also Ronald Bogue, 'Fabulation,' *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (2010), http://deleuze.enacademic.com/61/fabulation.

[36] 'Scotland's Makar – Jackie Kay', *The Scots Magazine*, 2019, https://www.scotsmagazine.com/articles/jackie-kay.

[37] 'Scotland's Makar – Jackie Kay'.

[38] Jackie Kay, 'Shell', in *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 137-58. All further references are to this edition quoted in the text as 'Shell'. Kay is not new to these kinds of experimentation through language also with reference to queer sexualities (e.g., the parallelism between the bandages used to bind his breasts by the transgender character Joss Moody in her debut novel *Trumpet* and the shed skin of a snake as a metaphor for change and renewal, or the

The short story narrates the vicissitudes of a corpulent black woman called Doreen who goes through a slow process of, perhaps physical, certainly psychical, transformation that culminates in her metamorphosis into a tortoise, with the title 'Shell' reflecting the carapace she develops on her back. Doreen's transmutation from woman into tortoise (from one 'species' to another, in a reversal of Fanon's idea of decolonization as shifting from object to human being) is triggered by the tears she sheds over her 'failed' relationship with her fourteen-year-old son Louis: 'It was during a big weeping session that her shell suddenly appeared on her back' ('Shell', p. 153). The tears are in fact only the initial stage of the transformation and, together with other signs that slowly begin to emerge (e.g., she starts feeding herself only lettuce that she eats straight from a bowl, her tongue starts feeling hard, her skin begins to get dry and crack, her urine to turn white, not to mention that she slowly drives a green Citroen Bamboo whose shape and colour recall that of a tortoise), inevitably associate her with the chelonian.

Doreen's transformation seems thus to be connected with her 'failure' to embody the role of the good nurturing mother for her son, a prescriptive social role for women that is dictated by what Elizabeth Freeman terms 'chrononormativity', that is the institutionalized regulation of time meant to preserve the state apparatus and its heteronormativity.[39] Naturalized through repetition, chrononormativity compels individuals toward maximum productivity through the organization of their lifetime, literally, and expectations: birth, health preservation, wealth accumulation, reproduction, and death.[40] The fact that chelonians are not generally social creatures and that 'no species of turtle nurtures their young' reinforces Doreen's association with the tortoise through her refusal of socially prescribed maternal/nurturing roles.[41] Yet, although the difficult relationship with her son triggers the transformation, Doreen's failure to follow a chrononormative path is not limited to the mother-son relationship. As her body metamorphoses (her back becomes rock hard,

owl as a metaphor for the special bond between two lesbian women in the short story 'Owl'). See Kay, *Trumpet* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) and Kay, 'Owl,' in *Reality, Reality* (London: Picador, 2012), pp. 161-9.

[39] See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[40] Freeman, p. 3.

[41] Alina Bradford, 'Turtle Facts,' *LiveScience*, 2 October 2015, https://www.livescience.com/52361-turtle-facts.html.

her voice hoarse, and her conduct lethargic) she eventually stops going to work, caring for the house, and generally becomes indolent:

> It is not like her to be indolent or lazy. Normally she is at it the whole time: washing, ironing, cleaning, cooking; never stops, never has a minute. Just recently, something has been happening to her body; her lower back is in agony and she feels heavy, like a crate full of goods, lethargic and exhausted ('Shell', p. 144).

Indolence, delaying, deferring are all concepts that somehow bear a negative connotation in Western cultures. According to Sigmund Freud, delay represents a key component of perversion since any lingering, any deferring (as in a prolonged contact), with any part of the body not strictly designated for the sexual intercourse, or with a sexual object in a way that postpones the sexual aim, is a perversion.[42] Similarly, in Western cultures any diversion from chrononormativity is still unconsciously perceived as a perversion. In fact, we tend to experience time as a natural progression, thus failing to recognize its construction,[43] and we often find ourselves frustrated by delays and satisfied by punctuality, or we might feel guilty about leisure and happy with a busy working schedule.[44]

Contrary to this linear perception of time and resulting account of development and growth, Doreen's story proposes an alternative model where delay, lingering, and irregularity prevail, as emphasized also by the repetition of the word 'slow', and its synonyms, throughout the short story. Her behaviour follows a queer way of 'growing sideways', to use Katheryn Stockton's expression,[45] that, by rejecting the coercive politics of productive and 'reproductive futurism',[46] has a radical disruptive potential. Through her transformation into a tortoise, Doreen in fact refuses the metaphors that associate women with maternity, mothering or nurturing,[47] in order to recover other forms of embodiment and self-expression, unrestricted by normative roles imposed on women by society.

---

[42] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Global Grey, 2018), p. 19.
[43] See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).
[44] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
[45] See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
[46] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Michael O'Rourke, 'The Afterlives of Queer Theory,' *continent* 1, 2 (2011): pp. 102-16.
[47] Altman, p. 501.

As her transformation acquires more visibility – at least to her since her son does not seem to notice anything different in her – Doreen feels different but good, as she embraces abjection: 'She was horrified. But she was also amazed at herself' ('Shell': 156). Her transformation into an animal involves in fact a recognition of otherwise abject parts of herself; for instance, she becomes insistently curious about her faeces and in her urine which she describes in meticulous details:

> That night she runs herself a bath. [...] Moments pass slowly, peacefully, till she surprises herself by feeling something come out of her. The heat of the water has brought it against her will. She looks at her own turd floating in the water. [...] it is quite curious, quite involving. A very long and thin, ribbony turd floating as if it had not a care in the world [...]. As if to keep it company, a piss arrives, too, with a hiss and a sigh. It is that thick white again ('Shell', pp. 151-2).

Doreen's curiosity and involvement in her excreta reflect her interest in the process of transformation she is experiencing, especially in relation to the new subjectivity such process is enabling to emerge. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), Julia Kristeva uses the term 'abjection' in order to define the processes of exclusion and boundary setting involved in subject formation.[48] For Kristeva, abjection refers to the human reactions of horror and nausea caused by a breakdown in meaning when facing the loss of distinction between the subject and the object, or between the self and the other.[49] The permeability of the body represented by its fluids and excreta (e.g., faeces, blood, sweat, sperm), and especially the decomposition inherent in the corpse, epitomize the abject for Kristeva:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.[50]

---

[48] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[49] Dino Felluga, 'Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject,' *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (Purdue University, 2011), http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html.

[50] Kristeva, p. 3.

Through a casting off of the abject, which is neither subject nor object, the 'I' establishes and consolidates the contours of its subjectivity in order to emerge. As Kristeva stresses: 'it is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.[51] It is exactly through the transgression of the borders that regulate sexist ideals of women behaviour that Doreen becomes abject: she is excluded from the social body that thus proceeds to consolidate hegemonic identities.[52] Since in a racist society black people learn to live in or as abjection by physically internalizing the legacy of racist discourse,[53] Doreen is similarly abjected by her skin colour and, at a certain point in the narrative, by her desire for another woman:

> Perhaps a new lover could come along and wake up her rolls of flesh. Maybe a tongue could lick under her folds. A lover could reach parts of herself she hasn't been able to find. It would be nice to have a woman lover, Doreen thinks. A big round soft woman like herself. With a big belly and big breasts. [...] She could trust a big fat woman not to lie to her ('Shell', p. 148).

Doreen's transformation, her becoming-animal to draw on Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's theorization,[54] enables her to claim alternative forms of existence, as her attention to and sudden awareness of parts of her body that she experiences in pieces (as *agencement*) allows her to deconstruct the common unitary conception of identity and subjectivity and to dwell in the experience of a cluster of capabilities and sensations that deviates from commonly known forms of embodiment pertaining to contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy. Here, again, we encounter the fragmentation of the colonized body (in this case colonized by a patriarchal language-system, by phallogocentrism) which becomes an instrument of resistance inasmuch as it enables a subversion of power dynamics. In fact, the transformation into animal enables Doreen to venture beyond prescribed ways of how women, black women and

---

[51] Kristeva, p. 3.

[52] See Iris Marion Young, 'Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia,' in *Crisis in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery *et al.* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 201-14; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 170.

[53] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjections: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), pp. 13-17.

[54] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

mothers should act, and 'to explore the senses, the indiscipline, the sexual raucousness' of the animal.[55] Her embracing of abjection concurrently enables her to think about a woman lover licking under the folds of her skin, and as such of exploring the intensity of queer forms of relationality inscribed in the responsive/receptive singularity of the flesh, rather than in the unity of the body, and once precluded to her.[56]

In psychoanalytic thinking animals usually signify repressed or disavowed aspects of one's remembered experience, and represent the 'too much', an intensity that – just like any form of flight from chrononormativity – is perceived as pathological, if it remains untamed.[57] Braidotti explains:

> 'Too much' here means excessive levels of affectivity that transgress, upset, or [...] explode the boundaries of the body. Being 'beside oneself' with emotion, passion, grief, pleasure or all of these combined is in fact considered unhealthy and potentially pathological. These are unsustainable states, which one had better avoid, or dose with care.[58]

Doreen's transformation into tortoise brings her closer to her body, to an affective corporeality that escapes the hyper-rationalization of perceived experiences. Passion has the same etymological root as pathology, both reflecting in Western culture the association with a sort of disease capable of shattering the balance and unity of the subject, and in fact animal drives have to be processed (i.e., linguistically interpreted) and tamed in order to be made tolerable, digestible.[59] The policing of the defining borders of the subject in the form of prescribed forms of behaviour remains in fact essential to access social order. In this context, it is interesting to notice how, for example, eighteenth-century biologists and scientists naturalized racist discourses by associating moral degeneracy (to include excessive passion and indolence) with tropical climates; according to this pseudoscientific discourse, a combination of heat and humidity apparently left Creole people 'susceptible

---

[55] Braidotti, 'Becoming-Dog: Pinka/Orlando, Vita & Virginia,' in *Sense of Smell*, eds. Marcel van Brakel, Wander Eikelboom and Frederik Duerinck (Breda: The Eriskay Connection, 2014), p. 177.
[56] On this issue see Gerald Bruns' discussion of Deleuze's and Guattari's conception of 'becoming-animal' in relation to Georges Bataille's notion of the 'heterogeneous'. Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): pp. 706-8.
[57] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses: Becoming Woman/Animal/Insect,' in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (London: Polity Press, 2002), p. 140.
[58] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 141.
[59] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', pp. 140-1.

to supernatural belief and incapable of sustained rational thought'.[60] The intensity of Doreen's affective perception (as opposed to an otherwise preferred moderation) continues to build up in the narrative as her transformation progresses:

> She bends down and eats the buttercups, one after another, even the stems. Some buttercups are really quite tasty. [...] The old greed is still there, but now it is a pure *boterbloeme* greed. The pleasure she gets from these ample gold-cupped flowers is more intense than any she can remember. ('Shell', pp. 153-4)

Her ingestion of flowers is described in this passage as an old greed resurfacing and now taking a different shape, a greed and a pleasure of an intensity that she has never experienced before. In fact, the more she metamorphoses into a tortoise, into the animal, the more she becomes acutely aware of her senses, until she realizes that 'a moment has a smell, a taste, a sound' ('Shell', p. 153) that she does experiences affectively, that is to say prior to (and beyond) cognition. The overwhelming centrality and intensity of these affective perceptions are finally and completely accounted for at the end of the story when her transformation into a tortoise is complete:

> she got down on her knees and crawled to the garden. It was much easier an all four, a huge relief. She felt herself shrink and shrink. [...] It was a glorious feeling of relief, close to euphoria. It was as if she was turned inside out. She felt fantastically good ('Shell', p. 157).

As her transformation is complete, Doreen clearly experiences emotions and affective states with an intensity (as suggested by the use of the adjectives 'glorious' and 'fantastically' with the sensations of relief and wellbeing, and by the noun 'euphoria') that would be considered close to pathological in Western cultures. Her becoming-animal, to include the recognition of abjected parts of herself, frees Doreen from her 'enslavement to a linguistic model of development, based in the power of signification',[61] and opens up the road for the imagination of a different life for herself. This appears clear especially in the final lines when she gradually blocks out her son's voice calling her, and she imaginatively shrinks

---

[60] Chris Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 233-4, quoted in Allewaert, p. 5.
[61] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 124.

and moves, 'surprisingly quickly' ('Shell', p. 157), to rush off toward the bushes ('Shell', p. 158), away from him and her past life.

Her final refusal to listen to or to take care of her son, as well as her distancing herself from other forms of human life, reflect how the process of becoming-animal 'throws open the doors of perception toward impersonal, uncaring, dangerous, violent forces'.[62] More specifically, hers is a refusal to be objectified by both being confined to the nurturing, caring and giving role traditionally associated with women through motherhood in Western patriarchal and capitalist society (a role that is unpaid and as such undervalued),[63] and serving as 'metaphorisation in the conceptual organization of man's experience'.[64]

3. Posthuman futures, or the stories we (must conjure up to) live by

By appropriating and reinscribing one of the myths of Western philosophy – that is to say the association of black people (but also of women, of queer people, etc.) with instinctiveness, sometimes animality, surely the body – Kay retrieves the trope of animalization in her short story 'Shell' in order to deconstruct the figuration of Man (or Western *cogito*) via 'the incorporation of the colonial and racialist histories of the modern incantations of the human',[65] and rewrites the black queer experience in the process.

Through the metaphorical transformation of the protagonist Doreen into animal, that is to say via the crossing of the sociogenic border between human and animal, mind and body, Kay imagines the possibility that something new, something different might emerge.[66] Metaphors in fact do not only possess an 'emotive charge' enabling them to carry several meaning at once, but have also the 'capacity to provide untranslatable information and accordingly [...] to yield some true insight about reality, linguistically as well as existentially'.[67]

---

[62] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 141.

[63] Berman, pp. 261, 263.

[64] Feder Kittay, p. 64.

[65] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Bipolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 21.

[66] On Wynter's discussion of Fanon's concept of sociogeny see Wynter, 'Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be "Black",' in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 30-66.

[67] Jacqueline de Weever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 61.

By undoing the rational episteme of the Western *cogito* with its dominant, unitary conception of subjectivity, Kay rebuffs a monolithic, auto-referential and, as such, necessarily violent conception of subjectivity and identity. Her search for genres of the human not based on reductive and violent binarisms, but produced through a different language-system (as a mode of signification), necessarily causes her to rethink what it means to be human, and to rethink culturally stratified expressions of gender and sexuality in the process. As Nyong'o words in the opening epigraph to this essay suggest, it is exactly the exclusion of black and queer forms of existence from the conception of the human as Man that engenders the production of new modalities of existence refusing to be categorized and represented by a language-system governed by anti-queerness and anti-blackness.[68] This is exactly what Kay does in her short story, and in fact, when narrating Doreen's reflection about her transformation, she writes: 'Eventually, she might end up being a different person altogether, with a different life, another past entirely' ('Shell', p. 150), indeed capable of imagining humanity otherwise.

The transformation through abjection, the retrieval of the corporeal dimension, thus hints at the creation of a new genre of the human in a posthumanism that moves beyond the 'humanist subject' towards a more open, disseminated, uncentred, less appropriating, and as such less violent, form of subjectivity and the human.[69] It marks the emergence of a minoritarian discourse capable of accelerating the conceptual erasure of the figure of Man and to 'bring closure to our present order of discourse'.[70] As Nyong'o suggests, rather than emerging from capitalist development or biological evolution and conforming to ideals of the human as modelled to conform to the global idea of race and sexuality, 'afro-fabulation "anarranges" the development and linear timeline of history' and 'insists that we do not yet know what a human outside an anti-black world could be, do, or look like',[71] yet continuous critical investigation remains necessary to think out of the box of contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy and eventually dismantle it.

---

[68] Nyong'o, p. 25.
[69] Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 26.
[70] Wynter, 'On Disenchanting Discourse,' p. 209.
[71] Nyong'o, p. 26.

Bibliography

'Scotland's Makar – Jackie Kay,' *The Scots Magazine*, 2019, https://www.scotsmagazine.com/articles/jackie-kay.

Abrahams, Roger D., ed., *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

Allen, Jafari S., 'Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18, 2-3 (2012): pp. 212-48.

Allewaert, Monique, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Altman, Meryl, 'How Not to Do Things with Metaphors We Live By,' *College English* 52, 5 (1990): pp. 495-506.

Amideo, Emilio, *Queer Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

Baldwin, James, 'If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?,' in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), pp. 780-3.

Bergson, Henri, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Berman, Tzeporah, 'The Rape of Mother Nature? Women in the Language of Environmental Discourse,' in *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*, eds. Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 258-69.

Bogue, Ronald, 'Fabulation,' *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (2010), http://deleuze.enacademic.com/61/fabulation.

Bradford, Alina, 'Turtle Facts,' *LiveScience* (2015), https://www.livescience.com/52361-turtle-facts.html.

Braidotti, Rosi, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

———, 'Met(r)amorphoses: Becoming Woman/Animal/Insect,' in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (London: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 117-71.

———, 'Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,' *PMLA* 124, 2 (2009): pp. 526-32.

———, 'On Putting the Active Back into Activism,' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 68 (2009): pp. 42-57.

———, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

———, 'Becoming-Dog: Pinka/Orlando, Vita & Virginia,' in *Sense of Smell*, eds. Marcel van Brakel, Wander Eikelboom and Frederik Duerinck (Breda: The Eriskay Connection, 2014), pp. 172-8.

Bruns, Gerald L., 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): pp. 703-20.

Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

———, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Deleuze, Gilles, 'Control and Becoming,' in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 169-76.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Dell'Aversano, Carmen, 'The Love Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond,' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 8, 1-2 (2010): pp. 73-125.

De Weever, Jacqueline, *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press 1986).

———, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

Feder Kittay, Eva, 'Woman as Metaphor,' *Hypatia* 3, 2 (1988): pp. 63-86.

Felluga, Dino, 'Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject,' *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (Purdue University, 2011), http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html.

Freeman, Elizabeth, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Freud, Sigmund, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Global Grey, 2018).

Gates Jr., Henry Louis and Maria Tatar (eds.), *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Liverlight, 2018).

Gesuato, Sara and Fabienne H. Baider, 'Masculinist Metaphors, Feminist Research,' *Metaphorik* 5 (2003): pp. 6-35.

Glave, Thomas, 'Jamaican, Octopus,' in *Among the Bloodpeople: Politics and Flesh* (New York: Akashic Books, 2013), pp. 91-105.

Gramsci, Antonio, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg with Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Halberstam, Judith, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Hartman, Saidiya, 'Venus in Two Acts,' *Small Axe* 12, 2 (2008): pp. 1-14.

Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

Hetmann, Frederik, *Märchen des schwarzen Amerika* (Berlin: Fisher, 1974)

Hines, Caitlin, 'Foxy Chicks and Playboy Bunnies: A Case Study in Metaphorical Lexicalization,' in *Cultural, Typological and Psychological Perspectives on Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. M.K. Hiraga, C. Sinha and S. Wilco (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), pp. 9-23.

Iannini, Chris, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Johnson, E. Patrick, 'Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,' in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), pp. 446-63.

Kay, Jackie, *Trumpet* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

———, 'Shell,' in *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 137-58.

———, 'Owl,' in *Reality, Reality* (London: Picador, 2012), pp. 161-9.

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Luciano, Dana and Mel Chen, 'Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 21, 2-3 (2015): pp. 183-207.

Midgley, Mary, *The Myths We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Mootoo, Shani, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2014).

Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Nyong'o, Tavia, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

O'Rourke, Michael, 'The Afterlives of Queer Theory,' *continent* 1, 2 (2011): pp. 102-16.

Russo, Katherine, 'Turning Turtle and the In/visibility of Ecofeminist Metaphors in Italian Translations of Katherine Mansfield's At the Bay,' in *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies*, eds. Eleonora Federici and Vanessa Leonardi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 150-62.

Scott, Darieck, *Extravagant Abjections: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

Semino, Elena, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Stibbe, Arran, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Stockton, Kathryn Bond, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Thomas, Greg, 'Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter,' *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* 4 (2006): pp. 1-35.

Van Dijk, Teun A., 'Critical Discourse Analysis,' in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 352-71.

Weheliye, Alexander G., *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

Wynter, Sylvia, 'On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond,' *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): pp. 207-44.

———, 'Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black',' in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 30–66.

———, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument,' *The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): pp. 257-337.

Young, Iris Marion, 'Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia,' in *Crisis in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery *et al.* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 201-14.

VI.
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

'SHE LIVES NOW IN TWO WORLDS': RE-PLACING THE EMBODIED OTHER IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S THE LOST CHILD

Maria Grazia Nicolosi

As the idea of vulnerability being the constitutive condition of the embodied self's worldliness has gained currency, postcolonial studies have readily grasped what its ethico-political implications may be for those who 'have their involvement in the world called into crisis' on account of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or 'race'. And yet, precisely the vulnerable materiality of embodied life ensures that spaces are shaped by the bodies that inhabit them, just as 'histories surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface' when they are most emphatically 'out of place'. Echoing the AIA Conference's chosen metaphor, 'Thinking Caryl Phillips Out of the Box' was the title of a special issue of *ariel* (2017) which challenged Phillipsian critical orthodoxies, both the 'deterritorialising tendencies of diaspora discourse [...] that situates migrant subjectivities outside locality, region and nation' and the weaknesses of Paul Gilroy's transnational 'Black Atlantic' model (1993). Assuming 'the temporally noncoincident ontology of the flesh' to be 'implicated elsewhere from the start', Phillips's 2015 novel *The Lost Child* interrogates the local and global alignments between 'race' and place that allow occluded colonial histories to reappear across time and space in the British literary imagination. Phillips's novel materialises this inheritance of 'loss' out of the (un)written lines of *Wuthering Heights*. Inverting the 'nesting' procedure of the Victorian classic by starting from a temporally and spatially distant narrative of slavery and then zooming in onto a modern 'Yorkshire *noir*', *The Lost Child* denaturalises notions of proximity and distance spatializing the heterological interferences of its 'polytemporal' intersections unto Brontë's 'unforgiving setting', stripped of its Victorian 'heritage' aura through its recursive proximity to the twentieth-century narrative of violation and disappearance. Ahmed's phenomenological hermeneutics, Butler's 'relational ontology' and the affect-driven art of black Britons from the North will guide my reading of Phillips's novel 'out of the familiar critical box' by first examining the ways in which it reconnects the broken lines of unrealised solidarities through shared vulnerability and then considering how mixed inheritances might re-articulate 'loss' as contingent upon contact through the recognition that 'contemporary mode of proximity *reopen prior histories of encounter*'.

Caryl Phillips; The Lost Child; Wuthering Heights; Colonial Legacies; Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Although the idea of vulnerability as the constitutive condition of the embodied self's worldliness has gained theoretical weight in the recent work of thinkers such as Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler, still the notion is deemed to carry quite fraught material implications for those individuals whose entitlement to the world is called into question on account of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or 'race'. In this respect, Ahmed describes the erasure of racialized others from the 'white' postcolonial and postimperial imaginary as a literal loss of place marked by violence under many guises.[1] And yet, just as spaces are shaped by those bodies whose inhabitance goes undisputed, so excluded others become visible when they are most emphatically 'out of place' precisely because histories of oppression and dispossession get inscribed onto the materiality of the living body.[2]

Caryl Phillips's 2015 novel *The Lost Child* turns the 'unforgiving setting' of *Wuthering Heights* into the uncannily polytemporal intersection of three emblematic moments of occluded black history from northern England in order to expose the crushing local and global alignments between 'race', gender, class and place meant to obliterate the vulnerable embodied other, from the days of slavery, through Emily Brontë's Victorian classic, to a modern narrative of bodily violation and disappearance. Through the repeated motifs of departed mothers, absent fathers, and missing children, *The Lost Child* materializes onto this recursive inheritance of 'loss' the violence that lurks between the (un)written lines of the British (post-)colonial and (post-)imperial imagination. This is the case in the episode set in late eighteenth-century Liverpool where a Heathcliff-like child is prematurely orphaned; his sorry plight is replicated by 'Emily Brontë''s impending death without the comforts of a caring father and by her writerly fantasies in the narrative's second strand. This is, finally, the case for the titular 'lost child' and his hapless mother's several losses – of parents' and husband's love, of this very child's, and of her own life – in the postwar strand set in working-class Leeds. And yet, as this heritage of 'loss' pervades each of the novel's narrative strands, the ghostly contours of their haunted topographies make visible the enduring presence of these excluded others and make space for the embodied legacy of their 'lost' genealogy.

---

[1] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 160; Judith Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, 2 (2012): pp. 147-8.
[2] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 112.

Challenging Phillipsian critical orthodoxies – both the deterritorializing emphasis of the diasporic discourse that positions minoritarian subjectivities outside locality, region and nation,[3] and the overly abstract model of Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' transnationalism,[4] Sara Ahmed's phenomenological hermeneutics, Judith Butler's 'relational ontology' and Phillips's own affect-driven writerly recovery of 'Emily Brontë''s 'lost' voice from within the intimate space of her deathbed chamber will guide my reading of the novel 'out of the familiar critical box'. I shall first examine the ways in which it reconnects the broken lines of unrealized solidarities through a shared vulnerability with the embodied other and then consider how denaturalized notions of mixed historical, spatial and affective inheritances might re-position the lived experience of 'loss' as contingent upon the recognition that 'contemporary modes of proximity *reopen prior histories of encounter*'.[5]

In Thesis XI of *The Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin memorably declared the oppressed class to be 'the depository of historical knowledge', warning, however, that 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns'[6] is at risk of irretrievable disappearance in consequence of the inherently effacing mechanisms of majoritarian discourse. Approaching Benjamin's historical insight through the lens of phenomenological hermeneutics, Sara Ahmed proposes to regard the shifting degrees of (in)visibility of minoritarian histories as the material impression in the flesh of the fundamental inequity of cultural and political practices constraining the 'bodily horizons' of particular selves.[7] Assuming specific '"alignments" between body, place, nation, and world'[8] to be the manifested effect of 'inherited' privileges handing down differential entitlements to inhabitance of the world,[9] Ahmed describes elsewhere the people we call 'strangers' as 'those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being

---

[3] James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 14.
[4] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1993.
[5] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 13.
[6] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn, 3rd ed. (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 251, 247.
[7] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 56.
[8] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 112.
[9] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 129.

out of place'.[10] Not incidentally, she turns to Frantz Fanon's compelling analysis of racialization, understood as a corporeal experience of social uncertainty and blockage, in other words, as 'the crisis of losing one's place in the world, as a loss of something that one has yet to be given',[11] to oppose Merleau-Ponty's idealized picture of a self that feels at home in the world.[12]

In spite of his universalistic bias, mostly blind to disabling socio-cultural conditions related to 'race', gender, sexuality, class, wealth, age, and so on, by describing the body as a 'gaping wound' Merleau-Ponty suggested that our shared corporeal vulnerability ethically grounds any openness to the world.[13] Traversing the same conceptual region, Judith Butler embraces Merleau-Ponty's insight radically to argue that 'perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a bodily life, understood as injurable'.[14] The inherent vulnerability characterizing all social existence is thus intimately related to the living body, which Butler sees as the material 'condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us'.[15]

It should be pointed out that such an emphasis on the vulnerability of embodied life is not meant to legitimize defeatism or to fetishize victimhood status in either thinker. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty himself recognized the existential significance of sensing one's instability as the circumstance that 'produces not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is *the awareness of our contingency*, and the horror with which it fills us'.[16] Merleau-Ponty's odd phraseology, invoking 'horror' seemingly out of context, may implicitly point to the Gothic as one of the literary genres in which the question of 'our contingency' is most often explored.[17] The phenomenological perspective brings Gothic fiction to the fore as a significant precursor to the use of the tropes of haunting and ghosting in those postcolonial theoreti-

---

[10] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 21.
[11] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 138-9.
[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 106.
[13] Merleau-Ponty, pp. 342, 296.
[14] Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' p. 147.
[15] Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' p. 141.
[16] Merleau-Ponty, p. 296 (emphasis added).
[17] Fred Botting, 'In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture,' in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 13-24.

cal and literary works focusing on the differential liability to 'horror' that the colonial legacy has forced upon certain bodies.[18]

There is hardly any need to highlight just how consistently Caryl Phillips's work has lent those subjects that have been most systematically 'ghosted' – black people, women, working-class people – the imaginative space to resurface from the 'abyss of silence'.[19] As he wrote about Liverpool's black history, concealed within the folds of the city's 'forgotten' connections to the slave trade, places particularly 'haunted' are those 'where history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people's consciousness'.[20] Precisely such a phantasmatic structure defines the novel *The Lost Child*, where it is positioned between the bodily and the discursive, this combination tracking down the 'sedimented histories of those lost, silenced, and invisible children of Empire'[21] that appear, disappear, and resurface as ghostly traces haunting the British literary tradition, especially in 'Gothic' novels like *Wuthering Heights*.[22]

The Lost Child brings together on the circumscribed stage of northern England a many-stranded narrative of separate yet interlocked stories, all about 'lost' children. The first strand is set in late eighteenth-century Liverpool, where Brontë's Heathcliff – through the evocation of the city's pivotal role in the British slave trade – is allotted a conjectural pre-history as the mixed-race son of Mr Earnshaw by an anonymous ex-slave from the West Indies; terminally ill, she is soon to die in a shabby slum, leaving behind her little child only belatedly rescued by his formerly uncaring father. The second narrative strand bifurcates into Phillips's imaginative recreation of 'Emily Brontë''s last days from her own standpoint and his recasting of her dead brother's loss as the affect-driven genesis of Emily's writerly fantasies about a wild boy out on the moors. The third narrative strand is set in 1960s and 1970s working-class Leeds and traces the historical, material, and affective conditions shaping the Johnson-Wilson family's de-formation and rupture under the weight of overwhelmingly traumatic events. The increasingly troubled Monica

---

[18] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 26-7, 141-73.

[19] Caryl Phillips, *The Lost Child* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 23, hereafter abbreviated *LC* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[20] Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 93.

[21] Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection,' *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48, 3-4 (2017): p. 230.

[22] Ledent and O'Callaghan, p. 229.

Johnson is a modern-day Cathy Earnshaw, disowned by her father on account of her relationship with a Ph.D. student of history from some postcolonial country that she hurriedly marries, relinquishing her Oxford degree. Soon abandoned by this man as well, she finds herself in a dismal predicament, so poorly equipped to fend off for herself and her two mixed-race children that she cannot but reluctantly hand them over to foster care. We learn from the elder son Ben's laboured narrative that when his younger brother, Tommy, finds death on the moors at the hands of Monica's sinister lover, she quickly descends into madness. Whereas Ben finds a way to cope with his grief and survive, Monica, utterly lonely and in despair, ultimately commits suicide.

Phillips's is just one amongst many postcolonial interventions in the world of the Brontës. In the dustcover to its first edition, *The Lost Child* was advertised as belonging in this postcolonial literary genealogy: 'Written in the tradition of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, *The Lost Child* is a multifaceted, deeply original response to Emily Brontë's masterpiece' (*LC*, n.p.). Although the connections are all too obvious plausibly to be confuted, the novel fails to meet the expected criteria for a proper intertextual conversation with *Wuthering Heights* along the lines of *Wide Sargasso Sea* vis-à-vis *Jane Eyre*, intentionally on Phillips's part, one would think from the writer's own statements.[23] Despite evoking Brontë's England's haunted places, *The Lost Child* is drawn along different lines from those ostensibly reproduced in British 'heritage' texts. '*Wuthering Heights* fitted into the architecture of this particular book', Phillips explains, 'because of Yorkshire, because of the Moors, because of the notion of being an outsider, because of the isolation of a child [...] as opposed to a canonical idea that I wanted to revisit'.[24]

Indeed, Phillips seems intent on dispensing altogether with the postcolonial 'writing-back' approach by implicating the canonical texts themselves in 'the predicament of the postcolonial writer, whose conscious or unconscious affiliation and allusiveness to the Western literary tradition is an inheritance that is as often unwanted as it is laboured for'.[25] His acknowledged debt towards Jean Rhys's work lifts it out of the

---

[23] 'I wasn't interested in just doing a book which might sit as a kind of companion piece to *Wide Sargasso Sea*'. Stephen Clingman, 'The Nature of Empathy: An Interview with Caryl Phillips,' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, 5 (2017): p. 595.

[24] Clingman, p. 594.

[25] Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 113.

postcolonial box, as it were, for Rhys herself is dislodged from her relatively secure habitation in the house of British fiction and repositioned more precariously in Phillips's own company. Rather than resting with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Phillips's favour goes in fact to Rhys's 'more modernist excursions [...] into the fragility of particularly female psychology'.[26] Likewise, his engagement with *Wuthering Heights* implicates its author, too, in 'the predicament of the postcolonial writer', for his 'Emily Brontë' hallucinates her own family's involvement in Heathcliff's troubled arrival at Wuthering Heights in terms that closely – albeit anachronistically – match Frantz Fanon's memorable account of racialized dispossession from *Black Skin, White Masks*: '*Dear Charlotte, do you remember when Papa deserted us for Liverpool and returned with the boy? The strange boy with blazing eyes who had lost his place in the world*' (*LC*, p. 110).

If Phillips did not want just to 'revisit' Brontë's novel, or its later re-writings, then the question is what did he want to do with it? I will argue that this question might be addressed through the phenomenological notion of 'relational ontology' as put forward by Butler, not incidentally, in a discussion of Sartre's response to Fanon's book.[27] Complementing Ahmed's model of ethical intentionality predicated on the principle of 'affect as contact', even at a distance,[28] Butler postulates that ethical relations ought to be conceived of as a 'multilocal' and 'cross-temporal' mode of proximity. The philosopher emphasizes that

> to have one's being implicated in the Other is thus to be intertwined from the start, but not for that reason to be reducible to – or exchangeable with – one another. Moreover, to be implicated elsewhere from the start suggests that the subject, as flesh, is primarily an intersubjective being, finding itself as Other, finding its primary sociality in a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable.[29]

I would argue that the novel's poetics establishes 'intersubjective being' as the embodied contours of its imaginative map.

Indeed, the mode of Phillips's proximity to the author of *Wuthering Heights* accords with Butler's claim, as suggested by Phillips's telling turn of phrase: 'I knew that the story was going to come out [...], because I had *her* still staring at me. [...] I have a little picture here [...], which I've had

[26] Clingman, p. 594.
[27] Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 194-7.
[28] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 2-3.
[29] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 168.

on my desk for 20 years'.[30] This uncanny moment of 'staring back'[31] reveals how 'the ghost has an agency on the people it is haunting'. The crucial point is that 'the ghost's desire, even if it is nothing more than a potent and conjectural fiction',[32] must be recognized by those who return the gaze. Phillips's beholding encounter with Emily's 'ghost' turns it into the creative core of his traffic with 'a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable'. For this reason, Phillips's '*unfinished* business with her'[33] cannot stop at temporal, racial, or gender borders, neither is it meant to fulfil a desire for biographical identification, or even for an impossible intimacy with a long dead fellow writer.

To begin with, *Wuthering Heights* itself could be envisioned, in Butler's words, as 'accepting and negotiating the multilocality and cross-temporality of ethical connections we might rightly call global'.[34] Published in 1847, the novel opens in 1801 and reaches back to the 1770s, when slavery was still in place on the British Isles; although set among the inhabitants of the rural hinterland, the slave trade is subtly implicated throughout.[35] In spite of its notorious topographical and chronological elusiveness,[36] *Wuthering Heights* materially encrypts Britain's guilty colonial history right within the folds of its Gothic romance.[37] Under that mask, or rather, precisely because the novel's intricate forms of concealment are informed by Gothic elements, the 'horror' allows to articulate historically Brontë's implicit criticism of the slavery-industrial complex.[38] The novel's 'Gothic' core undermines from within the complacency of Brontë's provincial world by writing into it multiple loci of potential disturbance to the reproduction of that social model.[39] Heathcliff's origins remain moot: we never know for sure whether or not he was 'a regular

---

[30] Clingman, pp. 593-4.

[31] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 194.

[32] Gordon, p. 179.

[33] Clingman, p. 595, emphasis added.

[34] Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' p. 138.

[35] Maja-Lisa von Sneidern, '*Wuthering Heights* and the Liverpool Slave Trade,' *ELH* 62, 1 (1995): pp. 171-96.

[36] Linda M. Shires, 'The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. David Deirdre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 66-70.

[37] Lyn Pykett, 'Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction,' in *Emily Brontë: 'Wuthering Heights'*, ed. Patsy Stoneman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 86-99.

[38] Susan Gillman, 'Remembering Slavery, Again,' *Caribbean Quarterly* 61, 4 (2015): p. 14.

[39] Daniela Garofalo, 'Impossible Love and Commodity Culture in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,' *ELH* 75, 4 (2008): pp. 823-4.

black',[40] nevertheless they are inconceivable outside the global network of imperial commerce[41] and, significantly, they are bound to violence: 'that little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway'[42] might have been 'kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England'.[43] From a postcolonial perspective, Khair rightly points out that

> Heathcliff's terror, coming from 'elsewhere,' is situated in the context of the sublime in the 'English' moors: far from being simply external to the nation/ the home, terror (displacement, fear, violence) resides just as much within the nominally 'local'.[44]

Recalling his earliest impressions of Brontë's novel, in *The Atlantic Sound* Phillips confesses how intensely her mysterious antihero captured his youthful imagination,[45] and that the episode uniquely stuck in his mind was Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights as a 'dirty, ragged, black-haired child' found 'starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool'[46] but declared nonetheless to be a 'gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil'.[47] Beckoning to him from that unfathomable distance, Emily Brontë's 'dark stranger' pointed to the muted heritage of 'lost' histories – racial or otherwise – as something to be reckoned with as a 'gift of God'.

Phillips has thus gone well beyond shaping *The Lost Child* as an improvisational prequel to Brontë's masterpiece: inverting the 'nesting' procedure of the Victorian classic by starting from a temporally and spatially distant Black Atlantic narrative of slavery and then zooming in onto a modern 'Yorkshire *noir*', Phillips's novel denaturalizes notions of proximity and distance spatializing the heterological interferences of its 'cross-temporal' intersections unto Brontë's 'unforgiving setting'. *The Lost Child* – like other Black British interventions in the English pastoral

---

[40] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Pauline Nestor, preface Lucasta Miller, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 58.
[41] Sarah Brophy, '"Going Home": Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child* as Feminist Decolonial "Yorkshire Noir",' *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 29, 3 (2018): p. 163.
[42] Brontë, p. 50.
[43] Brontë, p. 58.
[44] Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 70.
[45] Phillips, *Atlantic Sound*, p. 92.
[46] Brontë, p. 37.
[47] Brontë, p. 36.

tradition documented by James Procter[48] – strips its Northern setting of any Victorian 'heritage' aura so frequently 'built upon a racialised rhetoric of the past and the pastoral'.[49] On account of the sinister re-verberations of its narrative of violation and disappearance, critics have related *The Lost Child* to the contemporary 'Gothic' genre called 'York-shire *noir*'.[50] Although this genre seems particularly well-suited for the aesthetic amplification of small-scale devastation occurring in provin-cial enclaves into broadly generalizable socio-historical catastrophes, Rawlinson makes the point that generalization unwittingly contributes to normalizing evil and so, in some sense, to perpetuating it.[51] This argu-ment may validly support my view that *The Lost Child* in fact distances itself from the spirit of the 'Yorkshire *noir*'. Despite admitting that its Yorkshire setting reflected the sinister quality of the landscape where Ian Brady and Myra Hindley's infamous moors murders were committed in the 1960s, and that he had read and thought considerably about them, Phillips insisted that he did not intend to recreate those horrific crimes,[52] suggesting that the analogies were meant not so much surreptitiously to recover forgotten traumatic histories, but 'to make this past come alive as the lever for the work of the present [...], ending this history and setting in place a different future'.[53] This ethical project sits well with the novel's poetics of recursive proximity.

Organized in ten chapters headed, untypically for Phillips, by themed titles, this arrangement would seem to promise some kind of develop-ment, but the expectation quickly evaporates, as the transition from one chapter to the next instantiates ghostly resurfacings of the past by a practice that might be accurately described with Ahmed's words: 'Such histories are spectral in the sense that [...] they resist being convert-ed into something that is available'.[54] Quite significantly, the opening chapter, 'Separation', imagines into being Heathcliff's past *in the present tense*, by asserting the embodied presence of his unnamed black mother, a woman who never appears in *Wuthering Heights*, and whom we only

---

[48] Procter, pp. 181-4, pp. 194-5.
[49] Procter, p. 169.
[50] Brophy, pp. 160-1. See Barry Forshaw, *Crime Fiction: A Reader's Guide Paperback* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2020), p. 259.
[51] Mark Rowlinson, *Pat Barker* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2010), p. 40.
[52] Clingman, pp. 590-1.
[53] Gordon, p. 66.
[54] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 152-3.

meet here on the verge of disappearance (*LC*, pp. 11-12). Like many earlier novels by Philips, *The Lost Child* starts with a departure, begins with an ending. This frame clearly establishes, right at the beginning, the text's connection with *Wuthering Heights* in terms of an inheritance of loss: 'She is a woman in debt', we are told, 'a diminished woman who, before her time, has yielded reluctantly to age and infirmity' (*LC*, p. 3). Demonstrating graphically how obscure histories 'surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface',[55] she is 'a skeleton hung with rags' (*LC*, p. 12), 'pain has again established residence and has no desire to quit [her] body' (*LC*, p. 4). Readers are presented with the grim bodily inscription of the violently exclusionary system that has 'abraded' this woman's 'corporeal schema' into nonbeing:[56] 'her reduced self aged a year with each dismissive glance' (*LC*, p. 11). Perception of the embodied vulnerability and precarious inhabitance of the world shared by 'the human family' as a whole should advance mutual care, but here 'compassion' has decayed into an 'aura of superiority fed by excessive *familiarity* with rum and other strong liquors' (*LC*, p. 6, emphasis added).

Aptly, similarly dysfunctional families are figured as the locus where privately registered suffering, injury and death ripple outwards so that the 'perverted' semantics of affection, as ironically conveyed by interrelated headings referring to 'family', explodes publicly in the socio-political arena. Writing about *Crossing the River*, Yogita Goyal objected to Phillips's representation of diasporic hurt on the narrow family level because, in Goyal's opinion, it dehistoricizes and naturalizes any suffered violation.[57] McLeod, on the other hand, has maintained that Phillips's representation of family ruptures caused by 'the toxic concoction of racism, anti-colonial politics, sexual exploitation and the clinical confinement of unsupported women'[58] foregrounds – under the private guise – 'the historical locatedness of matters of vulnerability, surrender, and adoptability'.[59] I concur with the latter view: Phillips's focus on familiality should be regarded as indeed political, if one takes on board the fact that any account of history from the perspective of those officially

[55] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 56.
[56] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, 8th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1991), pp. 109-12.
[57] Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 217.
[58] John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 88.
[59] McLeod, *Life Lines*, p. 21.

written out of it would require a radical recalibration of its priorities, in other words, of who and what matter most. How this recalibration could be achieved depends on a newly conceived, more inclusive, 'humanistic' perspective which Phillips trusts literature is pre-eminently called to promote in today's world:

> The thing that literature does more than anything else, or should do, is remind us that there is actually only one family, and that's the human family. [...] there are all sorts of people who are trying to tell you that you belong in a specific box. That's unfortunately the great mythology about the world in which we live.[60]

Insofar as anonymous life – however precarious and forlorn this is shown to be – can assert its living legacy across the generations, 'all is not lost' (*LC*, p. 6). It is therefore fitting that a dying black woman's frail frame, both her literally waning body and the tenuous narrative she barely appears in, must hold the thread to the ensuing narrative strands and sets the tone for a poetics in which 'the temporally noncoincident ontology of the flesh'[61] enables the always unfinished creative task of crafting the space in which nearly vanished histories like hers may re-surface.

In this spirit, in the chapter titled 'The Family' Phillips fictively restores to Emily Brontë's fading body the textual space for her to reach out of the stifling world she had no choice but to inhabit. In order vicariously to fulfil, even on the threshold of her grave, Emily's indomitable desire, Phillips opens up her deathbed chamber and refashions her impending burial as an out-of-body flight: 'Emily continued to wander in her mind out onto the moors, where she pulled the landscape gloriously tight around her like a worn green blanket and hid herself away' (*LC*, p. 105). Importantly, Phillips allows Emily's desire to speak in her own voice, as he ventriloquizes the words about Heathcliff's demise Emily lent her frame narrator, Lockwood, who 'wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth'.[62] Phillips leaves his readers in no doubt that the task, then as now, is 'to complete their work and repair the unsettled earth' (*LC*, p. 109):

---

[60] Clingman, pp. 604-5.
[61] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 169.
[62] Brontë, p. 337.

> What better place than this to commit a soul into eternity? [...] Supported by stone and earth, she is ready now. She stands and pulls the hair from her eyes and begins to move down in the direction of home. [...] *Wait, I'm coming.* [...] She hears the noise of the debris thundering against the wooden box. She lifts her weak, gloved hands and covers her ears. She lives now in two worlds. She understands. (*LC*, p. 112)

Making her appearance, as flesh, on the verge of disappearance – just like the anonymous black woman from the first chapter – Emily Brontë's haunting 'presence' paradigmatically embodies the 'relational ontology' of the 'ghost' – 'she lives now in two worlds' (*LC*, p. 112) – bearing a vision of death as reclamation of place as well as repossession of voice. As Gordon asserts, 'the ghost has its own desires, [...] which figure the whole complicated sociality of a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced'.[63]

It could be interesting to imagine, Ahmed muses, how differently family stories would be told from the vantage point of those women who do not reproduce the family line[64] – in the genealogical and in the literary historical sense which, in *The Lost Child*, are treated as being one the figure of the other. If, in the chapter antiphrastically titled 'Family', the mixed-race siblings Ben and Tommy eventually discover that 'the idea of talking about family in general was completely off the agenda' (*LC*, p. 196), the novel as a whole delineates several trajectories where the 'idea' of breaking free from the 'conventional tree' is played out. One is reminded of the convoluted genealogical table introducing *Wuthering Heights*, supposedly to help clarify the plot's twists and turns, in fact highlighting the problematic role that the genealogical dimension plays in the novel's unfolding drama.[65] So, in the chapter 'First Love', Monica's marriage to 'a dark stranger' and renunciation of her Oxford degree alienates her father's love as a consequence (*LC*, pp. 15-61). Unlike her sisters, 'Emily Brontë' – as re-imagined by Phillips in the chapter 'The Family' – defiantly sides with her misfit brother (*LC*, pp. 107-8). Ahmed specifies that proper inheritance and the privileged position attached to it are usually regarded as patrilineal.[66] Precisely this exclusionary logic

---

[63] Gordon, p. 183.
[64] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 178.
[65] Brontë, p. xlii.
[66] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 22.

is queried by 'Emily Brontë': when her father teaches her how to shoot, as if she were the son Branwell never managed to be, 'Emily brandished the weapon with a presumption that almost made her father forget the accident of one son' (*LC*, p. 108); however, she appears to be fully aware that she is not entitled to 'inherit' the position poorly embodied by her brother: 'what was she supposed to do with this knowledge? *You have a son. I cannot be your son*' (*LC*, p. 109).

By exposing the cost of the affective labour carried on by those dispossessed subjects – mostly women and children – who cannot or have refused to reproduce the prescribed family legacy, Phillips's novel asks us to 'rethink the relationship between inheritance (the lines that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line)'.[67] The affective labour undertaken by the second generation in *Wuthering Heights* might describe the alternative path to reconciliation available to such disinherited subjects: Catherine tutors her illiterate cousin Hareton, and in return he helps her to create ornamental flower beds to re-place fruit-bearing 'currant and gooseberry bushes'.[68]

In *The Lost Child* a similar process of reconciliation begins with the acknowledgement of an inheritance of loss 'that can nevertheless be shared'[69] and therefore characterized as an affective practice that is not meant inordinately to *capitalize* on grief. In the chapter 'Childhood' – laid out as a kind of pop music 'playlist' triggering off Ben's elliptical narration of his most fraught years – his collection of stolen records[70] stands for Ben's difficult inheritance of inarticulable emotions. It mostly consists of '45s with the centre bits missing […] rejects from a jukebox or something' (*LC*, p. 143), in other words, Ben's collection incorporates the very lack it is supposed to assuage. Ben's emotional deprivation, which had stunted his recognition of his younger and more vulnerable brother's silent pain, in retrospect, provides the path towards repairing their broken relatedness. According to this affective economy, loss is never thematized as unredeem-

---

[67]   Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 17.
[68]   Brontë, pp. 314-16, 317.
[69]   Ledent and O'Callaghan, p. 236.
[70]   Ben's stealing may be interpreted as defying the reproduction of bourgeois proprietary priorities: tellingly, the possibility to stop pilfering, when he has money to do so, presents itself as 'a dilemma' to Ben (*LC*, p. 163). Similarly, Heathcliff's drive towards the acquisition of material wealth exceeds any rationally calculable purpose: prompted as it is by Cathy's loss and overinvested in mourning afterwards, it unwittingly exposes the melancholy core of Victorian capitalism (see Garofalo, p. 824).

ably final or irrevocable: 'As the making present of something that is now absent [...], the 'loss' itself', Ahmed insists, 'is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence'.[71] The elder brother partially makes peace with his 'ghosts' by a bodily re-enactment of the scene of loss, when he decides literally to traverse backwards the painful landscape of 'sedimented' older temporalities and spatialities that link what seems ineluctably past with the unbounded prospect of the present. Gordon avers that 'the ghost is [...] pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding'.[72] As it does for 'Emily Brontë', Ben's 'return' to the moors, signifies doubly in his mourning rite, for it presents, once again – and the recursive logic is essential here – a view of death as 'a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had':[73]

> I sped up and turned the van towards the moors, which was the opposite direction to where I should have been going. I stopped by the side of the road and stared at the depressing landscape. Bloody hell, I thought, even with a full moon it must be pitch black up here at night. And cold, and our Tommy didn't have his duffel coat with him. I shouted. Tommy! I walked a few paces away from the van and looked out into the distance. Tommy! Tommy! But it was no use. [...] I took a few steps onto the actual moorland. [...] I really wasn't ready to climb back into the driver's seat and point the van south. Not just yet. I wasn't ready to abandon our Tommy again, so I made up my mind to stay put on the moors. (*LC*, p. 189)

This pivotal episode provides the most poignant dramatization of Butler's 'multilocal' and 'cross-temporal' mode of proximity as 'at once a limit and a site of adjacency'.[74] In spite of the chasm between the 'stormy night' back in 1972 when Tommy disappeared (*LC*, p. 172), and Ben's future-oriented present,[75] feeling 'the moors closing in' on him, Ben is able to open himself up: 'for the first time in ages I began to feel close to my brother' (*LC*, p. 189). His newly found sense of proximity to his dead brother is presented as the direct effect of his willingness to accept the unfinished character of one's relation to the past – 'I really wasn't ready [...]. Not just yet'.

---

[71] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 158.

[72] Gordon, p. 183.

[73] Gordon, p. 183.

[74] Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' p. 141.

[75] Ben is going to embark upon a university education at Oxford (not incidentally, the same university his mother had quitted without obtaining her degree and therefore, in a sense, carrying on what she had left off).

Such a spatial and temporal interlacing – adumbrated here by a subtly dissonant verbal echo of 'Emily Brontë's' burial scene, where we heard 'she is ready now' – invites us to regard the encounter between ontologically 'distant' worlds as being eventuated by the phenomenological structure that Victoria Browne has termed 'complex coevalness'.[76] At this stage in the narrative, Ben is about to leave his hometown and his foster white family, the Gilpins (*LC*, pp. 172-9). It is quite striking, then, that the bodily enactment of his mourning ritual, in the affectively charged sequence cited above, is inaugurated by a literal *turn* in the *opposite direction* from the one he was heading to. As Ahmed postulates, 'deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines [...]. Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes'.[77] By *not* following the given course, Ben's disavowed inheritance may indeed re-appear as an unbounded sense of relatedness to his once 'lost' genealogy. Having established spatial and temporal 'deviation' as an affectively momentous practice, the final three chapters turn backwards, again, to the painful spatialities and temporalities where the readers may rediscover the marks – albeit nearly (in)visible or disregarded – left on the ground by the characters most tragically wiped out. Thus, in true Gothic fashion, their ubiquitous haunting form makes surprising textual reappearances when and where least expected.

The chapter titled 'Alone' 'posthumously' retells, through the harrowing internal focalization of the victim herself, Monica Johnson's last days' descent into a mute hell of self-inflicted agony. In the concluding pages of 'The Journey' Mr Earnshaw travels to Liverpool to claim the dark child he has fathered: 'Come to me, son, and let's go home' (*LC*, p. 252). Even if the child ignores who the man is and his response is left unspoken, his bodily hesitancy bespeaks a dreadful end, 'as though he is cognizant of something that others cannot see' (*LC*, p. 252). The inarticulate unease that the word 'home' summons poignantly foreshadows the terror that the 'lost' Tommy Wilson would endure in the short concluding chapter, 'Going Home.' The open temporality conveyed by the gerund contradicts the sense of destination embedded in the noun, the most charged one for a novel that centrally deals with the question

---

[76] Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 38-42.
[77] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 20.

of (not) being at home, in the house of fiction and in the world at large. The characters within the narrative do not hear the plea of the voiceless victim, but we do, his silent accusation rebounding 'even indirectly or diachronically 'through' or 'across' time',[78] co-implicating us in the impending event of violation: 'The boy stares now at the man in whose company he has suffered this long ordeal, and he can feel his eyes filling with tears. *Please don't hurt me.* Come along now. There's a good lad. We're nearly home' (*LC*, p. 260). In this coda, Tommy's 'homecoming' foregrounds the 'horrifying' aspect of intersubjective corporeality as being rooted in our contingency and mortality. Resurfacing on the verge of disappearance in this spatio-temporal fold at the periphery of the narrative – and of the characters' and readers' consciousnesses – the tragic 'destiny' of the titular lost child is posthumously 'bequeathed' to us. It ties in with Phillips's imagination of Emily's 'return' to the earth as reclamation of place and repossession of voice, as it does with Brontë's own fantasy about Heathcliff's 'homecoming', understood as the reparation of broken relatedness: 'My Soul's bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself. [...] I have nearly attained *my* heaven; and that of others is altogether unvalued, and uncoveted by me'.[79]

The Lost Child draws the lines of its minoritarian map by taking characters and readers alike to painful places where they may have had little desire to go. Importantly, the characters who appear to be least susceptible to a sense of proximity with, or ethical obligation to, 'strangers' are those who 'travel' the furthest away from their familiar direction. Thus Monica's father, on first meeting his mixed-race grandchildren, thought of them as 'this permanent stain on her [his daughter's] reputation', mentally associating them to unwelcome wartime 'evacuees' (*LC*, p. 54), expressly because 'he felt free to think about him [their black father] *in the past tense*' (*LC*, p. 57, emphasis added). However, in the end he finds himself wondering whether 'the boy [...] has found some way to re-establish a connection with his father' (*LC*, p. 206), and accepts that his concern for his grandson depends on a formerly inconceivable intergenerational bond: 'he still has something to offer his own flesh and blood' (*LC*, p. 208). Unlike the array of flawed patriarchs who fail 'their' children in each of the worlds conjured up in *The Lost Child*, Phillips's poetics has the merit of imagining into being a form of familiality that makes the 'possibility

---

[78] Browne, pp. 39-40.
[79] Brontë, p. 333.

for another way of dwelling in the world'[80] conditional upon the re-cla-mation of place and the re-possession of voice by those embodied others whose involvement in the world has been most inhumanly called into crisis.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

———, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn, 3rd ed. (London: Pimlico, 1999).

Botting, Fred, 'In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture,' in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 13-24.

Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Pauline Nestor, preface by Lucasta Miller. 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2003).

Brophy, Sarah, '"Going Home": Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child* as Feminist Decolonial "Yorkshire Noir",' *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 29, 3 (2018): pp. 159-78.

Browne, Victoria, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Butler, Judith, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, 2 (2012): pp. 134-51.

———, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

Clingman, Stephen, 'The Nature of Empathy: An Interview with Caryl Phillips,' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, 5 (2017): pp. 590-612.

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, 8th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1991).

Forshaw, Barry, *Crime Fiction: A Reader's Guide Paperback* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2020).

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Garofalo, Daniela, 'Impossible Love and Commodity Culture in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,' *ELH* 75, 4 (2008): pp. 819-40.

Gillman, Susan, 'Remembering Slavery, Again,' *Caribbean Quarterly* 61, 4 (2015): pp. 1-19.

Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

---

[80]   Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 178.

Gordon, Avery F., *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Goyal, Yogita, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Khair, Tabish, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Ledent, Bénédicte and Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection,' *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48, 3-4 (2017): pp. 229-47.

McLeod, John, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).

Mukherjee, Ankhi, *What Is a Classic?: Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

Phillips, Caryl, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber, 2000).

———, *The Lost Child* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

Procter, James, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

Pykett, Lyn, 'Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction,' in *Emily Brontë: 'Wuthering Heights'*, ed. Patsy Stoneman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 86-99.

Rowlinson, Mark, *Pat Barker* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2010).

Shires, Linda M., 'The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. David Deirdre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 61-76.

Von Sneidern, Maja-Lisa, '*Wuthering Heights* and the Liverpool Slave Trade,' *ELH* 62, 1 (1995): pp. 171-96.

WALKING A THIN GENDER LINE: TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER FLUIDITY IN MCCABE'S BREAKFAST ON PLUTO

Carla Tempestoso

Crossing the boundaries between genders is no different from crossing the boundaries between lands, with the same movement of dislocation, the same journey somewhere else that, whether metaphorical or real, invents new subjectivities, new positionings, new geographies of identity. This is the becoming described by *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), a novel by the Irish writer Patrick McCabe, in which the limits of sexual gender and national identity are crossed. A becoming, again, enclosed in the words introduced by the prefix 'trans' – transsexuality, transnationality – that well designate the unstable, intermediate position of those who are on the borderline. Not surprisingly, *Breakfast on Pluto* begins in the 1960s in the small border town of Tyreelyn, Ireland, and then proceeds to London where Patrick Braden feels imprisoned in the wrong body and for this reason dresses his womanly soul with the style and clothing of femininity, because in order to live like a woman he must 'fashion himself' like a woman. Through the ideas of *performativity* and *agency* offered by Judith Butler's investigation of gender identities, the paper aims to show how the protagonist of *Breakfast on Pluto* reacts to the ugliness of reality by escaping to a world painted in pastel luminescent and glamorous colours, that is the overripe fruit of his fervid imagination. Significantly conveyed by an episodic and at times rambling narration, the stiletto heels, the pink dresses, the bright lipsticks and the hairy lips of a woman with a man's body show, instead, how femininity is an artifice and not an essential attribute, and that it is our differences that colour the world.

Breakfast on Pluto; Patrick McCabe; Gender Identities

1. Introduction

The renowned metaphor 'to think outside the box' could imply several meanings, such as to think differently, unconventionally, or to ponder on something from a new perspective. Yet, it could also imply the concept of 'the singularity of literature', first developed by Derek Attridge.[1] Indeed, according to Attridge, 'the singularity of literature' refers to the unique quality of the literary form, namely, the disruptive force and resistance it

---

[1] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

acquires when pitted against established modes of thinking. As Attridge notes, literature is an encounter with alterity, with the unfamiliar; it forces readers to think differently and to reconsider their expectations and assumptions. Moreover, literary writing is a locus for the questioning of cultural norms, yet it also reinvents itself; it is always different from itself because it continually generates new readings. This is possible because literary writing is not 'pure' but open to 'contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization'.[2] The novel *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), by Patrick McCabe, offers the perfect example of how a writer attempts to transgress borders in every sense, since it is along the frontier, in the 'in-between' space, where the events take place, through which the differences travel.[3] Crossing the boundaries between genders, then, is no different from crossing the boundaries between lands, with the same movement of dislocation, the same journey towards a somewhere else that, whether literal or metaphorical, invents new subjectivities, new positionings, new geographies of identity. This is the becoming described by *Breakfast on Pluto*, in which the limits of sexual gender and national identity are transgressed: a becoming, again, signalled by the words starting with the prefix 'trans' – trans-sexuality, trans-nationality – that well define the unstable, intermediate position of those who are on the borderline. Not completely on one side, nor completely on the other. Not completely inside the box, nor completely outside the box.

Breakfast on Pluto begins in the 1960s in the small border town of Tyreelyn, in Ireland, and then moves to London. Patrick Braden – also called 'Pussy' and, sometimes, 'Patricia' – is an orphan abandoned by hir[4] mother on a priest's doorstep whilst still a baby. The mother leaves for London, while the village priest, Father Liam (who is later revealed

---

[2] Attridge, p. 63.

[3] Patrick McCabe, *Breakfast on Pluto* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1998).

[4] My use of the gender-neutral singular pronoun 'hir' is used as a gender inclusive pronoun in order not to associate a gender with the narrative protagonist of *Breakfast on Pluto*. According to Dennis Baron, who uses the pronoun 'hir' in his analysis of a transgender boy named Max in Taylor Mac's *Hir* (2004), the use of Max's pronouns 'ze' and 'hir' is a political and social strong tool for going beyond the conventional categories of male and female (see Baron, *What's Your Pronoun?: Beyond He and She* (New York: Liveright, 2020)). Indeed, these pronouns 'expand the ways that people are able to indicate their gender identity to encompass anyone who is trans or nonbinary, as well as those who choose an altogether different term to characterize their gender, like gender-nonconforming, genderqueer, Two-Spirit (a term used only by Native Americans), or genderfluid, among others. Such terminological variation spills over into grammatical discussions, where some prefer the term neopronoun for new pronouns. Or, as the question "what's your pronoun?" suggests, people can just call them pronouns' (p. 185).

to be Pussy's father), finds a foster home for his child. Because of hir inclination for cross-dressing, throughout hir entire childhood and early teens, Patrick is punished by hir environment for hir ways of questioning the traditional gender dichotomy. In both locations, Tyreelyn and London, Patrick feels imprisoned in the wrong body and for this reason dresses hir womanly soul with female style and clothing, because in order to live like a woman ze must fashion hirself like a woman. For hir transgressions Patrick is described as a 'high-class escort girl' (*BP* 1) who offers in London some 'Piccadilly Escort Services' (*BP* 71) by adding to cross-dressing the equally threatening taboo of venal sex.

Since *Breakfast on Pluto* was published in 1998, the critical reception of the novel has been contradictory. On the one hand, John Dunne asserts that the novel is a 'pitch-black comedy' with 'detached third person, pseudo-sentimentality and breathless outbursts that come at you bristling with exclamation marks [...] and odd syntax'.[5] Furthermore, many critics point out that McCabe's fiction depicts a Gothic world of madness, violence with an obsessively returning to the grotesque,[6] and focuses on the 'ordinary life in Ireland as bizarre and malformed'.[7] On the other hand, commenting on *Breakfast on Pluto*, a critic for the *Sunday Business Post* remarks that the novel 'delivers a Molotov cocktail of gender-bending, random violence and mental mayhem' (*BP* 2). In similar fashion the *Irish Sunday Independent* describes the novel as 'wild, hilarious, merciless and fiendishly clever [...] with humor of the blackest hue, madness and violence, hopelessly randy priests, dodgy politicians, a grand gallery of misfits' (*BP* 2). Moreover, the book was shortlisted for the 1998 Booker Prize for Fiction; in 'Audacious Ireland', an essay on the most famous Irish writers, Ben Howard emphasized *Breakfast on Pluto*'s quality of audacity and iconoclasm.[8]

Significantly, *Breakfast on Pluto* was adapted for the screen by McCabe and Neil Jordan in 2005. The main protagonist of the film is called Kitten and is played by Cillian Murphy. The movie is faithful to the source novel and the critical reception was even more positive than to the novel itself. In order to contrast the film and the novel, Nathan Lee states that

[5] John Dunne, 'Temporal Turbulence,' *Books Ireland* 215 (1998): p. 212.
[6] Clare Wallace, 'Patrick McCabe: Transgression and Dysfunctional Irelands,' in *Beyond Borders: IASIL Essays on Modern Irish Writing*, ed. Neil Sammells (Bath: Sulis Press, 2004), p. 143.
[7] Eve Patten, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 265.
[8] Ben Howard, 'Audacious Ireland,' *The Sewanee Review* 114, 3 (2006): p. 404.

'images sashay more credibly than words, and Jordan improves on the source material, an irritating novel by Patrick McCabe, who also wrote the screenplay'.[9] Indeed, by becoming 'a series of seductions, with the goal not sex but acceptance', the Pulitzer Prize Roger Ebert compares Jordan's film to a Dickens novel 'in which the hero moves through the underskirts of society, encountering one colourful character after another'.[10] As Lauren Raham describes *Breakfast on Pluto*'s strength in 'its ability to breathe relevancy into this political situation, while maintaining comedic undertones',[11] so Peter Bradshaw's review on *The Guardian* openly says that the transvestism of the film is 'a defiant rejection of bigotry, labels, and borders'.[12] Through the broad, transdisciplinary and international approach to queer studies, this chapter aims to explore the way in which McCabe's novel *Breakfast on Pluto* challenges conventional notions of gender identity which lie at the very heart of Irish identity. Indeed, in order to analyse gender performativity in Patrick's character, the chapter brings to the fore a severely dysfunctional idea of gender binary and the struggles of rejecting it in an Irish society.

2. Transgressing borders by cross-dressing

Transgender individuals live with a gender identity different from traditional binary gender roles,[13] and their gender identification either violates the heteronormative conceptualization of male or female or mixes identity and role aspects of being male or female.[14] The term 'transgender' reflects the concept of breaking gender roles and gender identity and/or transcending the boundaries of one gender to another gender.[15] Judith Halberstam's pioneering book *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* offers both a jumping-off point for the analysis of transgenderism and an important new way to understand

---

[9] Nathan Lee, 'Breakfast on Pluto,' *Film Comment* 41, 6 (2005): p. 72.

[10] Roger Ebert, 'A Boy Named Kitten' https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/breakfast-on-pluto-2005.

[11] Lauren Raham, 'Breakfast on Pluto. An Amusing Journey,' https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2006-01-31/arts/breakfast-pluto-amusing-journey/.

[12] Peter Bradshaw, 'Breakfast on Pluto,' https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2006/jan/13/2

[13] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[14] Lisa Diamond and Molly Butterworth, 'Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links over Time,' *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): pp. 365-76.

[15] Jamison Green, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

cultural constructions of time and place.[16] Analysing the sudden visibility of the transgender body in the early twenty-first century against the backdrop of changing conceptions of space and time, Halberstam tries 'to make queer time and queer space into useful terms for academic and nonacademic considerations of life, location, and transformation' and also 'to use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions of the "normal" on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality'.[17]

Indeed, in Western cultures, reproductive time and family time have been influenced by postmodern Marxist geographers,[18] who in turn have been influenced by Foucault's philosophy. In queer renderings of post-modern geography, the notion of sexuality and its body/local/personal dimension has been excluded as a category of analysis for capitalism and globalization, which have been analysed within a class/global/political frame of reference. So, if the use of 'queer time' as 'a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism' needs to leave the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, 'queer space' refers to 'the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics'.[19] From this perspective, postmodernism appears to be in conflict with a politics of gender identity, and it has also been critiqued for its lack of material analysis. To mention but one, Walby argues that postmodernism fails to take account of the structural forces that affect lived experiences.[20] One would think that poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist work and queer theory would be more helpful for each other, for the development of a contemporary understanding of transgender identity and for the analysis of the fluid gender identity of *Breakfast on Pluto*'s main character.

An understanding of gender as separate from sex thus holds the potential for a greater diversity of masculinities and femininities. These ideas can be incorporated into a contemporary understanding of transgender

---

[16] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
[17] Halberstam, p. 4.
[18] See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
[19] Halberstam, pp. 5-6.
[20] Sylvia Walby, *Gender Transformations* (London: Routledge, 1997).

that allows for a multiplicity of gendered identities and expressions which are unfixed to the 'sexed' body. Furthermore, Judith Butler argues that we should be wary of seeing 'sex' as a purely biological characteristic. Rather, sex is as socially and culturally a determined term as gender.[21] Alongside poststructuralism, the influence of postmodernism on strands of feminist thinking during the 1990s led to an explicit engagement with transgender identity. Indeed, rather than viewing postmodernism as wholly divergent from feminism, postmodern feminist scholars trace the common ground between the two theoretical projects:[22] 'Both have assaulted aesthetic or philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence'.[23] Thus, in order to analyse *Breakfast on Pluto,* critical approaches suggest that it is necessary to clarify how a queer approach to identity recognizes the complex and processual nature of identity formation, as well as attending to the multiple and fluid elements within identity positions, whilst also remaining aware of subjective accounts that suggest a more determined experience of identity. So, when approaching gender identities, 'transgender' becomes a broad umbrella term that responds to the need of keeping certain categories fluid and far from the gendered notion of heteronormativity.[24]

Because of its broad use, the concept of transgender identity is extensive in its scope, incorporating practices and identities such as transvestism, transsexuality, intersex, gender, queer, female and male drag, cross-dressing, and some butch/femme practices. Transgender may refer to individuals who have undergone hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or to those who cross gender in ways that are less permanent. As Ekins and King note, transgender has also been referred to as 'gender blending', 'gender mixing', 'gender fucking', and 'gender crossing'.[25] This conceptual framework has been

---

[21] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[22] See Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism. Reading Modernism* (London: Arnold, 1992); Seyla Benhabib *et al.,* *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Patricia Waugh, 'Postmodernism and Feminism,' in *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 177-93.

[23] Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism. Reading Modernism*, p. 190.

[24] Amy Dellinger Page, 'Negotiating Identities in a Heteronormative Context,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, 4 (2013): pp. 639-54.

[25] See Richard Ekins and Dave King, *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996).

useful for the creation of *Transgender Studies* as an independent field of inquiry.[26] While this emerging field is complex, multifaceted, and inter-disciplinary, the publication of a specific body of theory[27] both provides the ideal introduction for bringing together the voices and experience of transgen\der individuals, and paves the way for a questioning of the duality of the sex/gender system itself and its subsequent transgression to explore the space between these two poles and the possibilities beyond this grid. So, Kilian observes that it is necessary from a narratological point of view to discuss the visibility of transgender formations and identities challenges gender norms, thus demonstrating the various aesthetic strategies of making transgender legible.[28] In the case of *Breakfast on Pluto*, its protagonist is positioned under the transgender umbrella term through hir gestures and actions, which denote a diversity of practices by involving embodied movements across, between, or beyond the binary categories of male and female. Indeed Patrick/Patricia likes to dress like a woman, but when a thirteen-year-old Patrick steals hir neighbour's underwear, hir gesture is misinterpreted as a sign of precocious heterosexual curiosity:

> Stealing Mrs O'Hare's smalls off the washing line, pretending this time that I was dancing with Lorne Greene out of Bonanza! [...]. It didn't take long for word to get around the town and all you could hear going up the street was: 'Ooh! Cheeky!' and 'Lovely boy!' It was pointless explaining to them that I wasn't all that interested in sex. (*BP* 14)

From these words it emerges that transgression is acceptable within the confines of clear-cut gender boundaries and heterosexual normalcy.

[26] See Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (eds), *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[27] See David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Trystan Cotten (ed.), *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2011). Chantal J. Zabus and David Coad (eds), *Transgender Experience. Place, Ethnicity, and Visibility* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Michelle A. Gibson, Deborah T. Meem, Jonathan Alexander, *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013). Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018). Thomas J. Billard, '"Passing" and the Politics of Deception: Transgender Bodies, Cisgender Aesthetics, and the Policing of Inconspicuous Marginal Identities,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, ed. Tony Docan-Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 463-77. Ardel Haefele-Thomas, *Introduction to Transgender Studies* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2019).

[28] Eveline Kilian, 'Claiming Space: Transgender Visibility in the Arts,' in *Transgender Experience. Place, Ethnicity, and Visibility*, ed. Chantal J. Zabus and David Coad (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 85-107.

Significantly, the very first words of the novel are both a moment of self-reflection and an act of self-disclosure because Patrick says:

> Although I'm afraid I don't get too many clients these days! I can just imagine the reaction of my old acquaintances if they saw me now, sitting here in my silly old coat and headscarf [...] after all, every beauty has to lose her looks sometime and if the gold-digging days of poor old darling poo poo puss are gone for ever, well then, so be it. I ain't gonna let it bother me, girls! (*BP* 1)

These first words resonate in the entire novel, where neither a surgery nor hormones are ever mentioned. Patrick Braden's narrative is not a tale of sexual transformation from one identity to another, but rather one that leaves such questions open and retains a queer element throughout by not allowing the reader to fall back on fixed categories. Instead of presenting a man wanting to become a woman, or a man dressing like a woman, *Breakfast on Pluto* presents a person who unites these aspects, and more.

In his foundational 1910 work *Transvestites*, Magnus Hirschfeld coined the word 'transvestite' — from the Latin 'trans' or 'across' and 'vestis' or 'clothing' — to refer to individuals who are overcome with a 'feeling of peace, security and exaltation, happiness and well-being [...] when in the clothing of the other sex'.[29] Over a hundred years later, this description remains one of the most insightful explanations of what we now call cross-dressing. Although Hirschfeld 'readily admit[ted] that this name ['transvestite'] indicate[d] only the most obvious aspect, he recognized that how they expressed their sense of gender was what set them apart from other "sexual intermediaries", including individuals with same-sex desires'.[30]

The transvestite represents a category crisis, by 'disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic "dissonances"',[31] and thus s/he is seen as a challenge to the notion of a fixed or coherent identity. For Garber, transvestism is a 'space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but a crisis of category itself'.[32] There-

---

[29] Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, trans. M.A. Lombardi-Nash (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 125.
[30] Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 21.
[31] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.
[32] Garber, p. 17.

fore, transgender practices are embraced as a deconstructive tool that calls attention to 'transgender effects; those deconstructive moments when foreground and background seem to flip and reverse, and the spectacle of an unexpected gender phenomena illuminates the production of gender normativity in a startling new way'.[33] What is deconstructed in *Breakfast on Pluto* is the limits of gender binarism through Patrick's transvestite practices. Patrick is only a thirteen-year-old boy when ze is caught in flagrante delicto wearing Caroline's dresses (*BP* 13). Even if hir English teacher, Peepers Egan, threatens hir by saying: 'You won't do it again, will you Patrick? You'll try and stop this anti-social behaviour' (*BP* 11), ze continues with hir transvestite style and attitudes by breaking into shops to steal cosmetics (*BP* 20), wearing brass hoop earrings (*BP* 49) and buying 'knitted tops in white, purple, lavender, blazing orange, satin-stripe velveteen pants, turtle-necked leotards, flouncing skirts, ribbed stretch-nylon tights' (*BP* 36).

3. *Overcoming gender and national categories in a queer time and place*

Patrick/Patricia's subversive gender-performances can be analysed through the concepts of *performativity* and *agency* introduced by Judith Butler and through Raewyn Connell's theory of *hegemonic masculinity*.[34] Indeed, even if Patrick was biologically born as a man, there are many complicating factors that need not to be neglected. On the one hand, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler argues that sex and gender are not innate but performative, comprised of repeated acts that are seen to express masculine and feminine subjectivity.[35] So, as we internalize our socially acceptable, intelligible genders, we come to perform our genders with the practice of 'repeated stylization of the body within the highly rigid, regulatory frame, that is the masculine signifying economy'.[36] Moreover, the scholar notes that 'the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations'.[37] On the other hand, Connell contests the much-vaunted social construction of 'hege-

---

[33] Stryker and Whittle, p. 13.
[34] Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).
[35] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 43.
[36] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 43-4.
[37] Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' in *Performance, Critical Concepts in Critical and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 106.

monic masculinity'.[38] In order to talk about its plural 'masculinities', the scholar states:

> Masculinities are configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality. Masculinity is institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character and personality.[39]

Breakfast on Pluto offers an important textual example of how these discursive and material practices of resistance against essentialist views about identity parallel each other, and how the literary imagination can work to question these boundaries. In doing so, it is necessary to underline that there could be a relationship between the transgressive protagonist of the novel and an idealized masculinity, pointing towards a more general link between gender and national identities. *Breakfast on Pluto* derives its critical edge from a critique of national and gender boundaries, and is most effective where these converge. Sascha Pöhlmann's original reading of the novel argues that *Breakfast on Pluto* is not only a queer text, but also a political novel because it derives its critical edge from a critique of national and gender boundaries.[40]

Significantly, the time, spaces and places in which the novel is set are very important. The places of the novel are to be interpreted as a sense of *displacement* because the protagonist's movements underline hir wish to evade from Tyreelyn's small reality. However, Tyreelin is the only fictional place of the novel, and it lies 'on the Southern side of the Irish border' (*BP* 7), so it should be situated in County Cavan. Dublin – with its beautiful markets (*BP* 36), St Stephen's Green (*BP* 36) and Grafton Street (*BP* 37) – is the first step towards running away from a suffocating place. The most life-changing moment for hir is when ze moves to London. While prostituting hirself in Piccadilly Circus, Patrick/Patricia likes getting lost in the streets of the 'old London town' and ze says:

> Well, how many times did I manage to get myself lost in that old London town — don't ask me! After leaving Euston station, I must have walked the square mile half a dozen times — each time ending up back at Gower Street. Bright-red Pussy! Thinking all of London town's ten million people are saying: 'Look! It's

---

[38] Connell, p. 77.

[39] Connell, p. 77.

[40] Sascha Pöhlmann, 'Queer Postnationalism in "Breakfast on Pluto",' *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 3 (2008): p. 2.

her! She's lost again!' It was a miracle I found my way to Piccadilly Circus at all, there at last to begin my trade. (*BP* 63)

Not only in Piccadilly Circus, but also in Oxford Street (*BP* 67), Hammersmith Bridge (*BP* 68), Greet Portland Street (*BP* 71), Leicester Square (*BP* 76), and the West End (*BP* 85), ze feels more comfortable than in any other Irish place. Indeed it is the year 1972 when ze thinks about Tyreelin: 'What person in the right mind who had a choice would stay five minutes in the fucking kip' (*BP* 45) and it is no coincidence that the title of the next to last chapter of the novel is 'We Leave Tyreelin For Ever' (*BP* 191).

As regards the time of the novel, the late 1960s in Ireland are known as the period in which the 'Irish Troubles' started, before they historically ended in 1998.[41] So, the 1960s and the 1970s were only the beginning of thirty years of violence, shootings, and bomb attacks. Indeed, as the Troubles in Northern Ireland heightened, bomb threats became more frequent even in London, and in *Breakfast on Pluto* this type of violence assumes a homophobic undertone.[42] Patrick/Patricia hirself is nearly strangled by hir client, who turns out to be a gay-hater after their intercourse in a car:

> For no sooner had I my gold chain removed and my long brown hair tossed back than he had slipped his hand in his pocket and removed his silky string — although if it was indeed from that fabric fashioned, I could not say for sure. All I can accurately state is that it was a ligature of some sort, soft but not so when about your Adam's apple it's drawn tight as it will go. For some reason, at that precise moment [...] he began to strangle me. (*BP* 68)

This is not the only case of violence that the protagonist suffers. Indeed, ze is accused of a bomb attack in a disco in London when the discrepancy between hir body morphology and hir female appearance is discovered (*BP* 143). Moreover, when ze is arrested under suspicion of being a high-ranking IRA (Irish Republican Army) terrorist, Patrick/Patricia is brutally beaten by the police who use violence in order to re-establish their hegemony and assert their power,[43] and also because they considered hir as a 'wicked little fucker who would stop at nothing in

---

[41] Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio, *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).
[42] Marian Duggan, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
[43] Connell, p. 258.

his determination to mutilate and maim, even going so far as to disguise himself as a tart' (*BP* 143). Patrick/Patricia is arrested not only because hir being an Irish person in a London pub makes hir untrustworthy, but also because hir being an Irish transvestite further increases the untrustworthiness ascribed to hir.

Indeed, while the protagonist cannot trace the source of the senseless violence around hir, Detective Inspector Peter Routledge of Scotland Yard wonders why, after four days of detection, Patrick/Patricia could not 'just admit he had dressed up as a woman in an ingenious scheme to disguise himself — for they would stop at nothing, these mad, fanatical bombers — and his plan had gone horribly wrong!' (*BP* 148). Paradoxically, political violence and homo-transphobia are two of the leitmotifs around which several episodes of fear and displacement unfold in the novel. However, Pöhlmann notes that when Patrick/Patricia admits that ze has not 'the slightest intention of […] trying to fit in' (*BP* 11), ze

> rejects more than categories of gender and sexuality, but also those of a stereotypical Irishness, a Catholic nationalism and a Protestant Unionism. […] National categories and stereotypes are responsible for Patrick's arrest, and they add to the violence s/he had to experience due to his/her identity, or rather his/her refusal to conform to a clearly identifiable identity. […] Questions of the possibility of departing from one's established national identity then run parallel to those of freeing oneself from the constraints of one's gender identity, since if biology is not destiny, nationality is not destiny, either.[44]

Regardless of the presence in the novel of the violent and transphobic IRA, a review of the literature on the biological basis of sex reveals a world far more complex than the simplistic male-female dichotomy would suggest.[45] Moreover, taking into account that many scholars have often commented on the stereotypes pertaining to gender and nationalism,[46] in *Breakfast on Pluto* Patrick/Patricia's identity is so fluid in both terms, national and gender, that on the one hand ze considered hirself

---

[44] Pöhlmann, pp. 6-7.

[45] Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Alice Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[46] Anne McClintock, '"No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race, and Nationalism,' in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 89-112; Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

'an ordinary transvestite prostitute, not the slightest bit interested in politics at all!' (*BP* 142); on the other, ze wants 'a vagina of [hir] own' (*BP* 36). Any kind of constructed positional identities fails in front of Patrick/ Patricia who, by being 'a twilight zone of a disaster' (*BP* 62) or simply the 'fucking queer' (*BP* 105), shows how traditional gender roles can be not only subverted but also overcome even if influenced by media, religion, mainstream education, political systems, cultural systems, and social systems.[47]

At the very end of the novel, Braden speculates on hir fantasy relationship with Dr Terence (the analyst in the psychiatric unit where Braden eventually ends up), and expresses a sincere longing to bear hir lover's children:

> to wake up in the hospital all around me, exhausted after my ordeal maybe, but with a bloom like roses in my cheeks, as I stroke his soft and tender head, my little baby, watching them as they beam with pride, in their eye perhaps a tear or two — who cares! — hardly able to speak as they wipe it away and say 'He's ours!' (*BP* 199)

As the final statement of the novel, Braden's ardent wish suggests McCabe's discussion of 'home [...] belonging and [...] peace' in the Preface (*BP* XI), especially so given the context of the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Irish Peace Process. Violence turns meaningful gesture into nonsensical action, and Patrick's transsexualism elicits violent reactions from men and women alike; for them, suppressing the 'fairy boy' (*BP* 71) means reasserting binary gender roles and silencing the fear that they might never be up to their own gender, and that Patrick's subversive stance might be contagious:

> How the dancehall fight started I haven't the faintest idea, to be honest with you! I do seem to remember someone pulling my sleeve and enquiring as to my gender. After that, all I remember is: 'Skree!', and the women losing their minds as the bikers tried to get a kick at me. You can picture the scene, I'm sure – leather jackets, hefty boots and 'Kill the hooring nancy queen!' (*BP* 50).

However, even if Patrick/Patricia still dreams of a community that will accept hir by saying 'He's ours!' (*BP* 199), the end of the novel is suf-

---

[47] Joy Johnson and Robin Repta, 'Sex and Gender: Beyond the Binaries,' in *Designing and Conducting Gender, Sex, & Health Research*, ed. John L. Oliffe and Lorraine Greaves (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), pp. 17-39.

ficiently pragmatic and realistic. Instead of showing a world where Braden is completely integrated, it shows Patrick/Patricia's adaptation to the more severe social consequences of being read as gender nonconforming. Except for hir housecoat and headscarf, 'which provide so much amusement [...] for tufty-nosed labourers' (*BP* 198) around hir, the protagonist gets rid of the stuff ze loves after losing hope in finding hir mother in Tyreelin:

> I never did find Mammy, though, despite the fact that after leaving Tyreelin I had the place scoured looking for her. My escort work I gave up yonks ago, one night just breaking down in the arms of some poor unfortunate man, going: 'Let go of me! You don't love me! None of you love me!' and the next day presenting the Kilburn War On Want shop with the entire contents of my delicious wardrobe! (*BP* 198)

The act of deprivation of hir dresses is Braden's way of declaring hir physical and psychological 'weariness' because of the ordinary battles ze had to face in hir life. Unable to re-establish Patrick/Patricia's 'true' gender, despite repeated acts of violence, and unsure whether to punish hir for wearing women's apparel, people continue disturbing hir with insults such as 'old cow' (*BP* 42) and 'jealous bitch' (*BP* 42). Considering the homo-transphobic hate crimes and hate speeches that affect LGBT+ persons in various ways today,[48] McCabe's book on a transvestite who is wrongly accused or beaten on the basis of hir sexual orientation remains as relevant as ever. Keeping in mind that the book is set at a time when homosexuality was still considered a crime in Ireland,[49] it was commendable on McCabe's part to challenge the stereotypes that affected – and still affect – our society. As the novel's 'hero/heroine' puts it, 'to tell you the truth, I don't think they were actually capable of understanding us in real, [...] — I don't think they could accept that it could ever even *be*!' (*BP* 43). One should interpret these words and Dr Terence's invitation to Patrick/Patricia to write hir story, 'write it as best you can — it'll help me understand' (*BP* 165), as a way of talking, reasoning, observing, an-

---

[48] Joanna Jamel, *Transphobic Hate Crime* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[49] Homosexuality was decriminalized in England and Wales through *The Sexual Offences Act* in 1967. Even if the Act was applied only to England and Wales and did not cover the Merchant Navy or the Armed Forces, it was a landmark moment in the history of British homosexuality. 'Homosexual acts' were decriminalized in Scotland by the *Criminal Justice Act* in 1980, and in Northern Ireland by the *Homosexual Offences Order* in 1982. See Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

alysing, and writing down what we have learned from our community in order to use it as a way of deconstructing ethnic, gender, and cultural stereotypes. And that is what McCabe attempted to do with his novel – enable his readers break through each layer of the enforced gender segregation by putting them in the shoes of the oppressed.

Bibliography

Attridge, Derek, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Baron, Dennis, *What's Your Pronoun?: Beyond He and She* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

Benhabib, Seyla, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Benhabib, Seyla, *et al.*, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Billard, Thomas J., '"Passing" and the Politics of Deception: Transgender Bodies, Cisgender Aesthetics, and the Policing of Inconspicuous Marginal Identities,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, ed. Tony Docan-Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 463-77.

Bornstein, Kate, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Bosi, Lorenzo and Gianluca De Fazio, *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

Bradshaw, Peter, 'Breakfast on Pluto,' https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2006/jan/13/2.

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

———, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' in *Performance, Critical Concepts in Critical and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 97-110.

Connell, Raewyn, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

Cotten, Trystan (ed.), *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Cromwell, Jason, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

Diamond, Lisa and Molly Butterworth, 'Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links over Time,' *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): pp. 365-76.

Dreger, Alice, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Duggan, Marian, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Dunne, John, 'Temporal Turbulence,' *Books Ireland* 215 (1998), pp. 212-13.

Ebert, Roger, 'A Boy Named Kitten,' https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/breakfast-on-pluto-2005.

Ekins, Richard and Dave King, *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Fausto-Sterling, Anne, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Flax, Jane, *Thinking Fragments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

Gibson, Michelle A., Deborah T. Meem and Jonathan Alexander, *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013).

Garber, Marjorie, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Green, Jamison, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

Haefele-Thomas, Ardel, *Introduction to Transgender Studies* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2019).

Halberstam, Jack, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

Halberstam, Judith, *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989).

Higgins, Patrick, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

Hirschfeld, Magnus, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, trans. M.A. Lombardi-Nash (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991).

Howard, Ben, 'Audacious Ireland,' *The Sewanee Review* 114, 3 (2006): pp. 403-18.

Jamel, Joanna, *Transphobic Hate Crime* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Johnson, Joy and Robin Repta, 'Sex and Gender: Beyond the Binaries,' in *Designing and Conducting Gender, Sex, & Health Research*, ed. John L. Oliffe and Lorraine Greaves (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), pp. 17-39.

Lee, Nathan, 'Breakfast on Pluto,' *Film Comment* 41, 6 (2005): pp. 72-3.

McCabe, Patrick, *Breakfast on Pluto* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1998).

McClintock, Anne, '"No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race, and Nationalism,' in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 89-112.

Page, Amy Dellinger, 'Negotiating Identities in a Heteronormative Context,' *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, 4 (2013): pp. 639-54.

Patten, Eve, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction,' *The Cambridge Companion to The Irish*

Novel, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 259-76.

Pöhlmann, Sascha, 'Queer Postnationalism in "Breakfast on Pluto",' *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 3 (2008): pp. 1-11.

Raham, Lauren, 'Breakfast on Pluto an Amusing Journey,' https://www.queens-journal.ca/story/2006-01-31/arts/breakfast-pluto-amusing-journey/.

Stryker, Susan and Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Valentine, David, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Walby, Sylvia, *Gender Transformations* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Wallace, Clare, 'Patrick McCabe: Transgression and Dysfunctional Irelands,' in *Beyond Borders: IASIL Essays on Modern Irish Writing*, ed. Neil Sammells (Bath: Sulis Press, 2004), pp. 143-56.

Waugh, Patricia, *Practicing Postmodernism. Reading Modernism* (London: Arnold, 1992).

———, 'Postmodernism and Feminism,' in *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Jacki Jones (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 177-93.

Waylen, Georgina, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola and S. Laurel Weldon, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Zabus, Chantal J. and David Coad, *Transgender Experience. Place, Ethnicity, and Visibility* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES: THE SHADOW OF BREXIT IN ALI SMITH'S AUTUMN *(2016) AND AMANDA CRAIG'S* THE LIE OF THE LAND *(2017)*

Maria Elena Capitani

In 1934 Ezra Pound famously stated that 'literature is news that stays news', stressing the close relationship between literary artefacts and the society in which they are produced and, even more interestingly, the transhistorical potential of texts to speak to a subsequent readership. The idea of the novel as something 'new' that deals with the (disorienting) 'now' permeates Ali Smith's post-referendum Seasonal Quartet, published by Hamish Hamilton between 2016 and 2020. After a theoretical section on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Europe in his booklet *The Other Heading* (published in French as *L'autre cap* in 1991 by Les Editions de Minuit), this chapter will examine the opening act of Smith's cycle, *Autumn*, defined by critics as the first example of 'BrexLit', and Amanda Craig's state-of-the-nation satire *The Lie of the Land*. While Smith's novel was rapidly written in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, Craig's work had a longer genesis, being inspired by the 2009 recession and issued by Abacus in 2017. In different ways, both novels investigate the fissures of an inevitably fractured, gloomy, and disconnected Britain, in which Remainers and Leavers, cosmopolitanism and insularity, urban landscapes and the English countryside, immigrants and native people, future scenarios and nostalgia for the imperial past starkly contrast. Both Smith and Craig dissect the social tensions exacerbated by the referendum and tackle the thorny question of British identity that lies at the very heart of Britain's crisis. This (inter)national tsunami necessarily questions assumptions, encouraging writers, readers and scholars 'to think out of the box'.

BrexLit, Britishness, Ali Smith, Amanda Craig, Jacques Derrida

1. Deconstructing Europe

> Something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is still called Europe
> even if we no longer know very well *what* or *who* goes by this name.
> Indeed, to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity
> should this name be assigned today? Who will draw up its borders?
>
> Jacques Derrida[1]

After 47 years of tumultuous membership, the United Kingdom formally left the European Union at 11 pm (midnight in Brussels) on 31 January 2020, and entered a one-year transition period which ended on 31 December 2020, when the UK left the EU single market and customs union. With its disruptive import, Brexit was probably one of the most 'out-of-the-box' moments in European history. Despite being a unique watershed event, Britain's divorce from the EU has not come entirely out of the blue. Already in the early Nineties, the father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, foresaw the huge impact of internally divisive scenarios such as the current one in his booklet[2] *The Other Heading*, originally published in French as *L'autre cap* in 1991 by Les Editions de Minuit, after first appearing in a European newspaper (*Liber, Revue européenne des livres*, October 1990, no. 5). In this piece, written in the wake of the unification of Europe and of post-Sovietism, Derrida explores the controversial question of European identity and the inherent paradoxes within European discourse(s). The Franco-Algerian philosopher suggests that, for Europe to continue to exist, it needs to embrace its own internal contradictions and aporias, largely related to the question of hegemonic centrality: if,

> *on the one hand*, European cultural identity [...] cannot and must not be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable [...] *on the other hand*, it cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority that [...] would control and standardize.[3]

Over the past two decades, the nationalistic tendencies and centrifugal forces feared by Derrida have spread within the EU, shaking its very foundations. Britain's national and cultural pride, its geographical insu-

---

[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Nass (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 5.

[2] Derrida, p. 1.

[3] Derrida, pp. 38-9.

larity and linguistic sovereignty were vital to the success of the fierce Brexit campaign conducted in 2016. As the former EU Commission official, translator, and scholar Francis Rawlinson observes,

> [geography] shaped [Britain's] history as a global seafaring power and a fortress able to resist invasion. These, in turn, are a subject of national pride and foster a belief that Britain, the world's fifth biggest economic power, can go it alone again. It doesn't need Europe to make its way in the world. It can again stride the world stage as a respected and sought-after trading partner. This, too, was a powerful patriotic message in the Leave campaign.[4]

Though small (48.1%), the majority who voted in favour of leaving the EU transformed the Channel, once known as the 'Narrow Sea', into a vast ocean separating Britain from the Continent, shattering the dreams of many Europhiles and proving the central thesis of an 'over-acculturated, over-colonized European hybrid'[5] such as Jacques Derrida. This (inter)national tsunami necessarily questions assumptions, encouraging writers, readers and scholars to think 'out of the box'. Indeed, the extraordinariness of a traumatically dividing event such as Brexit cannot help 'demand[ing] thoughtful out-of-the-ordinary critical and cultural responses of all kinds',[6] as Robert Eaglestone observes in his Introduction to *Brexit and Literature* (2018), a collection dedicated to the memory of the MP Jo Cox, stabbed to death in West Yorkshire by a right-wing extremist shouting 'Britain first, this is for Britain'.

2. A portmanteau of Brexit and literature: BrexLit

If Brexit is notoriously prone to erecting walls, it is simultaneously able to cross various kinds of borders. After entering the *Oxford English Dictionary* in December 2016, the word 'Brexit' has generated a number of playful neologisms in different fields, including 'Breferendum', 'Bremain', 'Bregret', 'Brexitology', 'Brexitophobia',[7] and – when it comes to literary studies – 'BrexLit'. This term was coined by the English scholar Kristian

---

[4] Francis Rawlinson, *How Press Propaganda Paved the Way to Brexit* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 57-8.

[5] Derrida, p. 7.

[6] Robert Eaglestone, 'Introduction: Brexit and Literature,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

[7] See Gordana Lalić-Krstin and Nadežda Silaški, 'From Brexit to Bregret: An Account of Some Brexit-Induced Neologisms in English,' *English Today* 34, 2 (2018), pp. 3-8.

Shaw, who is currently completing the first monograph on Brexit fiction (Bloomsbury 2021). Shaw observes that, in a post-referendum world,

> novels are already appearing that could claim the tag of Brexit fiction, or 'Brex-Lit', reflecting the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum. The term BrexLit concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal.[8]

This essay will examine the opening act of Smith's seasonal cycle, entitled *Autumn*, which has been defined by critics as the first example of 'BrexLit', and Amanda Craig's state-of-the-nation satire *The Lie of the Land*. While Smith's novel was rapidly written in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, Craig's work had a longer genesis, being inspired by the 2008-09 recession and published by Abacus in 2017. As I will demonstrate, in different ways, both novels investigate the fissures of an inevitably fractured, gloomy, and disconnected Britain, in which Remainers and Leavers, cosmopolitanism and insularity, urban landscapes and the English countryside, immigrants and native people, future scenarios and nostalgia for the imperial past violently clash. Both Smith and Craig dissect the social tensions exacerbated by the referendum and tackle the thorny question of British identity that lies at the very heart of Britain's crisis.

3. A fractured collage of post-referendum Britain: Ali Smith's Autumn

In 1934 Ezra Pound famously stated that 'literature is news that stays news', stressing the close relationship between literary artefacts and the society in which they are produced and, at the same time, the potential of texts to speak to a subsequent readership. The idea of the novel as something 'new' that deals with the (disorienting) 'now', and possibly reverberates into the future, permeates Ali Smith's post-referendum Seasonal Quartet, published by Hamish Hamilton, whose fourth and last instalment, *Summer*, appeared in July 2020. As the Scottish writer points out, it is not clear whether in a few decades her four novels will 'be stale and mean nothing to us or if there are things in them that will hold'.

---

[8] Kristian Shaw, 'BrexLit,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 18.

However, 'the concept was always to do what the Victorian novelists did at a time when the novel was meant to be new. Dickens published as he was writing *Oliver Twist*. He was still making his mind up about the story halfway through. That's why it's called the novel'.[9]

A highly intellectual and intertextual novel, *Autumn* opens with a revised quote from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, immediately throwing light on the gloom of 2016 Britain: 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature'.[10] The narrative follows the path of Elisabeth Demand, a thirty-two-year-old no-fixed-hours casual contract Lecturer in Art History at an unnamed London university, and her centenary neighbour Daniel Gluck, who has no family and lies asleep in a care home, where she regularly visits him. These two characters have very evocative surnames: Elisabeth's comes from the French *de* and *monde*,[11] possibly hinting at the cosmopolitanism and mental openness supposedly embedded in an educated millennial, while the ethereal figure of Daniel has German origins and his last name means 'luck' or 'happiness', something he seems to find even in his semi-comatose state, gently flowing between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Set in England during the infamous summer of 2016, *Autumn* presents a 'collage-like, disjointed temporality of the narrative structure':[12] through a series of atomized flashbacks, the reader is told about Daniel's youth on the Continent in the Thirties and Elisabeth's childhood in England in the Nineties, when she first met her new neighbour after moving with her mother. All this is interwoven with episodes from the Swinging Sixties. From the very beginning, Daniel nurtures Elisabeth intellectually and emotionally, urging the girl into her art career, and now she takes care of him like a family member.

If the long-lasting friendship between Elisabeth and Daniel takes centre stage, the gloomy shadow of Brexit looms large over Smith's novel. As Shaw observes, 'these memoryscapes enforce a backward-looking focus on the narrative, interrogating the national pathology that resulted in

---

9 Claire Armitstead, 'Ali Smith: "This Young Generation Is Showing Us That We Need to Change and We Can Change",' *Guardian*, 23 March 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/23/ali-smith-spring-young-generation-brexit-future.
10 Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), p. 3.
11 Smith, p. 50.
12 Shaw, p. 21.

the referendum campaign and subsequent fracturing of the populace'.[13] Oscillating between past and present, *Autumn* is interspersed with disrupting 'out-of-the-box' moments that highlight contemporary Britain's dichotomies, as this anaphoric passage – which is worth quoting at length – exemplifies:

> All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing. [...]
> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland.* All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications.* [...]
> All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift.
> All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there,
> a line you don't cross here,
> a line you better not cross there,
> a line of beauty here,
> a line dance there,
> a line you don't even know exists here,
> a line you can't afford there,
> a whole new line of fire,
> line of battle,
> end of the line,
> here/there.[14]

The consequences of this plethora of divisions are even more evident, a week after the vote, in the small village where Elisabeth's mother lives, which is 'in a sullen state'.[15] On common land just outside the village, an electrified fence surmounted by razor wire and security cameras has been erected, serving 'both as a territorial reminder of a nation divided and as an allusion to the enforcement of toxic anti-immigration policies on the horizon'.[16] The atmosphere in this microcosm has become very tense. Elisabeth notes that local people have changed their attitudes, acting in an increasingly suspicious manner:

---

[13] Shaw, p. 22.
[14] Smith, pp. 59-61.
[15] Smith, p. 53.
[16] Shaw, p. 22.

People either look down, look away or stare her out. People in the shops, when she buys some fruit, some ibuprofen and a newspaper for her mother, speak with a new kind of detachment. People she passes on the streets on the way from the bus stop to her mother's house regard her, and each other, with a new kind of loftiness.[17]

Strolling around the village, Elisabeth sees a cottage whose front 'has been painted over with black paint and the words GO and HOME',[18] under which someone later replies, 'in varying bright colours, WE ARE ALREADY HOME THANK YOU'.[19]

Things do not look much brighter in multicultural London, where Elisabeth lives in the same rented flat she stayed in as a student, because she cannot afford to buy a house of her own. One weekend, some right-wing extremists shout in the street, just past her flat, 'Rule Britannia. [...] Britannia rules the waves. First we'll get the Poles. And then we'll get the Muslims. Then we'll get the gyppos, then the gays',[20] showing that anyone not conforming to British insular, white, Anglican, and heteronormative standards can experience blatant racism. Elisabeth witnesses an episode she finds particularly upsetting: a couple of Spanish tourists waiting for a taxi at a London station are shouted at to go home by people behind them in the queue: 'This isn't Europe [...]. Go back to Europe'.[21] Although some people standing in front of the couple are kind enough to let the two foreigners take the next taxi, Elisabeth identifies that moment as a turning point: the young woman 'sensed that what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic'.[22] If the fuel of racism was poured into British society by the referendum campaign which exacerbated pre-Brexit tensions, Elisabeth – a Remainer – continues to embrace difference by accepting the Other, as the philanthropic Daniel taught her when she was a little girl: 'So always try to welcome people into the home of your story', he said, 'That's my suggestion'.[23] In this light, Shaw observes that 'if good fences make good neighbours, then the need for cosmopolitan hospitality becomes an urgent necessity in a post-Brexit world'.[24]

[17] Smith, pp. 53-4.
[18] Smith, p. 53.
[19] Smith, p. 138.
[20] Smith, p. 197.
[21] Smith, p. 130.
[22] Smith, p. 130.
[23] Smith, p. 119.
[24] Shaw, p. 23.

Daniel has lived an eventful life spanning the century and his longevity allows Smith to play with unexpected references to various periods of Continental and British history. Elisabeth has become an art historian thanks to her stimulating conversations with her neighbour. Once a songwriter with a long-standing interest in literature and visual arts, Daniel used to discuss various books with Elisabeth, to take the little girl to see Shakespeare and to describe the artwork of his friend Pauline Boty, a founder of the British Pop art movement. Being the only female painter in the group, Boty is one of British art's best-kept secrets, and this lack of acknowledgement is the reason why Elisabeth, later in her life, decides to write her thesis on this artist's neglected work. Boty loved collage, a technique made from an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. As Daniel said, in collage 'all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange'.[25] Daniel's words provide us with a good description of *Autumn* itself – a novel which disrupts temporality and re-members the canon through an unpredicted use of literary/artistic quotes – and of this collection of essays, aiming to deconstruct received theories through re-assessment and re-vision. Interestingly, it is through Boty's artwork that Smith catapults the reader into the revolutionary Sixties. Her famous painting of Christine Keeler, *Scandal '63*, which only survives in photographs, and the novel's references to the Profumo Affair establish a striking parallel between Britain in 2016 and in 1963. As Smith has declared in an interview,

> there has been a massive lie and the lie has come from parliament and dissolved itself right the way through the country and things change. It's a pivotal moment. We were dealing with a kind of mass culture of lies. And it's a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie.[26]

Based on Lewis Morley's shot of Keeler sitting naked astride a copy of an Arne Jacobsen chair, which brought notoriety to the model who toppled the British government, Boty's *Scandal '63* 'reverses the dynamic of the Profumo affair's narrative by making Keeler centre stage, literally

---

[25] Smith, pp. 71-2.
[26] Quoted in Petra Rau, '*Autumn* after the Referendum,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 41.

marginalising the men who used her and then lied about it publicly'.[27] With its non-linear timeline, Smith's *Autumn* is an incredibly fascinating jigsaw, whose re-assembled pieces mirror Britain's past and present fractures.

4. 'This is England, too': Amanda Craig's The Lie of the Land

If Brexit pops out here and there in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017) never mentions the withdrawal of the UK from the EU explicitly. Rather, the novel explores the social consequences of this divisive atmosphere and, more specifically, its impact on a more parochial England. As the South African-born author states, *The Lie of the Land* 'is partly about the shock of discovering the rural world beyond the London bubble, a world which largely voted to leave Europe – but that is in the background of a very different kind of divorce'.[28]

Written as a response to the recession, *The Lie of the Land* begins with the words 'There is no money, and the Bredins can't afford to divorce'.[29] Craig declares that her opening line comes from a famous note left by a Minister in the last Labour Government:

> My husband, an economist, had been in the Treasury the day that this note was found and he returned sheet-white, knowing our country was headed for crisis. So, for nearly ten years, it has proved. But I (while fearful too) knew that I had found my next subject for what became *The Lie of the Land*. Fiction, at least the kind that I write, is about things happening to people.[30]

Craig's novel is about a London couple, Quentin and Lottie Bredin, an adulterous journalist and a control-freak architect, who – having lost their jobs and not having the money for a divorce – are forced to downsize. They rent their comfortable London house and relocate with their two young daughters, Stella and Rosie, and Xan, Lottie's son from a previous relationship, to a house in a fictional Devon village, Shipcott. Craig draws upon her personal experience of the English countryside to inform the novel:

---

[27] Rau, p. 41.
[28] Quoted in John Koski, 'YOU Reading Group: *The Lie of the Land* by Amanda Craig,' *Mail Online*, 10 June 2018, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-5804613/YOU-Reading-Group-Lie-Land-Amanda-Craig.html.
[29] Amanda Craig, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Abacus 2017), p. 1.
[30] Quoted in Koski.

> Although *The Lie of the Land* is not at all autobiographical, what is real is the farmhouse the Bredins live in, modelled very much on the half-bodge, half-ruin we fell in love with at the peak of the market. I was recovering from cancer at the time, and we needed a haven very badly. Devon has always been my home from home, the place which as an unhappy expatriate child sent back to boarding school gave me refuge and comfort.[31]

Craig's novel features a polysemous title: indeed, the British English expression 'the lie of the land' can refer to topography (the shape or height of the land) and to sociology/anthropology (the way a situation is developing or people are behaving). Both meanings seem appropriate for a novel set in the English countryside and tackling social issues. However, I would suggest that the word 'lie' plays a prominent role itself, on both a personal and public level: the novel revolves around an unfaithful marriage and, simultaneously, Britain itself suffers from the consequences of what Ali Smith defines as 'a kind of mass culture of lies'.[32] In keeping with its semantically protean title, *The Lie of the Land* crosses generic boundaries: it has been reviewed as an 'absolutely magnificent state of the nation novel' (Marian Keyes), an 'energetic satire of middle-class manners' (Anthony Cummins, *Daily Mail*), 'a realist page turner' (Justine Jordan, *Guardian*), '[a] hugely entertaining black comedy and psychological thriller rolled into one' (*Saga*).[33] Indeed, the novel is propelled by a detective story: the mystery revolves around Home Farm, the incredibly cheap house rented by Quentin and Lottie, where a brutal murder has been committed.

The Lie of the Land takes place over the course of a year, after which the couple should have enough money to move into two separate London flats. Although life in Devon is very different from that in London, Lottie grows to love the country, as she spends more and more time working on Home Farm, which is in poor shape when they arrive. Unexpectedly, Lottie also gets more invitations to tea in the first month of her arrival than she ever did in London from the parents of her children's schoolmates. Yet, while it becomes easier for the woman to appreciate Devon, other members of her family do not fit in. Quentin goes back and forth to maintain his work connections and to visit his London lover. Additionally, Xan, Lottie's smart mixed-race son currently in his gap year, struggles

---

[31] Quoted in Koski.
[32] See note 24.
[33] Reviews in Craig, page unnumbered.

to be accepted by local people and to integrate into country life: 'he can always feel people staring. Once, a little girl came up to him and asked if he were made of chocolate. Her hopeful tone made it impossible to be angry, but both Xan and Lottie had been depressed. The locals don't even know how racist they are'.[34] The lofty and suspicious attitude experienced by Smith's Elisabeth in the village where she is living with her mother becomes overtly racist in Craig's novel. At the (imaginary) Humble Pie factory, his new workplace, Xan is mistaken for an immigrant and asked for documents validating his British nationality:

> 'Do you speak English?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'What?'
> 'YES!' Xan shouts back, nettled. 'I *am* English!'
> The man looks doubtfully at him and says, at the same volume, 'Any ID?'
> Xan never thought he would be mistaken for an illegal immigrant, but Lottie has had the foresight to get him to photograph his passport.
> 'Can you read English?'
> 'Yes,' Xan says. 'The sign over there says NO TRESPASSERS.'
> The man grunts, and tells him to get changed. Xan scrambles to find a white nylon uniform and boots and to put up his clothes in a wire locker. Other men are also changing, and there's a general stir when Xan comes in. Having to bundle his mass of squiggly locks into the hairnet is embarrassing: he hasn't noticed, but he's grown an Afro.[35]

The Lie of the Land beautifully captures how different England is outside of London. The older daughter of Quentin and Lottie, Stella, does not like her new school and pleads with her mother to move back to London, although, when asking about when they are moving back, she remarkably phrases it this way: 'When are we going back to England?'. Lottie reminds her daughter that 'London isn't England', and Shipcott 'is England, too'.[36] The irreconcilable gap between the metropolis and the country also emerges from Quentin's column:

> *There's a fashion for calling children Devon, as there used to be for calling them India or Africa [...]. No wonder. Devon is a foreign country. The only thing you can be absolutely certain of, as in India and Africa, is that you'll live in a state of permanent frustration.*[37]

---

[34] Craig, p. 65.
[35] Craig, p. 68.
[36] Craig, p. 53.
[37] Craig, p. 32.

London is the only England Lottie's family has ever known: even in the same country, most of the family members feel completely lost because they have no connection with this rural dimension.

Like Smith, Craig is deeply inspired by the literary canon, drawing on the Victorian novel in her depiction of England's wealth gap, albeit with a contemporary twist. Her downward-mobility tale also seems to be a journey into England's past, where the modern luxuries of London are nowhere to be found. Like Smith, Craig herself acknowledges the imprint of Dickens on her work and her passionate interest in people's lives and shared humanity:

> One of my heroes is Charles Dickens, who wrote contemporary novels with great, suspenseful plots and memorable characters about the way the Victorians of all classes lived, loved, worked and died. This is surely why he is still read today and what causes millions to fall in love with classic novels. [...] What matters is the lives we live now, in the quick of time – the joys and sorrows, the common humanity, the eventfulness, frustrations, salvations, comedies and discoveries. This is what I write about, and this is what I hope readers most enjoy.[38]

Although *The Lie of the Land* is patently more middlebrow than the more intellectually demanding *Autumn*, both texts engage in a fruitful dialogue with 'the literary box' by challenging it. While owing a debt to eminent Victorians like Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray, *The Lie of the Land* also nods to John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), a novel which examines timely issues such as the housing crisis and the implosion of the middle class and similarly 'relies on a [...] detective story for its impetus',[39] thus appropriating the thriller motif from a new angle. In a similar vein, the less accessible *Autumn* juxtaposes quotes from Dickens and Huxley's *Brave New World* with Ovidian, Shakespearean, and Keatsian echoes, shaping a stratified – and simultaneously visionary – literary architecture.

---

[38] Quoted in Koski.
[39] See Alice O'Keeffe, '*The Lie of the Land* Explores the Complexity of Modern Britain through One Family,' *New Statesman*, 2 July 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/07/lie-land-explores-complexity-modern-britain-through-one-family.

5. In lieu of a conclusion: BrexLit as resistance

It is important to stress that Brexit 'is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too', and culture 'is the heart of national identity'.[40] Therefore, contemporary literature (and, more specifically, fiction) becomes a valuable instrument for investigating and questioning the notion of Britishness that takes centre stage in Brexit discourse. Because of a disruptive event such as the UK's exit from the EU, Bryan Cheyette suggests, the 'national straight-jacket – Englishness, not even Britishness – becomes much tighter and the value of a migrant's perspective becomes increasingly discounted and devalued'.[41] Therefore, in our terms, the English 'box' shrinks while becoming more impermeable to exogenous stimuli as its surface acts as a barrier between insularity and the outer reality. This unproductive (and destructive) lack of exchange between in and out, Us and Them, the Self and the Other is what BrexLit struggles against, promoting a constant interchange between localism and Europe, the received box and 'out-of-the-box' critical thinking. Thus, BrexLit can be considered a narrative of resistance as well as an effective antidote to exclusiveness which opens up cosmopolitan possibilities and fosters an inclusive debate, suggesting that another direction, or 'another heading' as Derrida would say, is still possible.

Bibliography

Armitstead, Claire, 'Ali Smith: "This Young Generation Is Showing Us That We Need to Change and We Can Change",' *Guardian*, 23 March 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/23/ali-smith-spring-young-generation-brexit-future.

Cheyette, Bryan, 'English Literature Saved My Life,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 66-72.

Craig, Amanda, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Abacus 2017).

Derrida, Jacques, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Nass (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

---

[40] Eaglestone, p. 1.
[41] Bryan Cheyette, 'English Literature Saved My Life,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 69.

Eaglestone, Robert, 'Introduction: Brexit and Literature,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-6.

Koski, John, 'YOU Reading Group: *The Lie of the Land* by Amanda Craig,' *Mail Online*, 10 June 2018, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-5804613/YOU-Reading-Group-Lie-Land-Amanda-Craig.html.

Lalić-Krstin, Gordana and Nadežda Silaški, 'From Brexit to Bregret: An Account of Some Brexit-Induced Neologisms in English,' *English Today* 34, 2 (2018), pp. 3-8.

O'Keeffe, Alice, '*The Lie of the Land* Explores the Complexity of Modern Britain through One Family,' *New Statesman*, 2 July 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/07/lie-land-explores-complexity-modern-britain-through-one-family.

Rau, Petra, '*Autumn* after the Referendum,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 31-43.

Rawlinson, Francis, *How Press Propaganda Paved the Way to Brexit* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Shaw, Kristian, 'BrexLit,' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 15-30.

Smith, Ali, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016).

Getting out of the box is a way for innovative writers across the ages not simply to jettison their given cultural and national tools but to combine them inventively. The present book contains a revised selection of the literature and cultural studies papers given at the XXIX AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) Conference, which was held at the University of Padova in September 2019. It aims to detect the many ways in which cultures negotiate their differences and eventually revise their boundaries: epistemological shifts are shown thanks to the changes in literary tastes and in conventions. In/out, the centre of the Empire and its (ex-)colonies, whiteness and blackness, man and woman, are among the main twin boxes that get revised and extrapolated. Not one single box is left untouched: fixed notions of genre, and of gender as well, are here discussed with a keen attention to the many moments where the writers' ambivalence causes a shift in literary creation.