A nalyses
R ereadings
T heories

Edited by:

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, Nelly Strehlau, Katarzyna Więckowska

A nalyses
R ereadings
T heories

Authors and Authority

Contents

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5492-4255
e-mail: lorek@umk.pl

Nelly Strehlau
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7670-7860
e-mail: strehlau@umk.pl

Katarzyna Więckowska
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3408-3695
e-mail: klew@umk.pl

Perspectives on Authorship and Authority

Abstract

This article outlines selected shifts in thinking about authorship and authority that have occurred in literary and cultural studies in the aftermath of Roland Barthes's proclamation of the death of the author, followed by the author's many revivals. Reconsidering Barthes's seminal essay and confronting it with Michel Foucault's query about the author-function, the article comments on Seán Burke's polemical stance concerning situated authorship. Against these general considerations, several areas in which authorship and authority have been reconceptualized are briefly discussed, referring to the themes addressed in this volume. These areas embrace the problems of representing and using somebody else's story in visual arts and testimonial theatre, the challenges of individual and cultural situatedness of writing within one's own output and in reference to more general cultural hauntings as well as the processes of self-formation in the interactions between a variety of texts forming life-writing.

Keywords: authorship, authority, death of the author, responsibility, testimony, life-writing

More than half a century ago, Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author and welcomed the birth of the reader. His influential essay was instrumental in redefining the place of the author and the reader in the process of interpretation and negotiation of meanings, questioning the traditional discourses of authorship, and decentralizing authorial practices. And yet, much like other spectres of cultural and literary studies, the figure of the author refuses to cease its haunting.

On the contrary: the debate on authorship remains as lively as it has ever been, and transcends the academic discourse, spilling over into all kinds of texts, from fanworks, to social media posts, to Internet poetry. Regardless if the discussion concerns texts that represent new media or traditional forms, at its heart remains the same question: that of authority and its situatedness.

Critical discussions of the relationship between authors and texts frequently stress the connection between authorship, authority, power, and control. In his seminal essay, Barthes consistently links authorship with social forces and power to present the author as "a product of our society" (2000: 147) and a tangible manifestation of its rules, which confer the right to author to some subjects while denying it to others. If to become an author is to be endowed with authority and power, then the "removal of the Author … utterly transforms the … text" (2000: 148), freeing it from the existing bonds but also entangling it in new ones. Barthes calls this new type of text performative, thereby pointing to the newly gained authority of the reader as well as indicating other pressures exercised on the text. The performative character of writing, the fact that "every text is eternally written *here* and *now*" (2000: 149), opens the space for multiple readings and various operations of power, and makes every encounter with the text both a liberating and restricting experience which re-inscribes into the text the rules and values of the readers' present.

The potential dangers associated with rejecting the traditional function of the author were famously commented on by Michel Foucault, who in his 1969 essay pointed to the need to "locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (2000: 177). In his "What is an Author?" Foucault stresses the importance of ownership of literary texts and discusses "author" as a function of discourse, "the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (2000: 186). Speculating on the future of texts, he envisages a time when "the author-function will disappear," yet only to be replaced by a different method in which fiction will operate, "another mode, but still with a system of constraint – one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced" (Foucault 2000: 186). Accordingly, a new set of questions will have to be asked to address this new mode of functioning of texts, regarding their circulation, appropriations, and power effects (Foucault 2000: 187).

Others have also warned against approaching the death of the author too uncritically. Seán Burke argues that the death of the author, or more broadly, the death of the subject in postmodernism, ought to be seen as intrinsically contradictory: to "dethrone the author" (1999: 27), Barthes had to first "create a king worthy of the killing" (1999: 26). Elsewhere, Burke stresses that "[w]ith unavoidable irony, the theory of authorial absence no more signalled a disengagement with issues of authorship than iconoclasm attests to the dwindling of the icons, or negative theology reflects an indifference to Divinity. The ancient chimeras of origin and authorship reassert themselves in the very gestures that seek to have done with origin and authorship" (Burke 2006: xvi). Burke also cautions that "[t]he need to ground authorship should be felt most intensely within political forms of literary criticism" (1999: 202) precisely in order to see the text as particular, situated, historically determined and relevant to ethical considerations of feminist or postcolonial studies: the readerly freedom achieved at the cost of "deracination" of the text may deprive it of meanings rather than assist in their proliferation (1999: 203).

The articles collected in this volume explore the spaces of resistance opened up and restrictions imposed by the critical gestures of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. The authors investigate various positions created for the reader and the author in 20th- and 21st-century texts and examine the responsibilities of speaking for the other and the consequences of the awareness that

every text is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 2000: 149). The practice of recycling and using works authored by others, which has been identified as one of strategies testifying to the exhaustion of postmodern culture, or the "death of the subject" (Jameson 1993: 195) mentioned above, thus engages with significant questions of positionality and the complex ethics of narrating somebody else's story. This aspect is of particular relevance to the practices of retelling the story of "another's wound" (Caruth 1996: 8). In the context of postmemory (Hirsch 2008) and transgenerational and cultural trauma (Alexander 2004), authority and authorship are embedded in the collective or inherited experience of the traumatic event, which places particular demand and responsibilities on individual responses.

The links between authorship, responsibility, and the right to re-tell somebody else's story are explored in Anna Kisiel's "Gazing at Eurydice: Authorship and Otherness in Bracha L. Ettinger," which discusses the role played in Ettinger's work by a photograph of women and children from the Mizocz ghetto, taken by an anonymous photographer in 1942. Referring to Ettinger's matrixial theory, Kisiel analyses *Eurydice*, No. 5 and an untitled sketch from 1985, to show how the artist re-subjectifies the dead women and creates a space for a relation between the author, the work, and the viewer that is based on intimacy, shareability, and compassion. A key element in the discussion of the spectral presence of the Mizocz women is the notion of trauma and the problem of representing the suffering of the other without appropriating it. As Kisiel convincingly argues, Ettinger's mediation of (original) trauma through various re-constructions of the photograph of the Mizocz women gives rise to ethical questions about authors and their responsibility and realises the humanising potential of authorship by re-presenting experiences that have been silenced or appropriated.

Ethical questions are also central to authority and authorship in testimonial narratives and witnessing. The popularity of forms based on testimony and witnessing, including testimonial theatre, as Clare Summerskill notes, has emerged from the general "distrust of mainstream media" and "seeking alternate versions of events and information provided in the form of personal narratives" (2021: 4). The interest of verbatim theatre (which it shares with oral history) in "testimonies from members of marginalised, vulnerable or previously silenced populations" (Summerskill 2021: 4) illustrates one of the central premises of this volume, of the emergence of alternative authors with the downplaying of the role of "traditional" authorships. What is especially significant in this type of authorship is a particular relationship between the "authors" of testimonial theatre, which can be based on the "authority […] rooted in its promise of an ethical and honest creative process, established upon relationships of care and trust" (Stuart Fisher 2020: Introduction). The difficulty of this shared authorship is further complicated by the problematic nature of traumatic memory (Caruth 1995; Felman and Laub 1992), the interaction between testimony and witnessing, connected with responsibility and taking action (Kaplan 2005: 122–23; Felman and Laub 1992: 24), as well as the experience of vicarious trauma (Kaplan 2005: 40). Some of these issues are addressed by Andrea Bellot in "Authoring war memories: War memoir writing and testimonial theatre performances," in which she discusses theatrical forms consisting in re-enactment of the war experience of their authors. Her article covers the history of war writing, the inherent difficulties associated with the effects of war on memory, and the ideological as well as medical dimensions of the form. Bellot argues that even though the collaborative authorship and experimental, non-professional form of theatre of testimony can be seen to seek to undermine the notion of a single story and its claim to objectivity and truth, as well as destabilise the accepted, known narratives about the war presented in the mass media, their authority and audience's belief in their veracity are ultimately derived from the figure of the veteran author, often performing in person or impersonated by an actor, whose status as first-hand witness provides the story with legitimacy.

In her introduction to *The Deaths of the Author*, Jane Gallop makes two observations that are significant for this volume's preoccupation with authors. The first – more general – is that "the author's death makes the reader think more not less about the author" (2011: 1), referring to both its conceptual reading as the aftermath of the poststructuralist legacy and a more individual comment on how the recent death of an author might impact the reading of their works. This second, more individual aspect highlights the peculiarities of re-reading the works of authors after their death, and leads to the second observation made by Gallop – on a particular "poignancy" that the reading process gains when the "book is haunted by the [recent] death of the author" (2011: 1). In her article on *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, Paulina Mirowska reads Sam Shepard's last play posthumously, placing it within the context of the author's individual artistic career and with reference to the idea of self-invention. Simultaneously, by tracing the connection of Shepard's last play to other texts and cultural contexts, by exploring its intertextuality, metatheatricality and cultural identification, Mirowska points to the significance of situatedness of authors, texts and readings. Contextualising her discussion in an overview of Sam Shepard's dramatic oeuvre, which, as Jeanette R. Malkin notes, was "in a constant state of self-transformation," (1999: 115) Mirowska demonstrates how the search for identity and constant effort towards re-inventing oneself shaped the playwright's works. *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)* is presented as a culmination of the author's search for self-expression, yet it also points to external cultural processes at play, such as the critics' inclusion of Shepard in the Irish dramatic canon, emphasising, among others, Shepard's predilection for story-telling reminiscent of the Irish playwriting tradition. In this context, the play that, as Mirowska argues, refuses to "resolve the conflict between various perspectives on such matters as the nature of identity, the search for meaning and value in contemporary culture, or the creative process itself," at the same time resonates strongly with its first audiences by referring to "histories of unhealed communal and individual traumas."

The concepts of authorship and haunting lead us to important questions about the relation between texts and authors as well as the problems of authority and power. With its various conceptualisations as both constricting and liberating, spectrality can signify the persistence of the past in the present and indirectly point to forms of continuity and tradition, however evanescent.[1] It is within such tradition of haunting that authors are often placed or to which they are interpreted to refer. Yet haunting brings another angle to authorship and authority by highlighting the problems of veracity or legitimacy of the haunting voice. Whether as a feeble expression of the dispossessed or marginalized, or the one in power, the spectral voice always acquires a sense of urgency connected to responsibility and knowledge (Derrida 2006: xix), which makes the ghost a figure to "reckon with" (Derrida 2006: xx). Because of this power, the figure of the spectre can play with its own credibility and superior knowledge and manipulate others. It is in this function that the spectral figures are examined in their relation to power and authority by Grzegorz Koneczniak in his article on "Supernatural beings and their appropriation of knowledge and power in *The Seafarer* by Conor McPherson and *Woman and Scarecrow* by Marina Carr." Koneczniak situates his discussion within the context of the spectral turn in contemporary Irish drama, referring to the tradition described by Morash and Richards as "the theatre of ghosts of a ghost, its spectral effect doubled" (2013: 178) and pointing to some possible directions for future investigation. His analysis focuses on the roles of the supernatural figures in two plays by contemporary Irish playwrights. In *The Seafarer*, the protagonist Sharky is manipulated by devil-like Mr. Lockhart into a game of cards whose stakes are life-and-death; in *Woman and Scarecrow*, the former is on her deathbed and the latter, invisible to

---

[1] For the discussion of the meaning of the past and spectrality see Jameson (2008), Derrida (2006), Abraham (1994).

all but the dying character, accompanies her last moments while disclosing secrets from Woman's life. Imbued with authority derived from intimate knowledge that seems to be attributed to their otherworldly provenance, Mr. Lockhart and Scarecrow control the human characters much like an author may direct their fictional characters: it is through revision, confrontation of perspectives and revelation of secrets that their control can be undermined, even if only partly.

The last area of authorship explored in this volume is the relation of the author to life writing. With its boundary crossing, indeterminacy and genre fusions, life writing reflects, as Zachary Leader argues, "a wider distrust of fixed forms, simple or single truths or meanings, narrative transparency, objectivity, 'literature' as opposed to writing" (2015: 2). Being "best viewed," as Marlene Kadar notes, as "a continuum […] spread[ing] from the so-called least fictive narration to the most fictive" (1992: 10), life writing can be approached as "a critical practice" which employs the reader's self-consciousness developed in the process of reading to "humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-the-writing" (1992: 12). This practice of inclusion and reading across various forms of writing has been central particularly to the reconstruction of women writers' position in the field of auto/biographical writing traditionally dominated by male authors (Cook and Culley 2012: 1–2).

The issues of life writing by women and the self-in-the-writing are discussed in the last article in this volume, "The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings" by Małgorzata Hołda, who investigates the process of becoming an author by analysing the complex relations between Woolf's fictional and autobiographical texts and the writer's life and work. Hołda's explorations are framed by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach to identity and Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, and describe the questioning of the boundaries between life and text, and fiction and non-fiction in Woolf's oeuvre. The first part of the essay brings together Woolf's fictional and non-fictional works to present them as mutually illuminating and forming "a unique self-narrative." In the second part, Hołda refers to Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity to examine Woolf's portrayal of the human self as contingent and formed by a variety of experiences and influences. The final part of the article turns to Foucault's ideas on identity and discourse to describe the self's constant disappearance and to analyse Woolf's practice of blurring the boundaries between self and Other, and writer and reader. In effect, Hołda's reading of Woolf's work presents the writer as an interpreter of life and of her own prose, acutely aware of the indispensability of interpretation and the intangibility of the human self.

The articles gathered in this volume aim at describing numerous ways of reading restricted by various kinds of constraint, whether personal or public, past or present, material or spectral. They are all informed by the awareness that any text is always multiple and that all texts are effects and vehicles of power. More importantly, their existence is made possible by Barthes's textual homicide and the realization that any book, including the plays, autobiographical texts, and artworks the authors discuss, is "caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (Foucault 1972: 23).

Works Cited

Abraham, Nicolas. 1994. "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology" (1975). In: Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 171–76.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." In: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1–30.

Barthes, Roland. 2000. "The Death of the Author." In: Nigel Wood and David Lodge (eds). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader.* Harlow, England: Pearson, 146–50.

Burke, Seán. 1999. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Burke, Seán. 2006. "Introduction: Reconstructing the Author." In: Seán Burke (ed.) *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, xv–xxx.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. "Introduction." In: Cathy Caruth (ed.). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 151–57.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cook, Daniel, and Amy Culley. 2012. "Introduction: Gender, Genre and Authorship." In: Daniel Cook and Amy Culley (eds). *Women's Life Writing, 1700–1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–8.

Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. NY, London: Routledge.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2000. "What is an Author?" In: Nigel Wood and David Lodge (eds). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader.* Harlow, England: Pearson, 174–87.

Gallop, Jane. 2011. *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29.1, 103–28.

Jameson, Fredric. 1993. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1988). In: Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (eds). *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*. London: Edward Arnold, 192–205.

Jameson, Fredric. 2008. "Marx's Purloined Letter." In: Michael Sprinker (ed.). *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*. London: Verso, 26–67.

Kadar, Marlene. 1992. "Coming to Terms: Life Writing from Genre to Critical Practice." In: Marlene Kadar (ed.). *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 3–16.

Kaplan, E. Ann. 2005. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Leader, Zachary. 2015. "Introduction." In: Zachary Leader (ed.). *On Life-Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–6.

Malkin, Jeanette R. 1999. *Memory-theater and Postmodern Drama*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.

Morash, Chris, and Shaun Richards. 2013. *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stuart Fisher, Amanda. 2020. *Performing the Testimonial: Rethinking Verbatim Dramaturgies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Summerskill, Clare. 2021. *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*. New York: Routledge.

Anna Kisiel

WSB University, Poland

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8803-0145

e-mail: kisiel.anna@outlook.com

Gazing at Eurydice: Authorship and Otherness in Bracha L. Ettinger

Abstract

A historical photograph of women and children from the Mizocz ghetto taken in 1942 just before their execution constitutes one of the most recurring motifs in Bracha L. Ettinger's visual art. By means of her artworks, Ettinger endeavours to retrieve these women's dignity and work through their traumas at a point when they are unable to do it themselves. Yet, one cannot ignore a number of questions that arise in the context of this kind of aesthetic practice; after all, Ettinger uses an archival photograph, taken by an anonymous photographer, and her acts of altering and decontextualising this "ready-made" material are aimed at producing a certain artistic effect. The objective of this article is to reflect on the issue of authorship in Bracha L. Ettinger's theory and art. Having introduced two Eurydicial artworks, I proceed to unravel the status of a matrixial artist-author. In order to do so, I analyse such notions as ready-made art, matrixial Otherness, trauma of the World, gaze, and appropriation.

Keywords: Bracha L. Ettinger, artist, otherness, Eurydice, Holocaust, matrixial theory, appropriation, ready-made

The Author and Her Others

One of the tropes that do not cease to occupy Bracha L. Ettinger's canvases is a historical photograph of women and children from the Mizocz ghetto taken in 1942 just before their execution. The photographer's identity is not confirmed, and we can only guess whether the picture was taken "as witness, as protest, [or] as trophy," to quote Griselda Pollock (2013: 25–26). The women and children in the picture were by no means selected to die due to their individual deeds – rather, their shooting was a result of collective responsibility. On the 13th of October, 1942, prisoners in the Mizocz ghetto, present-day Ukraine, revolted against the liquidation action; the following day, almost all the men, women, and children were taken to a ravine and executed.[1] The photographer's archival gesture humiliated the women and appropriated their image: it is the depiction of their nakedness and defencelessness that was recorded and preserved. As a consequence, we – the viewers – are doomed to lose in a struggle against submitting to an objectifying gaze. Aware of the problematic

---

[1] There are several known cases of prisoners who survived the slaughter. See: Parfeniuk and Suszek 2018: 407–408.

position of a viewer-voyeur, Bracha L. Ettinger endeavours to re-subjectify the Mizocz women posthumously via the medium of art. One of the means to do so is to initiate an interaction between the aforementioned photograph and a photocopier. In the artworks with the Eurydice motif – which are discussed in this article – the historical image is not merely copied, since Ettinger disturbs the work of the machine in the middle, before the "faithful" copy is completed. Partly giving in to the agency of the technology used, she cannot predict the outcome of such a procedure. The artistic effects are always unique, and yet they share such features as distortion and suspension; the Mizocz women become ghostly, not fully present but not yet absent, connoting mythical Eurydice at the exact moment when Orpheus turns to look at her. Brian Massumi comments upon this "Eurydicial" aspect of Ettinger's artistic practice: "The image has degenerated. But it hasn't disappeared. … [I]t has been caught appearing" (2006: 201). The next stage of artworking – which often takes years – consists in putting layers of paint on the manipulated picture. During this repetitive process, new layers come to existence; some of them hide the photographic content while others put emphasis on its chosen fragments. Finally, as much as any stage of these works may be called final, the painting becomes "less the image than the sensation of its remaining in its fading, re-arising: rhythm" (Massumi 2006: 203). Rhythmic and fluctuating, Ettinger's artworks are, thus, concerned not so much with actual content or historical knowledge as with affective data.

It seems that one of Ettinger's aims is to recover the dignity of the women from Mizocz. Humiliated before their death, now they are, in a sense, clothed in layers of paint, or partly hidden from the voyeuristic or fetishising looks of – first – perpetrators, and – then – spectators. Simultaneously, the Israeli painter-psychoanalyst provides these women with an intimate canvas space, understood as a homely site where their trauma can be worked through for – or rather instead of – them at a moment when they are not able to do so on their own.[2] Still, one cannot ignore the question of authorship in the case of such practice: on the most basic level, Ettinger uses the historical picture, taken by an anonymous photographer, in order to manipulate it artistically and achieve a particular aesthetic effect. Not only does she decontextualise the image, but she also covers the women from Mizocz with paint, frequently making them recognisable only to those who hold at least a partial knowledge of the series' background. I believe that it is impossible to grasp the complexity of authorship in Ettinger's artistic and theoretical works without turning to her approach to Otherness and an artist; these three notions tend to overlap in the Ettingerian universe to an extent that makes it difficult (and indeed futile) to define their exact borders.

The aim of this article is to address the issue of authorship in Bracha L. Ettinger, taking into consideration selected notions from the matrixial theory – a feminine supplement to the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. I intend to explore an inspiring interaction between Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis and her artistic practice, keeping in mind her conviction that "[w]hile painting produces theory, theory casts light on painting in a backward projection" (Ettinger 2006b: 94). I wish to identify both the prospects and potential threats of Ettinger's theoretical perspective on authorship and her own authorial practice. In order to do so, I take two Eurydicial artworks

---

[2] In this paragraph, I have hinted at several issues and themes that are already explored in other articles. For an analysis of a potential trans-historical encounter with the bodies of the Mizocz women and its ethical implications, and for Ettinger's peculiar procedure of "clothing" and protecting these women, see: Kisiel 2019. The importance of trusting the artist and the (un)necessity of historical knowledge in the context of Ettinger's art and theory are tackled in: Kisiel 2018. Theoretical underpinnings of the statement concerning the possibility of working through trauma of, for, and instead of the Other are explored in: Ettinger 2006c, and contextualised in, among others: Kisiel 2016, 2018.

– *Eurydice*, No. 5, and an untitled 1985 sketch[3] – as my starting points, and then proceed to discuss the status of an author, turning to such issues and terms as (ready-made) art, the artist's Others, shareability, trauma of the World, and appropriation.[4] I am convinced that Ettinger's general remarks on artists and her own interventions in the field of aesthetics support the thesis that a matrixial artist-author is a subject capable of entering into a compassionate relation with his or her Other(s), which, in turn, has important resonances for potential viewers.

Eurydicial "Ready-mades"

The question of tension between ready-made content and authorship is inevitable when one faces Ettinger's Eurydicial art. *Eurydice*, No. 5 (1992–1994)[5] reveals a fragment of the photograph that recurs in the whole series. In this play of light and shades, of the canvas and Ettinger's dark brush strokes, several figures are distinguishable. One of the women standing in a row looks in the viewer's direction and another carries a baby in her arms. Among them, a face of a little girl hugging yet another woman can be noticed. The people from the original photograph have almost disappeared; only the central woman who looks away is easily spotted. The historical image is juxtaposed here with a page taken from a French-Hebrew dictionary. One of the entries is *vivante/ morte*, which grasps the Eurydice-like position of the women in Ettinger's art, that is, their suspension between presence and absence, life and death.[6] In the lower part of the image, purple paint strokes are suspended in their act of veiling the picture. Undoubtedly, this is the fragment of *Eurydice*, No. 5 that most directly indicates the painter's authorial gesture, or – perhaps – her authoritative gesture, if we acknowledge a degree of violence and abruptness in it. An untitled sketch from 1985[7] uses the Mizocz photograph as well, yet it also invites more agencies within its borders. The frame is similar to, but slightly wider, than that of *Eurydice*, No. 5, and we cannot speak about the light/dark contrast anymore since the main colours of the sketch are black and purple. The little girl mentioned above becomes the most important figure of the artwork as she is "doubled" and appears on both sides of the painting. This time, however, alongside the Mizocz

---

[3] I discuss these two artworks in slightly different contexts in three papers. For a discussion on *Eurydice*, No. 5 alongside other paintings from the series, with an emphasis put on such tropes as proximity, traumatic repetition, suspension, and visibility, see: Kisiel 2018. For a discussion on *Eurydice*, No. 5 in the context of the archive's insufficiency and Orpheus's deadly gaze, see: Kisiel 2020. For a discussion on the untitled sketch in the context of a Levinasian response, see: Kisiel 2019.

[4] Bracha L. Ettinger's painting technique calls to mind the legacy of such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, or Gerhard Richter. However, Ettinger's indebtedness or relation to these artists has already been discussed, primarily by Griselda Pollock, a prominent art historian and feminist scholar. For Pollock's placement of Ettinger's *oeuvre* in art history, see: Pollock 2010; therein, Pollock recalls the tradition of abstract painting, elaborates on differences between Ettinger's and Richter's aesthetic practices, provides a detailed description of the sources Ettinger uses in her works, and identifies the original photograph in Ettinger's art as "a Duchampian ready-made" (2010: 856). For Pollock's juxtaposition of Andy Warhol's pop-art – portrayed as symptomatic of "modernity's … unfinished business" (2000: 50) – with Ettinger's trauma-informed art, see: Pollock 2000.

[5] Bracha L. Ettinger, *Eurydice*, No. 5, 1992–1994, oil painting, carbon toner, photocopic dust, pigment and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 47 x 27 cm. Collection Israel Museum, Jerusalem. © Courtesy of the artist.

[6] Ettinger's artistic technique and the ambiguity of presence and absence in her works may connote Jacques Derrida's notion of the spectre and its reliance on conjuration/conjurement. Since the spectre designates a breach in spatiality and temporality, suspending and deconstructing any attempt to capture it, it is subjected to the simultaneous gesture of summoning it and casting it away (Derrida 2006: 49–60).

[7] Bracha L. Ettinger, *No Title-Sketch*, 1985, carbon toner, photocopic dust, pigment and ashes on paper, 27.3 x 23.1 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

women, the artwork hosts Ettinger's parents from the pre-war photo taken in the streets of Łódź in 1936. Finally, another motif resurfaces here: the red letters that originate in Gustaf Dalman's 1925 book with aerial photographs of Palestine (*Hundert Deutsche Fliegerbilder aus Palaestina*).[8] A historical photograph, an image from a family album, two books – the amount of ready-made material to be found within these two frames, being merely samples of Ettinger's massive *oeuvre*, cannot be ignored. How, then, can we define authorship here?

In "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," Sigmund Freud proposes a distinction between ready-made writings and creative writings, which Ettinger transfers to the field of artistic production in order to question it (Ettinger 2006a: 72–73, 90). At this point, let us focus on Freud. The founding father of psychoanalysis reflects predominantly on the latter type of writings. As he proposes, the origin of creativity can be discovered in children's play and fantasy, and, thus, it is associated with the activity of daydreaming (Freud 1983). Interestingly enough, while Freud does not take ready-made works into consideration for the most of his essay and seems rather to disregard them, he does leave the discussion on his division open. In the last lines, he not only implies that ready-made assigned artists are somewhat independent and able to leave traces of themselves in their works, but also suggests that there may exist a certain collective mythology. He writes: "[I]t is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity" (1983: 28, emphasis original). Therefore, Freud leaves some space for rethinking the distinction between ready-made and original art; he does not require understanding these notions in a strict sense. Still, when we consider Ettinger's artistic pieces, it is difficult not to perceive them as ready-mades, given the amount of foreign content. It may seem that Ettinger's artistic production to a large extent relies on a thoughtful act of collaging pre-obtained material. To gain a more comprehensive perspective on Ettinger's idea of an aesthetic process and the value of an artist in it, first we need to look at the rudiments of her matrixial theory, including the notion of the matrix and the issue of Otherness in the matrixial borderspace.

Matrixial Encounters

Bracha L. Ettinger's intervention in the psychoanalytic field originates in the womb – an inspiration for introducing a supplementary feminine dimension into the phallocentric system. Ettinger proposes the Latin-based notion of the matrix (see: 2006a: 64), which in her theory stands for both an-Other sphere of subjectivity formation and a signifier of non-phallic difference. Claimed to be non-gendered and non-Oedipal, the matrixial difference is nevertheless pronounced feminine, as it is based on the prenatal/pregnancy encounters and maternity.[9] These experiences point to extreme – but not totally boundless – togetherness, which allows for partial sharing of affective data and mutual influencing. Thus, what the matrix as a notion promises in the psychoanalytic discourse is a shift of focus from a defining series of cuts, losses, and separation to the originary subjectifying force of intimacy, shareability, and compassion (Pollock 2006). The matrix, however, is not supposed to defy or jettison the male signifier found in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. On the contrary, Ettinger recognises the value of the phallus, but observes its insufficiency. As she argues,

> In the prenatal phase, the matrixial stratum is more active in the process of subjectivizing than the phallic stratum, whereas in the postnatal life it is the phallic stratum that dominates while the matrixial one recedes. Thus, the matrixial *objet a* is not a derivation of the phallic *objet a*, neither is it its

---

[8] Rosi Huhn writes more about this book and its implications; see: 2012: 43–55.

[9] See: Ettinger 2006e: 140–41. For a study of the matrixial feminine difference, see: Pollock 2009: 9–10. For Pollock's take on the notion of the matrix, see: Pollock 2006: 12–21.

"opposite." Rather, it has an autonomous source in the feminine difference. (Ettinger 2006a: 84–85, emphasis original)

The concept of the phallus, then, fails to encompass the complexity of subjectivity formation, and the matrixial theory aims at filling this gap.

The notion of the matrix allows Ettinger to propose a new subjectivising stratum and to rethink the *I*/*non-I* dualism, which – as is demonstrated further on – is of major importance in her take on artistic authorship. Within the matrixial realm, the subject's formation cannot be reduced to the binary logic of a split. What Ettinger postulates is a supplementary dimension: that of *subjectivity-as-encounter*. It is pronounced a primary subjectivising instance as it refers to the universal event of prenatal existence in the womb of one's mother (Ettinger 2006d: 181; Pollock 2006: 3, 14). In order to retrieve this maternal and originary space-time, one needs to fragilise oneself – to re-open one's borders to the Other and their traumas, pains, memories, and affective experiences. The threat of such vulnerability is unquestionable – one gives in to disruptive closeness without any promises or prospects (Ettinger 2009: 8–9, 18). As Ettinger notes, "In subjectivity-as-encounter – where an-other is not an absolute separate Other – [relations-without-relating] turn both of us into partial-subjects, still uncognized, thoughtlessly known to each other, matrixially knowing each other, in painful fragility" (2006e: 144). What we can gather from this passage is a shift in perception of Otherness. The Other ceases to be radical, distant, external, or impenetrable, and instead is portrayed as an affectively intimate *border-Other*,[10] who may be incomprehensible, and yet carries sense and knowledge during an encounter.

At this point, a psychoanalytic reflection meets an aesthetic experience. If the Other ceases to be radically separate, then trauma and memory are no longer entirely individual phenomena; artistic practice is claimed to open up a space in which the traces of painful experiences of *non-I*s can be brought to the surface and shared. Ettinger argues that "[m]atrixial aesthetic effects attest that imprints interweave between the artist, the viewer, and the world, that something branching off from others engraves traces in me, and something that relinquishes me, or is to me mentally unbearable, nevertheless accesses others" (2006e: 149; see also: 2006e: 153). This statement alludes to the features of matrixial artists and their relation with Otherness. An artist is implied here to be prone to receiving the *trauma of the world*, as Ettinger calls it, and transferring its traces into his or her artwork (2006c: 169; see: 2006c). Thus, the artwork carries both its maker's individual experiences and memories, and imprints of traumas he or she has not necessarily gone through personally. An artist is then a *wit(h)ness with-out an event* – he or she processes something for the Other, leaves its residues in the work of art, and allows for further working through of the disruptive data (2006e: 148–50). That is why from the matrixial perspective an artist is a crucial agent in dealing with trauma – it is an artist who facilitates the chance encounter between the *I* and the *non-I* by means of utilising the painful knowledge not originating in him- or herself but transferred by his or her aesthetic interventions.

Having unravelled Ettinger's line of thinking, we can immediately notice that the Freudian understanding of ready-mades is at odds with the matrixial logic. The Israeli artist-psychoanalyst points to this contradiction herself; she reconsiders the clear distinction between ready-made and creative art, arguing that in the matrixial sphere, the distinct borders between these two practices blur. In Ettinger's view, "[f]rom the matrixial angle, the *ready-made* borrowing of the other's myths and inanimate objects, and the *originals* stemming from the self, are not on opposite aesthetic poles. They are in the same basket: both suckle on the mythic prediscursive zone" (2006a: 90, emphasis

---

[10] On the matrixial woman as a border-Other and art, see: Ettinger 2006d: 193–94.

original). In the matrixial stratum – founded on participation, transformation, and collectivity – there is no difference if we consider the origins of art. Such a multiplicity, furthermore, contributes to a paradigm shift; while in Freud's and Lacan's accounts, trauma and other affective data originating in the subject cannot be shared, being internal and individual experiences inaccessible even to the very subject stricken with them, in the matrix "there is *an impossibility of not sharing* them" (Ettinger 2006a: 90, emphasis original).

As we can assume from the presented images, Ettinger has several Others whose traumas are shared in her works of art. The most intimate ones are Bluma Lichtenberg (Fried) and Uziel Lichtenberg. The 1936 photograph captures not only parents-to-be, but also survivors-to-be, as their history has shown – they managed to escape Poland and arrive in Palestine, having survived Nazi camps and ghettoes in several countries.[11] In this context, Ettinger can be identified as a member of the second generation after the Holocaust and, thus, as an indirect witness to her parents' war traumas. The fate of the women from Mizocz differs from that of Ettinger's parents. What is more, the death of the Mizocz Eurydices was documented, but they remained nameless, despite this gesture of twisted commemoration. Yet, Ettinger's artistic intervention offers a symbolic meeting place to the victims and the survivors.

Gazing at Eurydice

Burdened with disruptive content, the images hosting the Mizocz women can, nevertheless, be considered ethically dubious. First of all, the women are decontextualised. Their surroundings are absent, but also – depending on the artwork – particular women are chosen to appear on the canvas while others are cut out; some of the women present in the historical photograph never reach the surface of the paintings. Furthermore, the appearances of the women are artistically manipulated. When discussing the medium of photography, Susan Sontag observes that "[b]eautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown" (Sontag 2004: 81).[12] Here, the issue is even more ambiguous, as the aestheticising process may be argued to take place twice – in the original use of the camera and in Ettinger's intervention. In the *Eurydice* series, Ettinger employs such techniques as cropping, putting layers of paint, or juxtaposing their bodies with other images. In some paintings, the women are altered to such an extent that they become as if ahistorical, extracted from their tragic moment of being on the verge of death. Thus, they might be easier to identify with, or even appropriated. At this point, it may prove useful to refer to Dominick LaCapra's term of *empathic unsettlement*, introduced to characterise a reaction of secondary witnesses to trauma.[13] He notes that it is a valuable reaction, since empathy is a "virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (2001: 78). Simultaneously, LaCapra argues that if the clear-cut boundary between the actual witness touched by the trauma and the secondary witness is not maintained, the secondary witness may falsely identify with the victim, which can result in an appropriation of the pain of the Other (2001: 78–79). For LaCapra, it is necessary to be empathetic and open in order to grasp the Other's trauma, but one has to both affirm the distance between oneself and the Other, and be careful not to appropriate the Other's

---

[11] See: "Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Chronology," in: Zegher and Pollock 2012: 249.

[12] For a discussion on Bracha L. Ettinger's alternative understanding of beauty in contemporary, post-traumatic art, see: Pollock 2010.

[13] The notion of emphatic unsettlement is used repeatedly in LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, yet it is mentioned for the first time in: LaCapra 2001: xi.

position.[14] In this context, the situation of the Mizocz women in Ettinger's paintings becomes even more complex. The question that remains is: are these women appropriated, or are they retrieved?

As I propose, even though it is marked by the *Nazi gaze*, the original photograph may be viewed differently when being subject to Ettinger's artistic reworking. Marianne Hirsch postulates that the information about authors of the Holocaust photographs is by no means irrelevant as they are made in particular circumstances and, thus, contribute to a specific viewing experience (2012: 133). A kind of image Hirsch finds herself particularly interested in – as it is the most accurate example of the Nazi gaze – is one in which the victims and the perpetrators face each other, but also "in which the *photographer*, the *perpetrator*, and the *spectator* share the same space of looking at the victim" (2012: 134, emphasis mine). This description is partly true with regard to the photograph of the Mizocz women. One cannot be certain where exactly the soldiers are (there are only two soldiers within the picture frame); most of the women standing in the row look ahead or at other women, and it is impossible to guess from the image alone whether the soldiers are in front of them or near the anonymous photographer. As we have observed, one of the women is looking in a different direction, and because of that she seems to respond to the Nazi gaze in the most striking manner.[15] Still, viewers need to come to terms with the fact that most probably the photographer is also the perpetrator, so the position they occupy corresponds to that of the executioner. Having realised the place we are in, we – the viewers – might react as follows: "Too late to help, utterly impotent, we nevertheless search for ways to *take responsibility* for what we are seeing, to *experience*, from a remove, even as we try to redefine, if not repair, these ruptures" (Hirsch 2012: 138, emphasis mine). Ettinger's work deals with the Nazi gaze, for she manipulates the image taken presumably by one of the perpetrators. Nevertheless, if we look at her activity through the matrixial lens, we may come to the conclusion that the gaze undergoes a change here. As I would like to argue, in the case of Ettinger's art, the gaze viewers can engage in is rather a *com-passionate gaze*:[16] a gaze that can be portrayed as hospitable and respectful, responsible and engaging. Such a gaze makes it impossible to objectify the intimate Other; finally, it entails suffering in the experience of trauma that the Other cannot work through. Ettinger's *Eurydices* open the space in which a viewer can gaze at the women's bodies in com-passion, acknowledging the perpetrator's position but going beyond it in order to reach the women's fragility and shards of trauma.

Even if, as I have tried to show, the gaze is com-passionate, it is difficult to deny its "barbaric" aspect, to use Theodor W. Adorno's expression. In *Prisms*, Adorno famously proclaims that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1983: 34). He returns to the issue in *Negative Dialectics*, noting that while it is not accurate to ask about the capacity to write poems after the Shoah, there is a more fundamental issue that has to be tackled, namely, "whether after Auschwitz

---

[14] LaCapra also argues that if one has not experienced the traumatic event directly, one cannot experience trauma, as it would be an abuse (LaCapra 2001: 102). I discuss the differences between LaCapra's approach and Ettinger's matrixial theory in more detail in my article: Kisiel 2016.

[15] In this article, I hint at the possibility of theorising the response of the mentioned woman to the Nazi gaze, as she seems to be gazing back at the perpetrator and – consequently – at the viewer. Susan Sontag proposes an entirely different perspective on the photographed people's gaze in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. We read: "Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers [from the photograph analysed by Sontag – A.K.] might turn and talk to us. But no, no one is looking out of the picture. … These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses – and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? 'We' – this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through – don't understand" (Sontag 2004: 125). However, the trope of the Eurydicial woman's gaze provides a topic for a different discussion.

[16] For a scrutiny of the notion of *com-passion*, see: Ettinger 2009.

you can go on living" (2004: 363). As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, Ettinger most probably has faced the latter dilemma. Still, when examining her art, we can – or even ought to – ask questions about its potential "barbaric" qualities.[17] To begin with, Ettinger has not experienced the Holocaust personally, being a secondary witness. As has been noted, LaCapra warns us about the secondary witnesses' over-identification with the victims, leading to potential appropriation. Moreover, Ettinger's parents are survivors, having been able to establish a family and to deal with the new reality. Her position is, therefore, different from that of relatives of victims, or of survivors who could not manage to "go on living." When we, in turn, consider the photograph used in Ettinger's art, we need to keep in mind that it may – or may not – present someone from her parents' family, but we bear no actual knowledge of Ettinger's relation with the women. Last but not least, the author of this picture is probably a Nazi photographer, capturing the women's bodies without their agreement; as Ettinger cannot obtain it in any way, the question of consent applies to her as well. Although the above remarks and doubts cannot be addressed with certainty, we are obliged to acknowledge their existence. Nevertheless, as I have tried to emphasise in this section, it is the humanising capacity of an author that is of primary importance in Ettinger's artistic practice. Namely, a matrixial author-artist is argued to participate in changing the gaze of a spectator, and such a responsible role necessarily has to be compassionate and de-objectifying rather than appropriative or morally questionable.

A Matrixial Artist-Author

In this article, I endeavoured to combine Bracha L. Ettinger's artistic and psychoanalytic activity in order to explore the position of an author in the matrixial universe. In the theory of the matrix, an author (or, more specifically, an artist-author) mediates traumas that originate not only in him or her, but also in his or her intimate – yet not necessarily known – Others. The produced artwork is, thus, informed by the Other, but it does not mean that the Other's traumas are fully or easily accessible and comprehensible; the artwork carries only affective traces of disruptive data. Matrixially speaking, an author senses these traces, transforms them, and transfers them further, making them shareable. Certain problematic implications of such an act should not be ignored (as demonstrated in the discussion of Ettinger's Eurydicial artworks). Still, this practice allows for dealing with traumas that cannot be handled by those directly affected, and thus one cannot fail to notice its ethical aspects. Ettinger argues:

> If, because of the highly traumatic value of events, *I* cannot psychically contain "my" wounds at all, then in the matrixial psychic sphere "my" imprints will be transscribed for potential remembering by the Other. Thus my others will process traumatic events for me, just as my archaic m/Other had metabolized archaic events for my premature and fragile partial-subjectivity. (2006c: 167–68, emphasis original)

---

[17] Griselda Pollock rejects the possibility of reading Ettinger's art through the prism of "barbarism" or potential ethical doubts. We read: "[C]ontemporary critics, who look too quickly and with prejudice, are liable to make mistaken judgments about the ethics of the *use* of historical photographs from the Holocaust or the family album, when the nature of this project involves no *use* at all. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's work depends upon the potentiality of Painting – the category – and painting, the activity of a repeating bodily activity that encodes the duration of its making in the archaeology of its own surface and enshrines the time taken to create the space of 'almost missed encounter'" (Pollock 2000: 52, emphasis original). While, indeed, the question of the use of historical and personal photographs is rethought by Ettinger (in both theory and art), I believe one cannot close the discussion on possible "barbaric" qualities of Ettinger's art, as such a discussion contributes to a broader set of reflections: those on the capacity to "go on living" in the post-Shoah reality. In this context, clear-cut judgements that do not take the arguments of the other side into consideration are reductive.

A matrixial artist-subject contributes to working through and carrying (on) traumas for and instead of the Other by means of changing the gaze; by that, he or she renders it possible for a potential viewer to encounter the border-Other. Finally, in the space within which the Other is no longer radical, the boundaries between ready-made and "creative" art are also disturbed, or at least irrelevant, since what is privileged here is the creative metamorphosis disclosing the affective capacity of artistic practice. Gazing at Eurydice is a perilous task, as she vanishes the very same moment she appears before our eyes; our persistence, however, makes it possible for us to regain the humanising connection with those who have been neglected and whose bodies or experiences have been appropriated.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. 1983. "Cultural Criticism and Society." In: Theodor W. Adorno. *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 17–34.

Adorno, Theodor W. 2004. "Meditations on Metaphysics." In: Theodor W. Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton. London and New York: Routledge, 361–408.

Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006a. "The Matrixial Gaze." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 41–90.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006b. "The With-In-Visible Screen." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 93–120.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006c. "Transcryptum: Memory Tracing in/for/with the Other." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 163–70.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006d. "Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 173–98.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2006e. "Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 123–55.

Ettinger, Bracha L. 2009. "Fragilization and Resistance." *Studies in the Maternal*, 1(2): 1–31. http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_two/documents/Bracha1.pdf, DOA: 16.04.2013. https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.141

Freud, Sigmund. 1983. "Creative Writers and Daydreaming." In: Edith Kurzweil & William Phillips (eds). *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 24–28. https://doi.org/10.7312/kurz91842-003

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Huhn, Rosi. 2012. "The Folly of Reason." In: Catherine de Zegher & Griselda Pollock (eds). *Art as Compassion*: *Bracha L. Ettinger*. Brussels: ASA Publishers, 43–55.

Kisiel, Anna. 2016. "Uraz – bliskość – nie-pamięć. Psychoanalityczny dyskurs traumy od Freuda do Ettinger." *Narracje o Zagładzie*, 2: 115–32

Kisiel, Anna. 2018. "Touching Trauma: On the Artistic Gesture of Bracha L. Ettinger." *Narracje o Zagładzie*, 4: 138–62. https://doi.org/10.31261/noz.7899

Kisiel, Anna. 2019. "Aesth/ethical Bodies: Bracha Ettinger's *Eurydices* and the Encounter with the Other's History." In: Justyna Jajszczok & Aleksandra Musiał (eds). *The Body in History, Culture, and the Arts*. New York and London: Routledge, 149–60. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429264399-11

Kisiel, Anna. 2020. "Przełamując spojrzenie Orfeusza. Praca (anty)archiwalna Brachy L. Ettinger." *ER(R)GO. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura*, 41: 97–110. https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.8044

LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Massumi, Brian. 2006. "Afterword. Painting: The Voice of the Grain." In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 201–13.

Parfeniuk, Natalia and Ewelina Suszek. 2018. "Mizocz – palimpsest," *Narracje o Zagładzie*, 4: 400–408. https://doi.org/10.31261/noz.7914

Pollock, Griselda. 2000. "Nichsapha: Yearning/Languishing. The Immaterial Tuché of Colour in Painting *after Painting after History*." In: *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985–1999*. Ghent and Amsterdam: Ludion, 45–70.

Pollock, Griselda. 2006. "Introduction. Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?" In: Bracha L. Ettinger. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Ed. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1–38.

Pollock, Griselda. 2009. "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics/Aesthetics." *Studies in the Maternal*, 1(1): 1–31. http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_one/GriseldaPollock.pdf, DOA: 29.11.2013.

Pollock, Griselda. 2010. "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma." *EurAmerica*, 40(4): 829–86.

Pollock, Griselda. 2013. "Trauma, Time and Painting: Bracha Ettinger and the Matrixial Aesthetic." In: Bettina Papenburg & Marta Zarzycka (eds). *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 21–41.

Sontag, Susan. 2004. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador. https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.201.0127

Zegher, Catherine de and Griselda Pollock (eds). 2012. *Art as Compassion*: *Bracha L. Ettinger*. Brussels: ASA Publishers.

Il. 1. Bracha L. Ettinger, *Eurydice*, No. 5, 1992–1994, oil painting, carbon toner, photocopic dust, pigment and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 47 x 27 cm. Collection Israel Museum, Jerusalem. © Courtesy of the artist.

Il. 2. Bracha L. Ettinger, *No Title-Sketch*, 1985, carbon toner, photocopic dust, pigment and ashes on paper, 27.3 x 23.1 cm. © Courtesy of the artist.

Andrea Roxana Bellot

Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain

 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0561-2132

e-mail: andrearoxana.bellot@urv.cat

Authoring War Memories: War Memoir Writing and Testimonial Theatre Performances

Abstract

This paper will discuss aspects concerning authorship, memory, and war representation, as well as trauma and healing. In order to do so, I will explore the writing of war memoirs and/or the re-enactment of war experiences on the stage as two ways of expressing and coping with war trauma. In both cases, the concept of the author, a war veteran as first-person narrator or self-performer, is central to the representation of the traumatic memories of war. It is precisely through this interaction between the author, as a legitimate witness, and source of authentic and reliable information, that the readership/audience connects emotionally with the experience of the combatants and can empathise with their situation. A theoretical conceptualisation of war memoir writing, and testimonial theatre will be illustrated with specific examples of texts connected with the Falklands War (UK-Argentina, 1982). The dominant perspective of the reflection are veterans' stories.

Keywords: war memories, witness literature, theatre of testimony, re-enacting war experiences, trauma, autobiographical writing, war memoirs, self-representation.

Introduction: Witness as Authority

A "witness" can be defined as someone who can comply with the following three mandatory provisions: presence, perception and transmission; as Horace Engdahl puts it, "a witness is a person who speaks out and says, 'I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!'" (2002: 3). A particular claim to truth as first-hand witnesses is granted to war veterans as holders of "the authority of experience" (Scott 1991: 780). Laura Sasu refers to the relationship between witness literature and truth in the following way: "the focus [of witness literature] remains firmly linked to the contents of testimony and its relationship to truth" (2013: 8). Sasu argues that, regardless of the kind of literary or artistic testimony, the one aspect that prevails is the truth of the testimonial text or performance, and its implicit claim to credibility. This sets up a particular type of relationship between the author and the reader/viewer of the testimonial text or performance. Authenticity emerges as an imperative for any war narrative. Yet, even if historians rely on history, memoirs and autobiographies to recover the truth of past experience, there may always be a doubt about what really happened, and about the validity

and veracity of memory itself. The fact that war veterans play out their own memories on the stage or write down their own war recollections and experiences on paper provides a certain authenticity.

Memory plays a crucial role in the retelling of the past. It is widely agreed that the representation of traumatic experiences is beyond language: language proves insufficient to express the horror of hatred, violence, terror. In *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (2011), Kate McLoughlin argues that "the representation of war is inherently anxiogenic" because "even if it resists representation, conflict demands it" (2011: 6). Memory and the way war is recalled are central elements in the representation of war trauma, and in the healing processes of war victims. These past recollections represent the different ways in which veterans remember, and depend on whether they wish to talk about these war memories and make sense of them on the stage, or on the page. It then may be clear that memories are important and such representational anxieties will function to vocalise the veterans' struggle with the past. In a stricter sense, they can be understood as a metaphor for spaces where words fail to communicate meaning. Indeed, how does one cross the unbridgeable gap between language and the reality of war? Alongside this eagerness to keep certain experiences fresh and alive in the soldiers' minds, some memories are inevitably lost, or else they are too painful to bring back to the surface.

In contrast to mass media, literary, artistic, and theatrical creations form an alternative framework for a re-evaluation of war, and a discussion of deeper concepts and dilemmas, enabling the expression of overlooked or repressed voices. The traumatic historical events that took place in the twentieth century, such as the two world wars and genocides, gave rise to a different way of representing war experiences, where witnessing becomes new fodder for literature and drama, in which the victims of history reclaim the story and define how it should be recounted, shared and felt with the audience through a text/play, which is no longer a mere historical document (Malpede 1997). In this manner, the witness enters the category of "flesh-witness" rather than existing as a simple, more neutral "eye-witness" (Harari 2010).

The Writing of War Memoirs

War is a totally transformative and life-changing experience, and, in Samuel Hynes's words: "No man goes through a war without being changed by it, and in fundamental ways" (1998: 3). Such a traumatic experience produces deep and long-lasting effects in the combatants' physical as well as mental well-being. As Raghu Raman puts it, "there is no switch in the human mind which can periodically convert a kind soldier, who rescues victims from natural disasters, and then back again [to the battlefield], without affecting his mental state" (2019, para. 12).

The profound changes a combatant undergoes when returning from the battlefield are not always visible. Some veterans struggle to find the courage to share their war traumas. Many combatants endure painful emotions, such as guilt and shame, which prevent them from showing their true feelings in a society that rewards strength and bravery but stigmatises the weak and those seeking help (Farnsworth et al. 2014; Nazarov et al. 2015). Jay Winter thus reflects on the silence of war veterans and their incapacity or unwillingness to narrate their war memories:

> Many of those who fought never spoke about what they knew. There were many reasons they placed their memories of war beyond words. Some felt that civilians could not comprehend and did not want to hear what they had to say. Some wanted to leave their nightmares in the dark, where they belonged, and to go on living ordinary lives. Others went further and concluded that the horror of war was beyond speech, beyond images, beyond monuments. What war did was to place itself beyond utterance (2017: 172).

Many war veterans suffer a period of self-denial in accepting the repercussions of war, which is a recurrent feature in those who experienced such traumas. Winter (2017) refers to the type of silence that he calls "essentialist" and that concerns former soldiers who would only share their memories with veteran peers, as if understanding could only come from those who had been through the same experience. Coming to terms with the physical and psychological wounds is usually a laborious process and finding the way to express these traumas is yet another challenge.

Writing is one way of dealing with the ordeal of war recollections. For this reason, war memoirs have long been explored as works of traumatic recovery and personal "scriptotherapy," a term coined by Suzette Henke (1998) to refer to the therapeutic treatment in which writing is used as an instrument in the process of healing. The re-enactment of traumatic memories on paper provides a valuable discursive space for overcoming psychological wounds. Therefore, writing, especially autobiographical writing, can be a form of generating personal catharsis. Personal narratives can contain numerous disturbing elements that reflect the authors' traumas. According to Yuval Noah Harari, the aim of modern war memoirs is to reconnect authors to their lives after they had been disrupted by war (2005: 68). The main focus of war memoirs written by soldiers is, according to Jenkings and Woodward, "on the individual's experience rather than on broader reflection on the rationale for a conflict and its progress through time" (2014: 339). In the same vein, Gary Baines, in *Memoir Writing as Narrative Therapy in War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature* (2017) suggests that war memoir-writing is equivalent to, or similar to, a recovery by clinical means. A model of narrative analysis has been put forward to address how the form and content of the stories serve the purpose of reconciliation with general life stories, that is, achieving "harmony between past, present and future" (Hunt 2010: 117). The existence of a fragmented, disrupted life narrative and threatening flashbacks forms a fundamental part of the clinical definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Reconstruction, harmonisation, and the creation of coherent memories are considered by psychologists to be essential for recovery.

The benefits of writing to overcome traumatic experiences have also been described as a process of "active coping" with trauma (Harber and Pennebaker 1992: 372). Writing, by concentrating on the structural rules of grammar, both restricts and channels the emotional flow, thereby transforming the victim of the narrative into the author whose task is to render the events in a comprehensible manner. Moreover, sharing or publishing memoirs may become an important factor for alleviating personal suffering, as the recovery process may then be considered within the context of rebuilding social and political relationships. As suggested by Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), this is a process that joins victim and witness into a common alliance. Sharing personal experiences with a community instead of one-to-one treatment between a single patient and therapist has also been proposed as critical in alternative approaches to PTSD healing. Opening up to the general readership results in broader benefits to the group as well as a sense of relief in collective pain (Tick 2004).

Language is limited and insufficient when it comes to describing human suffering. In effect, war poses several representational challenges and constraints. Other forms of artistic expression can attempt to reflect the true human side of the ordeals of war, at the risk of being too subjective, somehow incomplete, inadequate, or futile; yet, this emotional dimension is a fundamental part of the story, which cannot be fully addressed by historical, fact-based texts. War memoir authors often claim that their accounts are true, but when their purpose is to present facts, they can often be debated and contested.

Representations of war have shifted historically from mere descriptions of facts to expression of emotions. In a historic context of progressive decrease in the tolerance of violence in modern societies, the personal experiences of the soldiers have taken pre-eminence over the

fact-accounting and honour-focused texts traditionally produced by kings, noblemen and high-rank officers. Therefore, the point of view shifted from a mere description of facts to the expression of feelings. Harari (2007) argues that veterans' accounts shifted to a progressive disillusionment and critical attitude towards war during the twentieth century. In *On Military Memoirs: Soldier-Authors, Publishers, Plots and Motives* (2014), Esmeralda Kleinreesink notes that war narrations in nineteenth-century memoirs bear a primary component of disenchantment while memoirs from the twentieth century contain more accounts of personal growth (2014: 272).

Narrating war recollections from the battlefield is nowadays a personal experience that tends to focus on the individual, the inner reactions and subjective experiences of the combatants, as Harari observes in *Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era* (2007). Modern-day memoirs, then, have shifted from the traditional war stories of military officers, historians, and politicians to those of the people who actually fought and suffered on the battlefield. Personal narratives like these, Jon Begley argues, "deliberately undermine sanitized abstractions of the war by reinscribing the terrifying immediacy and absurd singularity of combat experience […] into disordered narratives of combat fatigue and brute survival" (2012: 235).

Making use of a model created by Norman Friedman in 1955, Kleinreesink groups war memoirs according to their themes into three broad categories: pure "action" memoirs, "growth" memoirs, and "disenchantment" memoirs. Negative narratives regarding war recollections structured around personal degeneration, shattered ideals, and disillusionment, are commonly authored by traumatised veterans. As Jonathan Shay reveals, such damaging memories show the consequences of "betrayal of what is right" on the part of the soldier (1995: 11). Experience can also be understood as transformative, in that the personal journeys of the soldiers may have a positive outcome. Texts from the period studied suggest that, especially in historically war-involved nations like Britain (Fussell 2000 [1975]), positive outcomes, in terms of personal maturation or lessons learnt, definitely carry an important weight in the published accounts of the professional soldiers of our times. Even personal disappointment is often channelled into positive debate and action, rather than a loss of control (Kleinreesink 2014: 268–69). Kleinreesink's study was primarily based on war memoirs from soldiers deployed to Afghanistan during the years 2001–2010. At this point, it is worth emphasising the wide wave of military memoirs that were published in Great Britain after the war in Afghanistan.[1]

The case of Private Ken Lukowiak exemplifies the use of writing as a form of therapy. Lukowiak was a member of the Second Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army deployed to the Falkland Islands for the 1982 British-Argentine war. After suffering a long depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the veteran's creative drive motivated him to write down his memories, to help him overcome his war traumas. He needed an organised, written account of his daily experiences during that time to make sense of the war, to understand what he had been through, to heal and move forward. *A Soldier's Song* is Lukowiak's war memoir, first published in 1993. The book describes the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the young private as part of his regiment, sent with the Task Force to recover British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, following the Argentine invasion in April 1982. *A Soldier's Song* is one of the three best known personal accounts of the Falklands War written by veterans, together with Vincent Bramley's *Excursion to Hell* (1992), *Forward into Hell* (2006) and John and Robert Lawrence's *When the*

---

[1] The table of publications details were shared by Rachel Woodward and K. Nail Jenkins in their article "'This place isn't worth the left boot of one of our boys': Geopolitics, militarism and memoirs of the Afghanistan war" (2012).

Fighting is Over: Tumbledown (1988). Because of its rich composition, *A Soldier's Song* has been praised for its literary merits that go beyond those of simple, crude veterans' accounts. McGuirk regards the book as "by far the most literary of combatants' memoirs" (2007: 101) and worthy of literary analysis along with novels, plays, and poetry. In fact, the book has been adapted for the stage. In 1998, Guy Masterson adapted, directed, and solo-performed the theatrical piece, and, in 2012, the show was revived but this time with Lukowiak on stage, performing his own memories.

For Lukowiak, writing was not part of a medical procedure that he had been advised to follow by therapists or counsellors to find a cure for his PTSD. In the foreword to the 1999 edition, Lukowiak explains his creative process in writing the book. For him, writing was more of an impulse and not something that he had considered doing previously with a specific purpose in mind; he became a writer by accident: "One day, during a period of total despair, I picked up a pen and began to write down my memories of Goose Green" (1999: xiv). Writing was not then conceived as part of a medical procedure Lukowiak had been advised to follow but was a way of expressing himself and of sharing his inner emotions, his artistic drive, and personal creation. Moreover, it was a salvation from the unpleasant, chaotic, and painful life he was leading: "And that despair, which I now look back on as emotionally the blackest period of my life […]. I was a fine description of broke in every sense of the word" (Lukowiak 1999: xiv–xv).

In fact, when he began writing, little did he imagine that writing would come to signify so much in his future life. Writing became his only way of making sense of the world and of understanding the war. Writing became a refuge, a source of happiness, and soon he became addicted to it and needed to do it to remain sane; it was like a drug:

> I couldn't stop writing. The only description I've been able to come up with to explain the feeling, the absolute click of the fingers change in me, is that it was like a drug had been injected into my veins. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Couldn't stop. If I was sleeping, I was writing […]. As my war poured out, I relived memories that had torn me apart. One time I even remembered the fear […]. Once I finished putting down a particular memory, I always felt some sense of achievement, pride in myself (Lukowiak 1999: xvii–xviii).

Performing the Testimonial in the Theatre

There are diverse kinds of performances that invite direct testimony, such as theatre of testimony, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, applied theatre, as well as verbatim theatre. These kinds of performances share similar characteristics: they are created to narrate real experiences and to give voice to real people, real testimonies, and witness accounts. Therefore, the notion of authorship and authenticity are central in documentary performances.

The majority of the plays that are created to show a real-life experience of a specific person or group tend to avoid conventional forms: the performances are free in style, innovative in terms of structures, departing from linear narratives. The use of vernacular language becomes an essential part, as the actor/performer on stage needs to sound as authentic as possible. Documentary performances usually take place in small premises; this close distance and proximity of bodies between actors and spectators is sought to provoke not only an emotional but a physical involvement. The reduced space allows for occasional interaction between the actors and members of the audience: actors/performers can speak directly to the spectators and acknowledge their reactions (Jeffers 2006).

Testimonial theatre productions function to enable protagonists to recall traumatic events, while, at the same time, provoking an emotional response from the viewers. Playwrights, who take a secondary role in this kind of theatre, aim to elicit an emotional response from the audience (Jeffers 2006).

Empowering the audience can lead to political action, or more specifically, to "political mimesis," as Wake (2013: 118) suggests, using Gaines's terms (1999). This implies that viewers might replicate, re-enact or body-back the theatrical experiences and the ideals and beliefs triggered by what they have seen on the stage in different social contexts. Consequently, due to its claim to credibility, documentary drama has this potential of raising social consciousness about sensitive issues in society. Moreover, free from the pressure of hegemonic media, independent theatre productions can revive critical responses and activate the political conscience and assessment. As Colleran argues: "politically engaged theatre […] can employ its own [specific language] to call attention to the constructedness of media presentations. It can expose the incompleteness, subjectivity or partiality of news reportage" (2003: 631).

As many of these plays are crafted as collaborative and collective projects, involving veterans of war and directors, the very concept of authorship – in the traditional sense of the author having the authority over the text – fades away. The performers are usually non-professional actors, veterans who witnessed the war at first hand. A great deal of personal and professional responsibility is placed on the cast members. Not only do they have to act in a public performance, but they also must perform as themselves by enacting their own very personal and subjective war experiences and memories.

In testimonial theatre productions, technology is regarded as an integral part of performance and a means to embody memory; it is also necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of both the text and the performance. Virtual archives "confer legitimacy and give a strong feeling of 'being there,' of the 'real thing'" (Martin 2006: 10). Plays are created from a specific body of archived material such as videos, photographs on the screen, direct testimony from first-hand witnesses, among other documentary records. As Martin argues, "replication and simulation are used to capture and reproduce 'what really happened'" (2006: 9).

This kind of theatre is a performance of evidence and testimony. Jennifer Miller points out that when the performers are re-enacting as themselves, audience members tend to be grateful for their bravery on the stage and their willingness to be both vulnerable and open in public (2018: 53). Thus, testimonial theatre productions make it possible for both protagonists and audiences to recall traumatic events, and, at the same time, to re-examine, reconsider, and question previous conceptions. That is why documentary theatre not only acts as mere streamers of film or audio footage, but it also seeks to challenge grand narratives through complicating and interrogating archival truth. In the United States, for instance, testimonial theatre became very popular after 9/11 as a means for dealing with post-trauma.

One example of testimonial theatre is the so-called Theatre of Witness (TOW), a project created by artistic director Teya Sepinuck in the 1980s in the US. TOW places the performers' life experiences at the centre of the whole spectacle. According to its website, TOW develops from the performers' "sharing their personal and collective stories of suffering, transformation and peace". In Europe, TOW has offered several performances in Northern Ireland since 2009. All the performances were centred on "The Troubles," and aimed to bring together people from both sides of the conflict. All the performers of this kind of theatre of witness share similar characteristics: the actors are non-professionals who have experienced or witnessed a conflictive or traumatic situation. Performers range from refugees, prisoners, victims of abuse, survivors of war – "people whose stories haven't been heard".[2] As Chou and Bleiker reflect, "theatre can give voice to a multitude of real characters and under-represented perspectives" and "give expression to a range of voices and perspectives that would otherwise remain silenced or side-lined" (2010: 561).

---

[2] http://www.theaterofwitness.org/about/

One of the main goals in testimonial theatre is, as Miller (2018) suggests, the development of empathy by humanising the "other" on the stage. By bearing witness to the process the actors undergo while performing, the spectators develop empathy towards them. As Miller puts it,

> TOW has shown itself to be an effective form of testimonial theatre. The audience develops a connection to the participants and witnesses their healing and transformation. It helps to humanize the other, see other as self, and see our common humanity. It is transformative in developing empathy in the participants and the audience. The cross-cultural communication and interaction create awareness of the multiple angles/sides of events and conflicts (Miller 2018: 54).

Because of its essential involvement in the retelling of historical events and its reliance on first-hand testimony, testimonial theatre is better understood as a form of realistic stage theatre which, in Caroline Wake's words, might convey "an ethically risky proposition" (Wake 2013: 117) when these events are explicitly traumatic. Jordana Blejmar (2017) conceives of autobiographical theatre as a privileged space for representing a complex, layered and split subject. Likewise, Deirdre Heddon (2008) argues that theatre can become an effective space of empowerment and enunciation for traumatised individuals.

The theatre of self-performance has been used widely as a therapeutic practice for war veterans suffering from PTSD. The re-enactment of the combatants' war memories can bring about flashbacks of forgotten episodes. In this sense, the stage becomes a battlefield on which it is possible to revive shocking moments and to recover blocked memories, but also a space to heal open wounds and move forward. What Chou and Bleiker argue about verbatim performance also applies to testimonial theatre, as it "offers a mechanism to problematize how we represent war; what we see as real or how we draw the boundaries between truth and untruth" (2010: 569). As with verbatim performance, since testimonial theatre provides an alternate frame of reference, it "offers audiences a means to reassess political reality freed from the distortions of censorship and misinformation" (Chou & Bleiker 2010: 570).

In dealing with PTSD, treatment methods attempt to access, integrate, and repair the damaged memories. Many of these approaches encourage patients to reexperience, recount, replay, and re-enact traumatic scenes. In their article, "Drama Therapy in the Treatment of Combat-related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder" (1997), Miller and Johnson illustrate how the use of the arts has become an established treatment option for such patients. Nowadays, dramatherapy is, in many countries, a regulated form of therapy which uses the performance arts as the central element within the therapeutic relationship (Jones 2015).

Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre which has been widely practised in the UK since the mid-1970s. However, the term "verbatim," which literally means "word-by-word," was used by Derek Paget to refer to this form of documentary theatre in 1987. A verbatim play is created from taped interviews with real-life people whose true stories are later portrayed on stage. The performances are based on testimonial stories adapted into a theatrical script that is often performed by professional actors in verbatim theatre. The ways in which playwrights work with the testimonies raise questions about authenticity, aesthetics, and ethics of this practice. This is "speaking for the 'Other'."

A stage representation of the Falklands War that is worth mentioning here is *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas* (Louise Page 1983), a documentary verbatim play that was first released in 1983 – one year after the end of the war – in the Royal Court Theatre with Louise Page as writer and editor. The play is divided into two parts: the first part is composed of letters from Lieutenant David Tinker, a Falkland naval officer who was killed in action, while the second part brings into stage the testimony of five people, five "voices" involved in the war but not the fighting itself.

A more recent example of a stage representation of the Falklands War is *Minefield/Campo Minado* (2016), a bilingual play by Argentine writer, theatre and film director Lola Arias. The play explores the lives and memories of six veterans of the Falklands war – three British and three Argentine. After its premiere in London in June 2016 as part of the LIFT festival, *Minefield/ Campo Minado* has been staged repeatedly in several venues across the UK, Argentina, and other countries, such as Spain. The play has received excellent reviews from critics and spectators alike. Its success lies in its originality and authenticity, in uniting war veterans from the two nations involved in the dispute, its bilingualism, its experimental form and its creativity in terms of themes and staging.

Minefield/Campo Minado was crafted as a collaborative and collective project involving British and Argentine war veterans. The fact that the scripts were written jointly by the performers and the director challenges the very concept of authorship and reflects, at the same time, the overt initial intention of the director to give voice to those who were first-hand witnesses of the conflict. More than an author or a playwright, Arias acts as an editor, a collector of the veterans' stories and a facilitator guiding the performers, who are not professional actors, but witnesses of the war.

Conclusion

The interaction between historical facts and personal subjective experiences in war autobiographies and testimonial performances inspires wide-ranging texts that call upon diverse narrative strategies to shape individual and collective memory. The role of war memoirs, theatrical and other artistic expressions is also important as a counterbalance narrative of war trauma in a world dominated by hegemonic mass media. Emotions, reflections, and criticism can be formed and delivered to the readership/audience by means that can form a counternarrative, or alternative view, even if less constrained by requirements of historical or factual accuracy.

In drawing from documentary records, the theatre of testimony has become a genre of rupture that responds to the trauma of war: it calls upon the conceptual framework of witness literature to react to the devastation of war. The success of these types of performances depends on their originality and authenticity. They produce the effects of estrangement and instability that represent the enormity of war trauma, inviting the reader/viewer to participate in an ethical, social, and cultural act of reading/watching but also of bearing witness.

To summarise, a war veteran, as someone who was directly involved in the story, continues to be a valuable source of authority and truth, since a veteran is regarded as an authorised agent who is able to describe their own suffering or to respond compassionately to the stories of others.

Works Cited

Baines, Gary. 2017. "Memoir Writing as Narrative Therapy." In: Dwyer Philip (ed.). *War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature*. New York: Berghahn, 252–76. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvswx6zd.15

Begley, Jon. 2012. "The Literature of the Falklands/Malvinas War." In: Adam Piette, and Mark Rawlinson (eds). *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 231–40.

Blejmar, Jordana. 2017. "Autofictions of Post-war: Fostering Empathy in Lola Arias' *Minefield/ Campo Minado*." *Latin American Theatre Review*. 50(2): 103–23. https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2017.0006

Chou, Mark and Bleiker, Roland. 2010. "Dramatizing War: George Packer and the Democratic Potential of Verbatim Theater." *New Political Science*, 32(4): 561–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2010.520441

Colleran, Jeanne. 2003. "Disposable Wars, Disappearing Acts: Theatrical Responses to the 1991 Gulf War." *Theatre Journal* 55(4): 613–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2003.0157

Engdahl, Horace. 2002. "Witness Literature: Philomela's Tongue. Introductory Remarks on Witness literature." In *Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*. Stockholm: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789812706515_0001

Farnsworth, J.K., Drescher, K.D., Nieuwsma, J.A., Walser, R.B., and Currier, J.M. 2014. "The Role of Moral Emotions in Military Trauma: Implications for the Study and Treatment of Moral Injury." *Review of General Psychology*, 18: 249–62. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000018

Fussell, Paul. 2000 [1975]. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gaines, Jane M. 1999. "Political Mimesis." In: J.M. Gaines and M. Renov (eds). *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 84–102.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2005. "Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs." *Journal of Military History* 69(1): 43–72. https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2005.0023

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2007. "Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era." *War in History*, 14(3): 289–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344507078375

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2010. "Armchairs, Coffee and Authority: Eye-witnesses and Flesh-witnesses Speak about War, 1100–2000." *The Journal of Military History*, 74(1): 53–78.

Harber, Kent D. and James W. Pennebaker. 1992. "Overcoming Traumatic Memories." In: Sven-Ake Christianson (ed.). *The Handbook of Emotion and Memory*: *Research and Theory*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 359–87.

Heddon, Deirdre. 2008. *Autobiography and Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henke, Suzette A. 1998. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Hunt, Nigel. 2010. *Memory, War and Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511845017

Hynes, Samuel. 1998. *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. London: Penguin Books.

Jeffers, Alison. 2006. "Refugee Perspectives: The Practice and Ethics of Verbatim Theatre and Refugee Stories." *Platform,* 1(1): 1–17.

Jenkings, K. Neil and Rachel Woodward. 2014. "Practices of Authorial Collaboration: The Collaborative Production of the Contemporary Military Memoir." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 14(4): 338–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708614530305

Jones, Phil. 2015. "Trauma and Dramatherapy: Dreams, Play and the Social Construction of Culture." *South African Theatre Journal*, 28(1): 4–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2015.1011897

Kleinreesink, Esmeralda. 2014. *On Military Memoirs: Soldier-authors, Publishers, Plots and Motives*. Doctoral dissertation. Rotterdam: Erasmus University.

Lukowiak, Ken. 1999. *A Soldier's Song*. 2nd ed. London: Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.

Malpede, Karen. 1997. "Theatre at 2000: A Witnessing Project." In: Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (eds). *The Year 2000: Essays on the End*. New York and London: New York

University Press, 299–308.

Martin, Carol. 2006. "Bodies of Evidence." *The Drama Review (1988-*), 50(3): 8–15. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2006.50.3.8

McGuirk, Bernard. 2007. *Falklands-Malvinas: An Unfinished Business*. Seattle: New Ventures Editions.

McLoughlin, Kate. 2011. *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, James and David Read Johnson. 1997. "Drama Therapy in the Treatment of Combat-related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder." *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 23(5): 383–95. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-4556(96)00045-7

Miller, Jennifer B. 2018. "The Transformative and Healing Power of Theatre of Witness." *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 30(2): 47–56. https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.176.010

Nazarov, A., Jetly, R., McNeely, H., Kiang, M., Lanius, R., and McKinnon, M.C. 2015. "Role of Morality in the Experience of Guilt and Shame within the Armed Forces." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 132: 4–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.12406

Paget, Derek. 1987. "Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques." *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3(12): 317–36. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00002463

Raman, Raghu. 2019. "The Psychological Toll of Being a Soldier." *The Wire*, 13/07/ 2019.

Sasu, Laura. 2013. "Witness Literature: A Conceptual Framework." *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov*. Series IV: *Philology and Cultural Studies*, 6(55), no. 2: 7–12.

Scott, Joan W. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, 17(4): 773–797. https://doi.org/10.1086/448612

Shay, Jonathan. 1994. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Scribner.

Theatre of Witness. 2017. *What is Theatre of Witness*? Available at: https://theaterofwitness.org/about/, DOA: January 2021.

Tick, Edward. 2014. *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul after Return*. Boulder: CO, Sounds True.

Wake, Caroline. 2013. "To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*." *Modern Drama*, 56(1): 102–25. https://doi.org/10.3138/md.2012-0465

Winter, Jay. 2017. *War Beyond Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139033978

Woodward, Rachel and Nail K. Jenkins. 2012. "This place isn't worth the left boot of one of our boys': Geopolitics, Militarism and Memoirs of the Afghanistan War." *Political Geography*, 31: 495–508.

Paulina Mirowska

University of Łódź, Poland
e-mail: paulina.mirowska@uni.lodz.pl

Authenticity, Self-Invention and the Power of Storytelling: Sam Shepard's Postmillennial Work

Abstract

The article reflects upon Sam Shepard's playwrighting in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, paying particular attention to his last play, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, written specifically for the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture celebrations in 2013, and originally produced by the renowned Field Day Theatre Company. The article seeks to offer an insight into Shepard's mature multilayered text, which, in many respects, looks back upon almost fifty years of his artistic creativity and, at the same time, expands his vision. It also addresses the realisation of Shepard's play in performance and the significance of his text in an interplay of multiple creative inputs involved in the production process.

While revisiting the familiar landscapes and themes, Shepard's most recent work negotiates the boundaries between the actual and the fictitious, raising debates about the persistence of myths, mortality and the haunting legacies of the past. Richly intertextual and conspicuously metatheatrical, it grapples with questions of authenticity, performativity and storytelling – the narratives that are passed down, and how they form and inform our lives. It also engages with, and further problematises, issues of personal and cultural identity, which constitute Shepard's most durable thematic threads, revealing both the dramatist's acute concern with fateful determinism and commitment to self-invention. Significantly, while Shepard's postmillennial output highlights the author's ongoing preoccupation with instability and frontiers of various sorts (from those topographic, temporal and sociopolitical to those of language and art), it equally intimates his attentiveness to correspondences between times, lands and cultures.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, Field Day, The UK City of Culture, Derry/Londonderry, authenticity, self-invention

Sam Shepard had his debut as a playwright in 1964, when his brief, purposefully disruptive pieces, *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden,* were performed in New York, off-off-Broadway, by Theatre Genesis. Since then, his work has been staged both off and on Broadway, in the leading regional and university theatres of America, as well as internationally. In the course of a career that spanned half a century, he evolved from alternative theatre to mainstream recognition and Hollywood, transforming from a counterculture rebel into a cultural icon (Wade 2007: 285). Shepard's theatre eludes facile classifications. Tapping into a wide variety of sources, genres and styles – such as

popular music, the Western, crime stories, Greek tragedy and Beckett-style absurdity – his plays, for decades, have teased critics and audiences with intensely theatrical pastiches of legend and actuality, consistently defying totalising exegeses. During the fifty years of his work for the stage, various labels were attached to Shepard's name. He was called an "experimentalist" (Bottoms 1998: 3) and a "postmodernist" (Roudané 2002: 1). At the outset of the 1980s, when his popularity was at its height, *The New York Times* canonised Shepard as the "Playwright Laureate of the West" (Coe 1980: 35) and the "cowboy playwright" tag, still commonly associated with his name and work, has indeed proved most durable. In addition, Shepard has often been described as a "quintessentially American" author (Wade 1997: 2). As postulated by cultural scholar Leslie Wade, "[d]rawing from the disparate image banks of rock and roll, detective fiction, Hollywood B-movies, and Wild West adventure shows," Shepard's texts "function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that denote American culture and an American sensibility... [They] act as a theatrical Smithsonian" (1997: 2). One can also, as if by contrast, come across voices like that of celebrated Irish playwright and director Conor McPherson, who in his introduction to a collection of Shepard's *Fifteen One-Act Plays* reflects on Shepard's peculiar resonance with European sensibilities and contends that "this most European-seeming of American playwrights, ironically, elevates the myth of the American West to its theatrical zenith precisely because his existentialism feels so European" (2012: xiii).

In his illuminating study on *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*, charting the dramatist's various developments and shifts of direction up till the mid-1990s, Stephen Bottoms stresses Shepard's lifelong "fascination" with the notion of self-invention (1998: 14). Several times in his career Shepard discarded an established style of writing in favour of some novelty, and this tendency was mirrored outside theatre in his readiness to invent new roles for himself in life. It began with his early gesture of adopting the name of Sam Shepard on becoming a playwright, in a bid to sever his ties with generations of family tradition, and it continued with his branching out, in the late 1960s, into a musical career and, from the 1970s onwards, into film acting. Throughout his life, Bottoms suggests, Shepard demonstrated "a certain restlessness with himself, and a determination to use new experiences to turn himself into something new" (1998: 15). The 2000s witnessed Shepard's new efforts to reinvent himself: the veteran American author further investigated the possibilities of the dramatic medium in a visible attempt to challenge both theatregoers and himself, striving for an authentic idiom that would resonate with postmillennial sensibilities.

The article reflects upon Shepard's most recent writing, which revisits the familiar Shepard landscapes and themes while simultaneously somewhat expanding his vision. It focuses on his last work for the stage, *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)*, which had its world premiere not in the United States but in Northern Ireland. Written specifically for the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture celebrations in 2013, the play was directed by Nancy Meckler, an American director best known for her work in the United Kingdom with Shared Experience. Moreover, *A Particle of Dread* was originally mounted in collaboration with the renowned Field Day Theatre Company at the Playhouse Theatre in Derry, and, like his two earlier plays commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, it featured Shepard's long-time friend, Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea, one of the founders of Field Day. Thus a range of creative inputs were involved in the production process. The article seeks to offer an insight into Shepard's multilayered text with a collage-like structure, as well as addresses the realisation of *A Particle of Dread* in performance. Similarly to Shepard's other postmillennial works which negotiate the boundaries between the actual and the remembered, or fictitious, the play raises debates about the persistence of myths, mortality and the undying legacies of the past. Richly intertextual and metatheatrical, it grapples with questions of authenticity, performativity and storytelling – the narratives that are passed down, and how they

form and inform our lives. It takes up and further problematises issues of personal and cultural identity, which constitute Shepard's most durable thematic threads, revealing both the dramatist's acute concern with fateful determinism and commitment to self-invention. Significantly, while Shepard's recent work highlights the author's preoccupation with instability, dislocation and frontiers of various sorts – from those topographic, temporal and sociopolitical to those of language and art – it equally intimates his attentiveness to correspondences between times, lands and cultures.

Shepard's final play was written for and staged as part of diverse arts and cultural events connected with Derry/Londonderry City of Culture in 2013. The location and occasion naturally appealed to the American dramatist, who, from the beginning of his career, had been absorbed by questions of self-definition, personal and cultural identity, and the inexorable impact of the past upon the present. Interviewed by Clare Dwyer Hogg, Shepard (2013) explicated his interest in Ireland's historical weight: "If, being Irish, you're knowingly carrying around a thousand years of history, you potentially have in you knowledge that we [Americans] don't have. The history shapes you. You go way back." The city in Ulster chosen as the UK's inaugural City of Culture is a place with two names: Derry and Londonderry, with a rich cultural history, and with such iconic historical landmarks as the City Walls, an original seventeenth-century urban fortification, which reflects Derry's turbulent past and its often divided community (Protestant versus Catholic, Unionist versus Republican) – with the divisions traced back to the siege of this once Protestant outpost in 1689.

Administered by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, The UK City of Culture is an initiative launched in 2009 with the intention of promoting cities, outside London, with viable plans "to make a step change in their cultural life and engage the whole country"; cities with a vision to use culture to effect "lasting social regeneration by engagement, widening participation and supporting cultural diversity" (National Archives 2010). The events and projects hosted by Derry in 2013, which coincided with the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city, while respecting Ulster's heritage, were also directed towards fostering new stories and gaining the confidence to move forward. The organisers, deeply committed to the peace process in Northern Ireland, did not seek to shun the uneasy past or the legacy of the Troubles, but rather to acknowledge it, draw lessons from history and bring people together. Developed through cooperation across all parties and communities in Derry, its cultural programme successfully wove together varied elements that contributed to creating "a strong and compelling narrative" about the once troubled city and its people (DCMS 2010). After all, as noted by City of Culture judge Phil Redmond, "[i]f culture cannot be used to help promote harmony, tolerance, hope and aspiration; . . . [or] help people understand their past, inform their present and help shape their future – then what role does it have?" (DCMS 2010).

One of the significant stories of Derry's year as the UK City of Culture was the re-emergence of Field Day, the distinguished theatre company founded in 1980 by playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea. The company resumed its activity after a hiatus of sixteen years, in December 2012, with world premieres of plays by two young Northern Irish dramatists. Based in Derry, the city with a divided identity whose communal tissue was regularly torn by horrific acts of violence, Field Day began as a cultural and intellectual response to the political crisis in Northern Ireland (Field Day n.d.). Committed to promoting new theatrical voices and developing new audiences, as well as addressing the unsettled situation in the Province in a responsible and creative manner, the company attracted eminent and courageous authors, such as Seamus Heaney, Terry Eagleton, Thomas Kilroy, Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, Stewart Parker and Friel himself, whose critically acclaimed *Translations* (1980) was the first of many Field Day plays premiered

at Derry's Guildhall (Field Day n.d.). In 2013, the revived company staged the world premiere of *A Particle of Dread*, commissioned by and starring Rea as a postmillennial embodiment of the mythological Oedipus. Shepard, like Rea, ostensibly believed that theatre should play a part in the cultural dialogue about the past and its relation to the present and future. Remarking on his cooperation with Field Day, involvement in the City of Culture project and its implications, the playwright particularly emphasised the role of the locale in the production process, for Derry's unique history and topography contributed new layers of meaning to the authorial text:

> The material we are using is pertinent to the situation here. It's not as though we are doing something just for culture. We are doing it for a reason. The notion of "place" is very strong here. There is where something happened. We explore destiny, fate, murder, exploitation, origins. The fact there is a wall round the city is part and parcel of what is going on in the play... It is important to have art and culture in a society go through transformation. Something is happening here. You can feel it. Putting on this type of play here takes on a different significance than, say, if we were going to New York. Where strife has been in the foreground, it is bound to have repercussions, or is bound to have meaning. (Sam Shepard Web Site 2014)

It should be noted, perhaps, that the Northern Irish location did not seem to be an incongruous context for the first staging of a Shepard play and that claims of Shepard's Irishness have occasionally been made in Shepard criticism. The sources of such claims are diverse and appear to have gained in validity in recent years, especially in view of the fact that both Shepard and his work had a strong presence in Ireland at the start of the new millennium. That has led several scholars to consider more seriously Shepard's Hibernian connections and investigate the implicit Irishness of the cowboy playwright. In the final chapter of *Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance,* Emma Creedon briefly relates the dramatist's numerous engagements in Ireland in the early twenty-first century. She mentions, among others, Shepard's recent cooperation with Ireland's National Theatre and productions of his five plays – *True West*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, *Fool for Love*, *Ages of the Moon* and *Curse of the Starving Class* – on the Peacock and Abbey stages between 2006 and 2011; Shepard's active involvement as a mentor for young writers in the Abbey Theatre's New Playwrights' Program in 2011; or his receipt of an honorary degree at Trinity College Dublin in 2012 (Creedon 2015: 165). Creedon also looks at the occasional presence of Ireland in Shepard's work, offering some insights into its possible significance. The critic posits, for instance, that Ireland in Shepard's plays is heralded "as a romanticized premodern sanctuary to 'revert' to" and that, in some cases, the West of Ireland seems to function similarly to the American West "as a site of authenticity" (Creedon 2015: 167). Importantly, she asserts, Shepard's evocation of Ireland, like that of his mythic American West, has more of the fantastical than realistic credibility (Creedon 2015: 168). Creedon seeks to explain Shepard's predilection for Ireland by relating it to the argument developed by Diane Negra in *The Irish in Us*, where she explores the recent commodification and transnationalisation of Irishness, which has become "particularly performative and mobile at the millennium" (Negra 2006: 2).[1] According to Creedon, Ireland in Shepard operates as "a simulacrum, a myth of origin that provides a tailor-made historical context, which is particularly relevant in terms of Shepard's probing of issues of authenticity" (2015: 168). The dramatist appears to be "harnessing Ireland's history" (Creedon 2015: 168) in his texts to spin his own tales.

---

[1] Negra states: "With a greater level of permission now given to claim heritage amidst the cultural romance of identities, Irishness has emerged as an 'a la carte ethnicity,' the ideal all-purpose identity credential" (2006: 2).

Also Stephen Watt recently argued for Shepard's honorary inclusion in the pantheon of Irish dramatists (Watt 2015: 242). The scholar considers Shepard's playwrighting in the context of contemporary Irish literature and analyses *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), dedicated to Stephen Rea and resounding with Beckettian echoes and affinities, in his monograph *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* – with Shepard being the only non-Irish or Northern Irish author discussed at length in the study. Watt later extends his examination of Shepard's contribution to the "re-foundation" of modern Irish drama (2015: 243) in his essay "Sam Shepard, Irish Playwright," included in the collection *Irish Theatre in Transition*. Watt links there Shepard's approach in his mature one-act *Ages of the Moon* (2009), written for the Abbey Theatre, to that of one of the founders of the modern Irish theatre, John Millington Synge. What the scholar sees as crucial to this affiliation with the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* is the concern with storytelling and figures of storytellers that both writers share. "Syngean storytellers and their audiences are typically engaged in wilful acts of self-invention, making up their own meanings from 'local idioms and forms of life'" (Watt 2015: 246). Significantly, while deftly "incorporating the local in all of its variety into the narrative texture of his plays," Synge's theatre simultaneously gestures "to larger cultural and national formations" (Watt 2015: 246). In Shepard's major plays, too, says Watt, "the specific and delineated often deliquesces into the general," and ambiguity lurking within the particularities of his locales implies "larger national or mythic proportions" (2015: 246–47). Such dissolution of the local into the general also typifies Shepard's last work for the theatre, *A Particle of Dread*, as does his interest in "tellers of tales" who, as teasingly pointed out by one of the play's characters, "turn things to suit their own needs," creating "[p]lot twists" and "story" – "inventions to make the listener think he's onto something" (Shepard 2017: 50).

A Particle of Dread draws its title from a line in one of the best known tragedies in history, *Oedipus Rex,* or *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles (1988: 87), but the parenthetical subtitle, *Oedipus Variations*, serves as a more useful clue to grasping Shepard's approach. The play, by the author's own account, is not so much an adaptation but rather a loose variation on Sophocles (Shepard 2013), transformed into something more consistent with the canon of Shepard's work. As John Winters drastically puts it, "Shepard slices and dices the story of Oedipus and shows it to us in various contexts" (2017: 350). Admittedly, the American author had long felt a deep connection to Sophocles' plays, in which the past informs the present and future, as they explore such universal themes as fate, truth-seeking, troubled family relations, or the conflict between the individual and the state (Shepard 1986; Winters 2017: 349–50). He was specifically drawn to the Theban trilogy – consisting of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* – which relates to the tale of the mythological tragic hero prophesied to kill his father and marry his mother who vainly attempts to flee his destiny. *A Particle of Dread* retells the Greek tale as a peculiar whodunnit that bespeaks, amongst other things, the questionable morals and mythologies of our times. In this respect, it could be argued that Shepard's updated version of the legendary history of Thebes aligns him with such Field Day writers as Seamus Heaney, the author of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, whose works also drew upon Sophocles and myths to comment on the present.

Composed of 33 scenes arranged in non-sequential order, *A Particle of Dread* constitutes an intellectual exercise for the audience. There are two major interwoven storylines: the ancient Oedipus myth and the investigation into the homicide of a shady Las Vegas casino boss in the Mohave desert. The action moves back and forth in time, merging settings, characters and themes. On one level, we deal with a murder mystery centring on the ruthless slaying of one Angel Langos, "the notorious Las Vegas casino mobster and drug lord," who was found dead along with his chauffeur and bodyguard on a desolate stretch off the shoulder of Highway

15, "on the outskirts of Barstow" (Shepard 2017: 30–31). Their disfigured corpses had been "deliberately and repeatedly run over" by the gangster's own steel-gray Bentley Phantom, leaving "the rib cages crushed and flattened, the knees smashed, and the heads completely obliterated beyond recognition" (Shepard 2017: 30–31). Although the murder is a cold case which may have been committed long ago, it must be solved, and the perpetrator identified, to lift a curse that has ravaged the city. Clearly, the spine-chilling incidents that occurred in the southern California desert are strongly reminiscent of those that had plagued ancient Thebes, and Shepard consistently refers to the classical source, yet since the allusions do not form a neat pattern and the spatial and temporal coordinates are constantly renegotiated, one has the sense of trying to piece together "a literary jigsaw puzzle" with some of the elements missing (Hampton 2014). In one scene, we are at the site of a triple murder, accompanying an obsessively meticulous forensic investigator in an overcoat and blue latex gloves who, like any audience member, is consumed by the task of reconstructing the crime and coming up with a legitimate version of events on the basis of evidence gleaned in the desert (Shepard 2017: 20–27). In another scene, we shift to the bungalow home that belongs to a man named Otto, where this modern incarnation of Oedipus, as a wheelchair-bound pensioner residing with his spouse in southern California, reads about the massacre at a crossroads (Shepard 2017: 30–37) and – prompted by the gory details of the newspaper "story" that sounds uncannily familiar (Shepard 2017: 67) – undertakes a quest to the desert to personally investigate the truth. As noted by Watt, in Shepard, similarly to Synge, "fiction veers towards myth" when "both time and place may be viewed as the constantly shifting repositories of previous times and histories" (2015: 254).

Importantly, all the key figures in Shepard's retelling of Sophocles have their counterparts in the Greek tragedies, alternating between their double, or triple, ancient and modern identities. Oedipus, king of Thebes, oscillates between his classical identity and that of contemporary Otto. Oedipus's antagonist, and true father, is split into the characters of Laius, Lawrence, or Larry, and Langos. Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, and true mother, morphs effortlessly from the dignified queen of Thebes to a sensual gangster's moll, to Otto's level-headed wife Jocelyn. Otto's estranged self-conflicted daughter Annalee reappears as Antigone. The unstable status of the characters' identities was further compounded in production by Nancy Meckler's decision to render *A Particle of Dread* with both a mild Northern Irish and an American Western accent, which puzzled reviewers. Ben Brantley (2014) speculated in *The New York Times* that the different ways of speaking helped define the varied levels of the play: "When the accent is Irish we seem to be in an older, European realm, where kings still count. When people talk with a twang, we have moved into the latter-day American West ... where kings are more likely to be criminal kingpins." And yet, the dichotomy was not always observed, with a performer's accent shifting mid-monologue, suggesting, perhaps, "how a myth mutates from era to era and culture to culture" (Brantley 2014).

Shepard's Oedipus resembles a caretaker who ushers us into the play's diverse, if interrelated, stories conflating recent events with a more mythic past. Dressed in bib overalls, a T-shirt and black janitor boots, he walks "*with an exaggerated limp*," his eyebrows dripping blood (Shepard 2017: 5). While "*mopping up the constant flow of blood*," the man struggles to recount a traumatic childhood experience of a spike being hammered through his ankle and then being deserted to stop a prophecy from coming true:

> Right here. Isn't this the place where you held me down? Your foot on my back. My chest in the mud. Here, wasn't it? Someone – someone held me while you hammered a steel spike right through my ankle. Yes, that was it! A spike! Flash of light. Your powerful arm. Every inch of blood. Every vein. My ankle remembers. (*Pause.*) Or no – Was this place you dropped me off? Could've been. Draped

in mystery and confusion. The secret let out. Maybe that was it. Full of fear as you were. Trembling, running, hauling me across your back. Flapping like an extra skin. You think I'd forget? . . . Hanging from an olive tree. A baby human. Left for dead. (Shepard 2017: 5–6)

In the following scene, the action moves to a ghastly butcher's shop, Shepard's corrupted version of the Delphic oracle, where Uncle Del, a large muscular man in a blood-splattered apron, reads signs and prophesies an ominous future by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals. We find him hanging animal skins and intestines on a clothesline to dry and casting knucklebones, which, he affirms, "all tell a tale ... It's all written out somewhere" (Shepard 2017: 11). In the original Derry production, Shepard's stage directions regarding the physical setting of the action were translated by set designer Frank Conway into a stark, white-tiled space covered in blood suggestive of a torture chamber or an abattoir, with dripping animal skins and body parts exhibited upon a line as "testimony of lives lost in chilling circumstances" (Coyle 2013). As gloomily prognosticated by Brantley (2014): "Such is the slaughterhouse of history that has traditionally been the setting for tragedy, an arena to which people will probably always gravitate despite themselves."

Sporting a dark three-piece suit and an overcoat, the menacing Don Corleone-type figure of Lawrence appears to be no stranger to the play's macabre surroundings as he shares with Uncle Del the luscious details of his intimate life, consulting the contemporary soothsayer about his wife's infertility (Shepard 2017: 7–13). The fragmentation of the character's identity is noticeable: one moment he is Laius, king of Thebes alarmed by the oracle's divination, the next, Las Vegas gangster Langos, who reluctantly confesses to the audience that he is haunted by the memory of the child he had once abandoned, "hanging ... helpless upside down from the bough of an olive tree" (Shepard 2017: 50). Otto's daughter Annalee, Antigone in her former life, has her own tragic story to tell. Traumatised by her marriage to an abusive husband incarcerated for raping and killing the babysitter of their child, the young woman thinks of forsaking her son, whom she reckons as "marked for life" by the nightmarish familial legacy (Shepard 2017: 44). Also the character of Uncle Del takes on multiple roles in Shepard's text: he appears as the blind seer Tiresias, summoned by Oedipus to aid the state in investigating the murder of the former Theban king and locating the unwitting assassin, as well as a sightless goat-herding Traveler who offers to kill Annalee's unwanted baby "for twenty bucks" or less (Shepard 2017: 59). Interestingly, the same actor in the Derry production was cast as a hitchhiking vagabond identified as the Maniac of the Outskirts, an unbalanced, irritable outcast dwelling on the margins of society who becomes a popular scapegoat for all evils. Brantley (2014) is right in noting that dispossessed individuals, similar to the Maniac, "who feel paradoxically both outside of and implicated in the world they observe" figured occasionally in Shepard's earlier playwrighting. In the last play, most of the characters, "whether they are active players in the central tragedy or not, seem to feel both distant from and tainted by it" (Brantley 2014).

The truths in *A Particle of Dread* accrue unhurriedly, through an apparently arbitrary sequence of short scenes interspersed with monologues and asides providing swatches of minor narratives with further clues to the crime, or crimes, committed in the desert, identities of the victims and perpetrators, as well as the consequences for the generations to come. The finale of Shepard's drama, leaning heavily upon Sophocles, is predictable, if still deeply disturbing. Jocasta hangs herself and self-blinded Oedipus is slowly led offstage by Antigone, chanting "Mama" softly to herself (Shepard 2017: 115). As Jocasta's corpse continues to slowly swing, the father and daughter leave behind the horrors they have witnessed, letting the Oracle provide an unsettling closure to the play:

> The whole city went back to being what it had always been – just a place where people came and went; births, lives, deaths. On the surface they seemed returned to health and self-confidence, but a distant memory still persisted, a shadow that never left. Something had been torn apart from the inside out. A ghost of something close at hand yet far enough away and so terrible as to pretend it never happened. (Shepard 2017: 116)

The closing words were bound to strike a chord with the Derry audiences in 2013, both hopeful of an auspicious future and still haunted by their violent legacies, enduring national myths, and histories of unhealed communal and individual traumas.

Resounding with echoes of ancient tales and clearly metatheatrical, Shepard's play takes up and explores a number of issues, such as the nature of tragedy, the persistence of myths in collective memory, or the question of destiny and self-knowledge. The value to be found in tragedy appears ephemeral. In scene 23, the character of Annalee charges forward and, breaking the fourth wall, addresses the audience directly in a provocative fashion, saying: "Oh, tragedy, tragedy, tragedy, tragedy. / Piss on it. / Piss on Sophocles's head. / I'd rather be dead. / I would. / No lie" (Shepard 2017: 76). She goes on to ask: "Why waste my time? / Why waste yours? / What's it for? / Catharsis? / Purging? / Metaphor? / What's in it for us? / You and me" (Shepard 2017: 76). Like many of this play's characters, the young woman would rather live without knowing the uneasy truths that tragedy affords. Still, ostensibly entrapped in her role, she proves unable to escape the destructive patterns inherited from the past and rewrite her fate, as she states: "I go around and around and around and around. / And I wind up here. / Right back here. /. . . . / Exactly like you do" (Shepard 2017: 77), which could be viewed as a rather bleak conclusion derived from Shepard's ultimate work.

According to Bottoms, the playwright's occasional tendency to draw upon "the imagery of traditional myth narratives" best attests to the "profound ambivalence of Shepard's writing, his simultaneously romantic and deeply sceptical outlook" (1998: 11). And indeed, the genealogy of the figures that people Shepard's texts and his plots can be frequently traced back to various myth schemes, as diverse as Greek and Egyptian mythology, the Bible, or Celtic and Native American myths. "As with his use of pop-cultural sources, there is something of the self-consciousness of postmodernist pastiche in these instances, the ironic manipulation of the redundant fragments of ancient stories which have lost their power to affect us in their original form," argues Bottoms (1998: 12). And yet, the critic further insists, "there is also the sense that these stories might contain lingering truths, that the fragments might still resonate, that such myths – however compromised they may be – are all we have" (1998: 12).

Reviewers on either side of the Atlantic seemed unimpressed with Shepard's episodic take on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and the themes that had long exercised his imagination. They were, for the most part, united in dismissing the play as "fractured" and "cryptic" (*Irish Times*, *Time Out New York*), flawed through "fragmentation" and a conspicuous "lack of cohesion" (*Irish Independent*), "frustratingly oblique" (*Hollywood Reporter*), even "lethally muddled" (*Village Voice*). Its characters were deplored as "inaccessible" (*Village Voice*) "shape-shifters and time travelers" (*New York Theatre Guide*). While some considered the play an "unfinished end product" and tagged it as a "collaborative chaotic collective" (*Si's Sights and Sounds*), others saw the "mysterious" and "weirdly primal" collage piece where "[a]ncient myth mingles with Irish accents and desert-rat Americana" as a signature Shepardian creation, a ponderous "return to the playwright's experimental off Off-Broadway beginnings" (*Newsweek*).[2]

---

[2] For a representative selection of reviews of both Derry and New York productions of *A Particle of Dread* in 2013 and 2014, respectively, see Sam Shepard Web Site 2014.

Nancy Meckler, a long-time Shepard friend and director responsible for the 2013 Derry production of *A Particle of Dread* and its subsequent staging in New York in 2014, suggested that, bearing in mind Shepard's musical affiliations, one could, perhaps, apply a musical lens to the play:

> [Sam] calls it *Oedipus Variations* and that's exactly what it is. The thing about Shepard is that he loves jazz, and this is almost like a jazz improvisation, where you take something that's thrown up by the story, follow it, and then you come back. Sometimes we're in ancient Greece with Oedipus. Sometimes we're in a modern version. It's like Sam's riffing on the myth, but it's still about a man who does not know his origins and gets caught out trying to get to the truth. He doesn't realize that the truth is going to destroy him. (Winters 2017: 350)

A similar interpretational key was adopted by Sophie Gorman in the *Irish Independent,* who advocated approaching the play like a piece of music, "with the theme of Oedipus like a musical coda, emerging in different forms but still recognizable" (Sam Shepard Web Site 2014). Also Stephen Rea, who had collaborated with the American playwright multiple times, and appeared successfully in Shepard's dramas, has argued that Shepard's writing "aspires to the condition of music" (2008: xi). Drawing parallels between Shepard and Beckett, Rea postulates that Shepard's plays, too, "feel like musical experiences" in that they "transcend meaning, avoid the literary and conceptual, and search for a concrete immediate reality, beyond the idea, which the actor and audience are forced to experience directly" (2008: xi).

Admittedly, Shepard's love of music, particularly improvisatory jazz music, and its impact on his playwrighting cannot be overstated (Bottoms 1998: 33). Young Sam, as chronicled by Bottoms, "grew up listening to, and playing, music which was constantly challenging the boundaries of its own form, reinventing itself through improvisation" (1998: 33). Attracted by different styles, he naturally gravitated towards free jazz, appreciating "its pursuit of unrestricted musical self-expression" (Bottoms 1998: 33). An accomplished drummer himself, Shepard commented on the inspiration he had drawn from the approach of his musical idols, especially Charles Mingus's band, which appealed to his "eclectic streak" since it allowed for combining elements "as diverse as Dixieland jazz, Mexican carnival music, black gospel, and even the European classical tradition" (Bottoms 1998: 34). He admitted:

> [I] was stunned by his sense of polyrhythm ... fascinated by the idea of merging that with writing, seeing if there was a way of evoking the same kind of collage in the writing of plays. I started thinking about the kind of structure jazz has, the kind of life it implies, and I decided to see if I could be a playwright myself with what I'd learned from them. (Shepard qtd. in Bottoms 1998: 34)

Less than a decade later, in a famous interview the playwright gave to *Rolling Stone* magazine, he reasserted his "great affinity with music," describing "writing" as "a musical experience" (Shepard 1986).[3] In the same interview, among his theatrical idols, Shepard mentioned Sophocles and Aeschylus, stressing that the Greeks were "all about destiny! That's the most powerful thing. Everything is foreseen, and we just play it out." Asked whether he thought a person could shape their destiny, he responded cautiously: "[M]aybe. But first you have to know what your destiny is" (Shepard 1986).

In a recently published biography of the American author, *Sam Shepard: A Life,* aimed at sorting out facts from myths, legends and rumours about the playwright, John Winters affirms that "the tale of the cursed king fighting against destiny is central to Shepard's understanding of life"

---

[3] For a more recent interview, where Shepard summarises the significant impact of music on his life and playwrighting, see Shepard 2002: 66–67.

and could be viewed as "a prism for much of his thinking" (2017: 349–50). Clearly, the question of destiny, intertwined with Shepard's other major thematic preoccupations, like the seeking of the authentic, the impact of heredity and inescapable legacies of the past, also present in the Sophoclean trilogy, resound in Shepard's ultimate riff on the classic tale, *A Particle of Dread*. The importance of the aforementioned issues to the American dramatist, intimately connected with one of the most insistent Shepard themes, that of personal identity, indeed seems indisputable. Alongside his more universal aspirations, Shepard's numerous writings and interviews with the author of *True West* register his concern with the possibility of an authentic self-expression, of "arriving at a kind of true personal speech, a statement of unique identity" (Bottoms 1998: 13).[4] More often than not, the pursuit of the truth, including the truth about one's identity, becomes the source of the sense of crisis that Shepard's work repeatedly evokes (Bottoms 1998: 13).

It seems that the most cogent evidence of Shepard's commitment to the notion of authenticity – correlated with that of self-invention manifest both in his personal life and professional career – is afforded by his dramas, in which the characters searching for "a way of acting toward the world" relentlessly strive "to create and recreate their personal appearances" (Kakutani 1984; Bottoms 1998: 15). Typically, Shepard's male figures negotiate a constantly shifting repertoire of roles and venture to "manufacture new identities," making up "remarkable stories about themselves, but in shedding various costumes, poses and personalities, they often misplace the mysterious thing that makes them who they are" (Kakutani 1984). As posited by Bottoms, Shepard's protagonists, time and again,

> fall back on the fact of their immediate, physical presence on stage, and perform for grim survival: it is as if, by placing other characters in the position of receptive observers, they hope to gain some fragile, exterior confirmation of their existence, and so establish themselves as coherent characters. (1998: 15)

Indeed, from the erratic, game-playing, role-switching occupants of Shepard's earliest improvisatory dramatic pieces like *Cowboys*, to the more consistent but still performance-oriented figures in such renowned family dramas as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child* or *A Lie of the Mind*, to, more recently, the Beckettian ill-conceived cowboy questing for "AUTHENTICITY" in his intensely metatheatrical *Kicking a Dead Horse* (Shepard 2008: 12), Shepard's theatre routinely portrays individuals "with a profound lack of clear direction or 'rounded' identity" (Bottoms 1998: 15). Also in Shepard's most recent variation on Sophocles, both male and female characters, in all their incarnations, come across as disjointed, confused about their status, foraging restlessly "in their memories for clues to their own identities that keep evading them" (Brantley 2014).

Crucially, the characters' dependence on performance is further complicated by the fact that, "far from having an endless multiplicity of possible roles from which to choose, they seem trapped within a rather limited range of potential options, victims of deterministic influences which, try as they might, they cannot shake off" (Bottoms 1998: 15–16). As Annalee despairs in her direct address to the audience: "I go around and around and around and around. / And I wind up here" (Shepard 2017: 77). According to Bottoms, one of the most "vexed" questions posed by Shepard's playwrighting is exactly that of "how much of an independent identity [one] can ever claim to have, if one's fate is being shaped and channelled, even before the moment of one's birth, by forces entirely beyond one's control" (1998: 16). The characters in Shepard's plots make desperate attempts to assert themselves and resist the influences of heredity, family, society, religious beliefs,

---

[4] See, for instance, Shepard 2002: 71.

government authority, and even of the author himself, while these powerful forces continue to shape their actions, undermining their claims to autonomy (Bottoms 1998: 16). And yet, there is also a recurrent sense informing Shepard's writing that the struggle for self-definition, even if futile, is vital and needs to be attempted. For Shepard, Bottoms hypothesises, quite rightly, it seems, one is *both* the victim of deterministic forces *and* the creator of one's self (1998: 16).[5] The problem of how to effectively reconcile and negotiate these two seemingly incompatible "truths," raised also by *A Particle of Dread*, was bound to prompt his audiences to question, and, in questioning, to start to pursue their own answers.

In many ways, this last dense and resonant drama epitomises Shepard's method. At once violent and obscure, emotionally charged and digressive, merging the local with the universal, the mythic with popular culture – *A Particle of Dread* encapsulates the author's sense of precarious instability informing his perception of life and work. With its splintered characters and time frames, complex layering, "patterns of internal tension and contradiction," and "loose ends and uncertainties" (Bottoms 1998: ix), Shepard's dialogical theatre invites his audiences to reason, investigate and deduce, while consistently refusing to resolve the conflict between various perspectives on such matters as the nature of identity, the search for meaning and value in contemporary culture, or the creative process itself. Shepard's exploitation of familiar generic conventions, and his preference for fragmentary narratives and collage means that, in many cases, we are enabled, even enticed, to connect the clues and form assumptions about the problems his plays dramatize, even if our conjectures and speculations are oftentimes deliberately subverted. And yet, though Shepard audiences may feel "bothered and bewildered" (Brantley 2014) by the lack of conclusive resolutions, the necessity to construct one's own story, rather than problematic, can also be seen as empowering and liberating.

Works Cited

Bottoms, Stephen J. 1998. *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brantley, Ben. 2014. "Call Out the Patricide Squad. *A Particle of Dread*: Sam Shepard's Take on Oedipus." *New York Times*, November 23. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/theater/a-particle-of-dread-sam-shepards-take-on-oedipus.html, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Coe, Robert. 1980. "Sam Shepard – Playwright Laureate of the West." *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 21: 35–38.

Coyle, Jane. 2013. "*A Particle of Dread*. Field Day Add Sam Shepard's Oedipus Story to Its Impressive Canon." *Culture Northern Ireland*, December 3. https://www.culturenorthernireland.org/reviews/performing-arts/particle-dread, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Creedon, Emma. 2015. *Sam Shepard and the Aesthetics of Performance*. New York: Palgrave.

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. 2010. "Derry/Londonderry named UK City of Culture 2013." https://www.gov.uk/government/news/derry-londonderry-named-uk-city-of-culture-2013--2, DOA: 2.04.2019.

---

[5] What merits noting, it seems, is that Shepard's preoccupation with authenticity and self-invention operates also on a different level and can be referred to the author's perception of the process of creation. Frequently incorporating fragments of imagery and language drawn from American popular culture, Shepard's playwrighting witnesses to a sensibility acutely aware of the fact that the idea of using spontaneous "improvisation to liberate imagination is to some extent a delusion" since the artist's imagination is largely, if not entirely, "shaped by the culture within which it operates" (Bottoms 1998: 8–9).

Field Day. n.d. "Field Day – A Brief History." http://fieldday.ie/about, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Hampton, Wilborn. 2014. "'A Particle of Dread': Shepard's Oedipus At Cucamonga." *HuffPost*, November 24. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-particle-of-dread-shepa_b_6212698, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Kakutani, Michiko. 1984. "Myths, Dreams, Realities – Sam Shepard's America." New York Times, January 29. https://www.nytimes.com/1984/01/29/theater/myths-dreams-realities-sam-shepard-s-america.html, DOA: 2.04.2019.

McPherson, Conor. 2012. "Introduction." In: Sam Shepard. *Fifteen One-Act Plays*. New York: Vintage, xi–xv.

The National Archives. 2010. "The race is on to find UK's first 'City of Culture' for 2013." https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100512152140/http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/media_releases/6256.aspx, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Negra, Diane. 2006. "The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture." In: Diane Negra (ed.). *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–19.

Rea, Stephen. 2008. "Foreword." In: Sam Shepard. *Kicking a Dead Horse*. New York: Vintage, ix–xii.

Roudané, Matthew. 2002. "Introduction." In: Matthew Roudané (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–6.

The Sam Shepard Web Site. 2014. "*A Particle of Dread*." https://www.sam-shepard.com/particle.html, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Shepard, Sam. 1986. "Sam Shepard on Working with Dylan, Why Jim Morrison Has No Sense of Humor." Interview by Jonathan Cott. *Rolling Stone,* December 18. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/sam-shepard-on-working-with-dylan-why-jim-morrison-has-no-sense-of-humor-193848/, DOA: 2.04.2019.

Shepard, Sam. 2002. "Shepard on Shepard." In: Matthew Roudané (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 64–80.

Shepard, Sam. 2008. *Kicking a Dead Horse*. New York: Vintage.

Shepard, Sam. 2012. *Fifteen One-Act Plays*. New York: Vintage.

Shepard, Sam. 2013. "The Good Guy and Bad Guy Stuff Just Doesn't Interest Me." Interview with Clare Dwyer Hogg. *Observer*, December 1. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/dec/01/sam-shepard-interview-oedipus-derry, DOA: 1.08.2019.

Shepard, Sam. 2017. *A Particle of Dread*. New York: Vintage.

Sophocles. 1988. *Oedipus Rex*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. In: Dudley Fitts (ed.). *Four Greek Plays*. San Diego: Harcourt, 69–140.

Wade, Leslie A. 1997. *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Wade, Leslie A. 2007. "Sam Shepard and the American Sunset: Enchantment of the Mythic West." In: David Krasner (ed.). *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 285–300.

Watt, Stephen. 2009. *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watt, Stephen. 2015. "Sam Shepard, Irish Playwright." In: D.E. Morse (ed.). *Irish Theatre in Transition*: *From the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century.* New York: Palgrave, 241–56.

Winters, John J. 2017. *Sam Shepard: A Life*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.

Grzegorz Koneczniak

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2198-0450

e-mail: gregorex@umk.pl

Supernatural Beings and Their Appropriation of Knowledge and Power in *The Seafarer* by Conor McPherson and *Woman and Scarecrow* by Marina Carr

Abstract

This article is a comparative analysis of *Woman and Scarecrow* by Marina Carr and *The Seafarer* by Conor McPherson from a hauntological perspective. It aims at discussing the influence of supernatural beings on mortal protagonists as well as addressing the configurations of power and knowledge formed between the characters. *Woman and Scarecrow* follows the final moments of a dying woman accompanied by the mysterious figure of Scarecrow, who is hidden from other characters. The verbal exchanges between Scarecrow and Woman will be interpreted as a manifestation of the apparent power possessed by the former, the ambiguous supernatural figure, over the latter, a human being, in terms of appropriating the knowledge about the woman's past. In McPherson's *The Seafarer*, a mysterious relationship develops between Sharky and Mr. Lockhart, who knows about Sharky's past, too. This paper will demonstrate both similarities and differences in the way in which Carr and McPherson make use of supernatural beings that manipulate human characters in the most crucial moments of their lives and will situate the two plays within the recent rise of interest in spectrality in Irish drama.

Keywords: Carr, Marina, McPherson, Conor, supernatural, power, knowledge, manipulation, appropriation, *The Seafarer*, *Woman and Scarecrow*

It can safely be argued that plays by Marina Carr and Conor McPherson belong to the already established canon of contemporary Irish drama and have frequently been commented on in mainstream discussions of Irish dramaturgy (see, for example, Murray 2000: 35–38; Watt 2000: 131). In this comparative study, Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* and McPherson's *The Seafarer* will be explored. The main objective is to compare the functions of supernatural figures in Carr's and McPherson's plays and to determine how the relation between knowledge and power develops there. The behaviour of the plays' human characters on the stage is affected when they are confronted with their spectral tormentors. The supernatural beings know, or pretend to know, more than they actually do, and can do more than the others, thus reflecting attributes of ghostly figures and the influence they exert on human characters (see Davis 2005: 377).

Woman and Scarecrow and *The Seafarer* contribute to the development of what Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards, in the concluding part of their book, call "spectral spaces" in Irish theatre (see Morash and Richards 2013: 175–179). Addressing the hauntological aspects of Irish dramaturgy at the end of the twentieth century, the authors of *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* define spectral spaces in terms of "a 'theatre of the calamity of yesterday,'" borrowing Samuel Beckett's expression, "haunted by a past that nevertheless provided only the most shifting and insecure basis for Being in the present, through the persistence of fallible, and often involuntary, memory" (Morash and Richards 2013: 178). The tradition of spectrality reaches back to earlier times: Morash and Richards argue that the dilemma expressed in "the 'calamity of yesterday' […] would haunt Beckett's own theatre throughout the subsequent decades: the recognition of a self that is non-identical with past selves, but is nonetheless unable to escape memories of a past that ultimately attach themselves to places, and to bodies in place" (2013: 178). Morash and Richards also link the recent development of "spectral spaces" to "the fluorescence of space," with "fluorescence […] understood to be the light emitted by a dying particle" (2013: 117). The "fluorescence of space" refers to the haunting self-awareness of both the end and the new beginning in Irish theatre in the last two decades of the twentieth century (see 2013: 117). The new beginning continues into the twenty-first century and the examples found in *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* include *Terminus* (2007) by Mark O'Rowe and the performance of *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) by ANU Productions (Morash and Richards 2013: 179).

By depicting the ambiguous influences of supernatural figures on human characters, *Woman and Scarecrow* and *The Seafarer* inherit the tradition of spectrality in Irish drama which has been developing since the end of the twentieth century. As Morash observes in another study, the aspect shared by such works as *The Weir* by McConnor, *The Mai* and *On Raftery's Hill* by Carr, *Faith Healer* by Brien Friel or *The Steward of Christendom* by Sebastian Barry, among other works (Morash 2010: 267), is that "the Irish theatre in the closing decades of the twentieth century has been increasingly filled with monologues delivered to spectres of the past" (Morash 2004: 267). Carr and McPherson have played a significant role in this spectral development: the former's plays "revolve around characters for whom a world of ghosts is more compelling than the reality around them" (Morash 2004: 267); in the latter's *The Weir* "all that the characters […] can share is the recognition that each is alone with a story of ghostly contact" (Morash 2004: 267).

It is hardly possible to disagree with Morash and Richards that the spectrality is still thriving with ghostly figures on the stage. Carr's *Ariel* includes the occurrence of the ghost of the daughter killed by her own father in his pursuit of power. McPherson's *Shining City* focuses on the counselling sessions given to a husband who believes that he has been visited by his dead wife. Among other recent renditions of the dramatic supernatural worth noting is the deathly messenger found in Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus*,[1] mentioned by Morash and Richards in "Spectral spaces" (cf. Morash and Richards 2013: 179), and the ambiguous visit of the dead young man paid to his older companion in Sebastian Barry's *Tales of Ballycumber*. *Woman and Scarecrow* and *The Seafarer* are not addressed by Morash and Richards in the context of spectrality; it appears that there have been no comparative studies so far dealing with the two texts.[2] The plays focus on intimate encounters between mortal and supernatural characters, thus contributing to the tradition

---

[1] Carr's *Ariel* and O'Rowe's *Terminus*, similarly to *The Seafarer*, deal with a Faustian motif (see Lonergan 2013: 179).
[2] However, *Woman and Scarecrow* is listed among Irish dramas with their premieres outside Ireland in Patrick Lonergan's discussion of *The Seafarer* in "Irish Theatre and Globalisation: A Faustian Pact?" Lonergan uses the Faustian theme found in McPherson's play to comment on the complexity of global issues addressed in this and other dramatic texts.

begun at the end of the twentieth century and confirming Morash and Richards' observations on the individual levels of the realities depicted in the works.

In *Woman and Scarecrow* and *The Seafarer* supernatural, or at least strange and uncanny, beings have a tremendous influence on how the human characters behave and on how dramatic irony develops. Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart manipulate the knowledge about the events Woman and Sharky would like not to have happened, hidden memories and shameful past experiences.[3] In both plays, supernatural elements are linked with ambiguity, a feature attributed to spectral beings – both spectres and spirits – by Jacques Derrida[4]:

> […] but as for what they have in common, one does not know what it *is*, what it is presently. *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. (Derrida 1994: 6, italics in the original)

The ontological status of Scarecrow in Carr's play is subject to debate. It should be made clear that this spectral being has been interpreted in various ways, and not always necessarily in terms of the supernatural, which shows ambiguity pertaining to this figure. By way of illustration, David Gordon holds that the mysterious character "may or may not be a morphine hallucination" (2018); Deb Miller describes Scarecrow as Woman's "antithetical alter ego" (2018). As regards Mr. Lockhart in McPherson's play, he is treated as the Devil, "Satan in human form" or "the devil incarnate" (Lonergan 2013: 177). At the end of both plays, the supernatural figures confound the human characters on the stage as well as readers and spectators. This illuminates an instability of knowledge and meaning stressed in hauntological readings inspired by *Spectres of Marx* by Derrida and the contribution by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (Davis 2005: 376; see Lorek-Jezińska 2013: 21). As Colin Davis explains, "[h]auntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Davis 2005: 373).[5] Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart can be said to represent such ghost-like figures, transgressing borders between the apparently opposite realms of existence and non-existence.

Woman and Scarecrow, staged in 2006 and included in the second volume of Carr's *Plays* (2009), mainly consists of a deathbed dialogue between the title characters. Their verbal exchanges, delivered on the stage and accompanied by other minor voices, can be interpreted within the dynamics of the assumed power of Scarecrow, who appropriates knowledge and manipulates Woman's perception of her past experiences. Such an approach can be used to relate Carr's work to McPherson's *The Seafarer* (also staged in 2006), in which a corresponding dialogue, or a game, is played out between Sharky and Mr. Lockhart, of which the other

---

[3] Miller treats the relationship between Woman and Scarecrow in terms of "the protagonist's ongoing battle between her lamentable life choices and her critical inner voice" (2018).

[4] For a discussion of this aspect of spectrality, see Lorek-Jezińska 2013: 17.

[5] It is worth noting that hauntological approaches have recently been adapted to interpret the biographies of the leading Irish authors and their canonical works. By way of illustration, quoting the same passage from the text by Davis and referring to Derrida's contribution to hauntology, Eva Roa White argues that James Joyce "inhabits hauntology itself in that he is the obsessive spectre that keeps appearing in the present, a trace of the old Dublin that cannot be shaken off, as it exists both in the past and present through what Derrida calls 'disarticulated, dislocated' time" (White 2018: 25). As regards Joyce's works, they manifest similar aspects "in that they too haunt the new Dublin, not only through events such as Bloomsday […], but also as traces in the majority of literature about Dublin" (White 2018: 25–26).

characters on and off the stage are ignorant. Sharky and Woman are both depicted in the most crucial moments of their earthly existence – the fight over their souls. However, both are also involved in literal and symbolic struggle over their lives. Their experiences are appropriated by supernatural characters, who have access to mortal characters' memories, make them re-examine their apparently individual and private pasts and reconsider their systems of values (cf. Hill 2019: 157). Appropriating knowledge implies manipulating the truth about another person's past by a supernatural character and his or her certainty that such ability gives control over a human character's behaviour and the decisions to be made. In both plays, there are also apparently minor characters who are not aware of the dramatic conflict between the protagonists and their supernatural tormentors. Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart, who show their power over Woman and Sharky, respectively, are at the same time responsible for creating and shaping, or just manipulating, those minor characters' perceptions of the invisible conflicts. The supernatural figures also show their power over the main characters by revealing segments of knowledge about them and insinuating that they know more than that.

The importance of the supernatural characters and their influence on the mortal protagonists are definitely linked to the relation between power and knowledge, which both belong to Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart but which are not given to them in absolute terms. Even with such limited attributes, the spectral figures, through manipulation and in a calculated manner, build the dramatic conflict and negotiate the relationships between the characters. Yet, the dramatic significance of the spectral figures is ambiguous. On the one hand, as a source of superior knowledge, the characters of Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart make Woman and Sharky dependent on them; on the other hand, this dependence upon the supernatural beings makes the humans learn more about themselves and accept the past. This corresponds with the function of spectral beings in hauntological criticism, which "is part of an endeavour to keep raising the stakes of literary study, to make it a place where we can interrogate our relation to the dead, examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthought" (Davis 2005: 379; see Lorek-Jezińska 2013: 21, 40).

The spectral encounter in *Woman and Scarecrow* is preceded by a short description of the stage design – "A bed. A chair. A wardrobe. A CD player" – and of the characters: Woman, Scarecrow, Him, Auntie Ah, and the "Thing in the Wardrobe" (Carr 2009: 151). The play opens with a dialogue between Woman, lying in bed and being on the point of dying, and Scarecrow, the mysterious figure whom Woman knows. Scarecrow seems to know all the answers to the questions and doubts that Woman expresses and that concern her former decisions, lost opportunities and the possibility of changing the course of events and saving her from the clutches of death hidden in the wardrobe (cf. Miller 2018):

> Woman lies in bed gaunt and ill. Scarecrow watches her.
> Woman: I ran west to die.
> Scarecrow: You ran south and you didn't run, you crawled.
> Woman: I ran west. West. Why would I go south?
> Scarecrow: You got lost.
> Woman: I thought you were the navigator.
> …
> Woman: I started out west. I'd like to finish there.
> Scarecrow: When you could've gone west you refused.
> Woman: No, listen to me. If I could get across the Shannon once more maybe the air would perform some kind of miracle ... I might live.
> Scarecrow: You think crossing the Shannon is all it takes? Once, perhaps, long ago, that would have been the thing to do. (Carr 2009: 153)

In the conversation between Woman and Scarecrow, we see the moment Woman dies, which is symbolically compared to crossing the Shannon River (cf. Trench 2010: 78) and depicted as moments of futile metaphysical negotiations as Woman wrongly believes she can still be saved and live for the sake of her children. The metaphysical aspect of a deathbed experience, commonly expected by readers and frequently encountered in literary works, is eclipsed by the verbal play and double meaning in the early utterances, as further implied in the following exchange, in which the two characters seem to be teasing each other about the past and making and denying reciprocal accusations (cf. Miller 2018). The verbal scuffles seem both incongruent and comical, bearing in mind the gravity of the dramatic situation:

> Woman: I take it you don't want to come back.
> Scarecrow: That's not what I said.
> Woman: You don't want to come back with me … you don't want to go on with me.
> Scarecrow: That possibility does not arise.
> Woman: Well, I wouldn't turn down another sojourn here with you or without you.
> Scarecrow: I don't believe you.
> Woman: It's the encroaching annihilation is doing it … I've changed.
> Scarecrow: You haven't changed since your holy communion.
> Woman: You don't know the first thing about me.
> Scarecrow: I know when you're lying. I was there before you and I'll be there after. Lie away. I'm through with you. I'm just going through the motions. I'll find someone else.
> Woman: Who? Who will you find?
> Scarecrow: Someone with possibility this time. Someone who hasn't surrendered before they're out of nappies. (Carr 2009: 165)

Woman tries to prove that she is the one that has prior access to knowledge about herself, but such attempts are made in vain. Scarecrow turns out to be a superior being controlling Woman's life story, her experiences, feelings and relationships.[6] It can be argued that Scarecrow possesses the knowledge of the woman's existence in the world and seems to be playing with her recollections and their interpretations and manipulating the dying person's fears, anxieties and faults.[7] The most important moment showing Scarecrow's power is the scene in which she fights against the figure of death hidden in the wardrobe so as to defer the moment of Woman's death: "The door of the wardrobe creaks open. Scarecrow steps out, covered in blood and bruises. Nightdress torn. Shaken from encounter" (Carr 2009: 196). Scarecrow seems to have won extra time for Woman to live and can apparently be treated as the figure that is more important than death itself. Still, the nearness of death on the stage, whose appearance is another crucial function of supernatural elements in the play, is suggested in the descriptions of the figure hidden in the wardrobe. By way of illustration, at the end of the first act, "[t]he wardrobe door creaks open. Woman and Scarecrow turn to look. A wing droops from the wardrobe, then a clawed foot hovers, then lights down" (Carr 2009: 190). Death is approaching Woman and will finally take over her life. Scarecrow tries to win extra time

---

[6] Similarly, Miller notices a crucial role played by Scarecrow (though with reference to one specific performance of the play) and related to the supernatural being's "frankly questioning the Woman's decisions, accusing her of being motivated by spite and revenge, and unwavering in assuring her of the inevitability of her own mortality" (2018).

[7] In this aspect, the symbolic control of Woman by Scarecrow in Carr's play does not affect the construction of one's identity in a negative way – as a woman's entrapment by "the symbolic order," understood within the context of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Julia Kristeva's reconsideration of it, does, which is argued in Rhona Trench's study (see 2010). Along the same lines, the argument presented in this article does not undermine that put forth by Hill and concerning "self-authoring" (see 2019: 157; cf. Miller 2018).

for her human companion, but the moment of crossing the boundary between life and death cannot be postponed in eternity.

Although Woman is generally aware of Scarecrow's control over her memory, knowledge, and self-awareness, in some parts of the dialogue there are seeming reversals of roles and Woman is able to confound Scarecrow with the truth she discloses, sometimes in a mocking way, as she addresses Scarecrow about Him: "You needn't sound so final about it. And my dreams were all of infidelity. Strange that, and I thought I loved him by my dreams, all of escape, flying, bedding strangers. Why was that, Miss Know-All?" (Carr 2009: 197). Woman endeavours to show that some explanations and judgements voiced to her in private by Scarecrow are not always as accurate as they might seem. These verbal skirmishes are not significant bearing in mind Scarecrow's function of preparing Woman for the moment of death; however, they prove that the mortal character does not always blindly accept the spectral being's superiority.

Struggle over the human being's life brings Carr's work close to McPherson's *The Seafarer*, in which a corresponding dialogue is played out between Sharky and Mr. Lockhart, of which other characters, though not the audience, are ignorant. The blurb on the cover of one of the editions of the play gives some insight into the plot:

> It is Christmas Eve in North Dublin. Mid-life Sharky Harkin, erstwhile fisherman/van driver/chauffeur, finds himself reluctantly hosting old friends at the dingy house that he shares with his brother who has recently gone blind. A lot of booze and card playing carry the men into Christmas Day, when Sharky must face the grim promise he made decades ago to one of these old friends. (McPherson 2007: back cover)

The passage introduces the context, outlines the plotline, and creates a sense of mystery. In contrast to Carr's Woman and Scarecrow, the mystery is not explicitly formulated at the outset of the play, but in the middle of it. The mysterious visitor appears in The Seafarer at the end of the first act; however, implicitly, the presence of the supernatural is anticipated earlier, even before the characters are introduced onto the stage in the opening directions, in the description of Binn Eadair, or Howth Head, as a place of "myths and legends" (McPherson 2007: 5). This aspect is one of the differences between the two plays as to how the supernatural beings enter the world depicted and how their function and power develop in the plot. Still, Mr. Lockhart, like Scarecrow in Carr's play, is a superior being who shows Sharky, a human character, his supernatural knowledge concerning the man's life in the past. Mr. Lockhart also suggests that he knows what awaits Sharky in the future. Yet the power assumed by Mr. Lockhart and the prior knowledge he apparently has and uses for manipulating others actually fail him: the spectral character is surprisingly ignorant of who the real winner of the poker game will be and his control thus turns out to be illusory.

Although Act One of McPherson's play is titled "The Devil at Binn Eadair," the first scene does not deliver on the promise of the title. It is an onstage re-enactment of the party held the previous night, and gradual sobering of the two characters, Richard and Ivan, after a period of intoxication. Richard's brother, Sharky, is the only character who restrains himself from alcoholic beverages, as he has been fighting his addiction to alcohol. The verbal exchanges between the two brothers indicate that their relationship is rather strained, with unresolved problems aplenty. Towards the end of the same scene, one of the brothers, accompanied by their friend wanting to go home, decides to leave the house and buy alcohol and something to eat. When they are back, it turns out that they have invited yet another friend, Nicky, much to Sharky's disappointment (cf. Jordan 2019: 129).

The potential tension between Sharky and Nicky is suggested in the conversation between the two brothers:

Sharky: You told him to call in on us ...
Richard: Be sure, that's what you say! That's what everybody says!
Sharky: You told him to call in to play cards!
Richard: That's ... that's just what you say! Anyway – so what?!
. . .
Sharky: You don't fucking say that to fellas like Nicky, Dick. He'll be in on top of us before you know it!
Richard: No he won't! He was plastered! He was down in the Brookwood Inn of all places! How the hell is he gonna rock up here? In a taxi? I don't think so! Hey, is there 'ere a Christmas drink going a begging around here?
Sharky: Yeah, well I saw him the other day, and he was driving *my* car, Richard.
(McPherson 2007: 32; emphasis in the original)

In this verbal exchange, it becomes obvious that Sharky is reluctant to see Nicky, whom he treats as the source of his misfortune. However, the man does not realise that his brother will be only accompanying yet another character, Mr. Lockhart, who, as a supernatural figure, is invited to the house to torment Sharky about their shared past experience and the debt which only one of them is supposed to pay back.

The arrival of Mr. Lockhart, an unknown and mysterious figure, is apparently not strange to the remaining characters and to the spectators and readers of the play. The visitor is a polite person who keeps some distance between himself and the remaining characters, which gives him an air of aloofness and superiority manifested in the official manner he uses to address the others (cf. Jordan 2019: 130). However, he is willing to join a card game, which is going to be the major activity performed throughout Christmas Eve. As Richard proposes, "Why can't a game of cards be just for fun?" (McPherson 2007: 33). Now all the characters are ready to play the game, but only two of them realise what is at stake. The real importance of the game is revealed when Sharky and Mr. Lockhart meet for the first time in the house: "Sharky and Lockhart are alone. Sharky shakes his head at Lockhart" (McPherson 2007: 47). It is a decisive episode, as Sharky and Mr. Lockhart are left alone during their intimate verbal exchange, in which the other, supernatural, nature of the strange visitor is revealed:

Lockhart: Yeah, I've seen you. On your wandering ways. I've seen you going down Wicklow Street, and halfway up Dame Street, down Suffolk Street, Grafton Street, Dawson Street, round and round, back up, back down, am I right? (Pause) I've seen all those hopeless thoughts, buried there, in your stupid scrunched-up face.
Sharky: What are you talking about?
Lockhart: Oh come on, Sharky! You don't remember me?
Sharky: No, I ... I do. But where did we ...?
Lockhart: We met in the Bridewell [police station], Sharky. (McPherson 2007: 47–48)

What is strange in this scene is that Mr. Lockhart does not find it difficult to make Sharky realise that they once met, and Sharky does not even deny knowing the strange guest, which shows his ambiguous attitude to this supernatural visitor. Mr. Lockhart's description of Sharky's wanderings, which should be unknown to the strange visitor, brings the play close to Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow*, in which the supernatural character is able to recount events from Woman's life which she seemingly kept secret from others (cf. Sihra 2018: 191). It turns out that Mr. Lockhart is Sharky's acquaintance from the past and, twenty-five years ago, he helped him to avoid punishment for a crime (McPherson 2007: 49), which we learn from the dialogue:

Sharky: What do you mean "after what I did?"
Lockhart: ... His name was Laurence Joyce. He was sixty-one. He was vagrant. … You beat him up in the back of O'Dowd's public house in the early hours of the twenty-fourth of December 1981. You killed him. ... I let you out. I set you free. (McPherson 2007: 49)

Whether Sharky actually knows what he did and is just pretending otherwise at the beginning cannot be determined, yet Mr. Lockhart helps him to remember things:

> Lockhart: Come on, you remember that moment when the guards opened the door, in the morning? And told you to get your stuff and get lost? ... I organized that. Because you won that hand of poker we were playing. (McPherson 2007: 50)

As can be predicted, Mr. Lockhart has returned to play another life-or-death game with Sharky:

> Lockhart: ... I've come here for your soul this Christmas, and I've been looking for you all fucking day! We made a deal. We played cards for your freedom and you promised me – you promised me – the chance to play you again. So don't start fucking me around now. ... Because we're gonna play for your soul and I'm gonna win, and you're coming through the old hole in the wall tonight, Sharky. (McPherson 2007: 51)

The most obvious interpretation of the two encounters between Mr. Lockhart and Sharky, and one frequently proposed by critics, is the symbolic pact in which the former appears as the devil who signed a contract with the latter, a Faustian figure.[8] Mr. Lockhart's discourse and diction change when this supernatural character speaks to Sharky in private. The speech does not resemble the gentleman's language used before: now it is vulgar and contains swear words, which might serve to show the real function of Mr. Lockhart in the play and to stress his relationship with Sharky through a change of style,[9] different from that used in the presence of others. Mr. Lockhart sets the invisible task to Sharky so that he can pay back his debt and regain his freedom. Sharky thus sees beyond the reality and physicality surrounding the characters on the stage, who do not realise what the game is really about. He is the only figure who is granted access to, and accepts, the metaphysical dimension, the intimate encounter with the evil visitor. Although Mr. Lockhart can be perceived by other characters, they remain unaware of the otherworldly dimensions of his actions and the power he purports to wield. By contrast, in *Woman and Scarecrow*, the mysterious figure, the female personification of the passage to death, remains invisible to both Auntie Ah and Him, the husband. Scarecrow possesses the knowledge about Woman's decisions and the motivations behind them (cf. Miller 2018); the gradual exposure of details influences the way the mortal protagonist changes and evolves on the stage. Still, one can argue that Scarecrow does not really know details of Woman's life experience but simply invents and manipulates them, using her supernatural power over the human character, depending on the changing situation and Woman's answers, which leads to a lot of tensions and conflicts between the married couple or the woman and her aunt (cf. Miller 2018).

The struggle over the interpretation of the past is presented in the arguments between the two figures in Carr's play, and Scarecrow appears, or simply pretends, to be right: "Your backward

---

[8] Lonergan makes a noteworthy comment regarding the Faustian theme in *The Seafarer*: "McPherson's characterisation of Sharky slightly inverts the story of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, who sold his soul in exchange for twenty-four years on Earth with Mephistopheles as his servant. Both Faustus and Sharky enjoy roughly the same period of time enjoying an undeserved and ultimately damaging freedom, but McPherson begins his play where Marlowe's ends – at the moment when the debt must finally be repaid" (Lonergan 20013: 178). He also offers an apt interpretation of the Faustian motif in terms of the current situation of the Irish nation: "The story of Faust has broad resonances, but one of its major features is that it often appears in societies that are facing a crisis of valuation, in which something that should be free from the economic suddenly becomes commoditised" (2013: 179). Following McPherson's statement on his play, Lonergan argues that the crisis of values experienced in Ireland is related to its economic growth and the affluence achieved, inevitably accompanied by the fear of a new recession (Lonergan 2013: 179–80).

[9] Lonergan singles out the expression "the hole in the wall" (2013: 178), understood also as a cash machine, and, in general, notices the "economic language" used throughout the play to show the "recent social development" reflected in the Faustian pact (2013: 179).

twisted little heart was tied, always tied to him [your husband] who made little of your every opportunity he could" (Carr 2009: 168). To further prove the point, Scarecrow is able to use the knowledge regarding other characters from Woman's life: "Remember what Auntie Ah said. . . . Then I'll tell you. 'I'd rather see your white body float the Shannon than for you to marry that man'" (Carr 2009: 168). The confidence with which Scarecrow demonstrates her knowledge and control makes Woman uncertain about her own life and relationships with others. As she says, "Well you can just take that smug eternal look off your face or look away. Look away. Don't look at me like that as if you know something. If you know something tell me" (Carr 2009: 170). Scarecrow reveals details of Woman's life, inflicting more and more psychological suffering on her and, at the same time, leading to more and more self-awareness on her part, which suggests ambiguity in judging the functions attributed to this spectral being. In *The Seafarer*, Sharky is psychologically tormented by Mr. Lockhart, too. The other characters are unaware of what is occurring, but the readers are in tune to what is happening, and, thus, dramatic tension is building up, based on partial dramatic irony.

In Carr's play, the journey into death cannot be stopped and Woman is not able to return to the world of the living. Scarecrow seems to be her companion: someone who is supposed to accompany Woman and help her reach her destination. However, as simple as such a process might seem, it is permeated with challenges as to who knows what and how knowledge is distributed among the characters, which, to some extent, might even undermine the superiority of Scarecrow, as a spectral figure, over Woman, a mortal character. Yet, at the most crucial point regarding the importance of the supernatural being present in Carr's play, when the husband leaves the stage and death comes out of the wardrobe to take Woman with her, Scarecrow becomes less of a deathbed companion and changes into Death itself or himself, thus revealing a new significant aspect of this supernatural being:

> And exit Him. Woman lies there. Hold a minute. Wardrobe door creaks open. Enter Death from the wardrobe, regal, terrifying, one black wing, cobalt beak, clawed feet, taloned fingers. Stands looking at woman, shakes itself down. Woman stares at him. (Carr 2009: 220)

Woman is frightened and she seeks assistance from Scarecrow, which is no longer possible, as revealed in the following verbal exchange:

> Woman (calls weakly): Scarecrow … I'm begging you. He's here … I can't do this on my own.
> Scarecrow: You don't have to, my dear.
> Woman: Scarecrow … is that you … But I thought …
> Scarecrow: That I was your slave … that you were in charge? Not so. I've a few forms to fill out, so just bear with me a second.
> Plucks a feather from her wing. Takes out parchment, unrolls it. (Carr 2009: 220)

Scarecrow's change of role confounds both Woman and the audience, as so far she has acted as the superior being with total control of Woman's life experience. The supernatural figure once more proves the human's inferiority as regards knowledge and shows her ultimate power over her life (cf. Hill 2019: 157). Woman is wrong again as to the function of Scarecrow in their mutual relationship.

Further activities performed on the stage are even more disturbing as "Scarecrow takes Woman's hand, pierces vein in her wrist, a fountain of blood shoots out. Scarecrow dips quill into Woman's wrist. A cry of pain from Woman" (Carr 2009: 221). Moreover, she just treats the woman's death in terms of procedures and shows no emotions (cf. Miller 2018): "I know, my chicken, I know it's never easy becoming the past tense. Okay. It says here you had no brains to

burn?" (Carr 2009: 221). After all the procedures are completed, as "the paperwork must be in order" (Carr 2009: 221), "the next breath isn't coming" and the "woman dies in Scarecrow's arms" (Carr 2009: 225) in the absence of Him and Auntie Ah, who are unable to see Scarecrow even at the end of the play. The supernatural being proves her ultimate superiority over all the mortal characters. Throughout the play she remains invisible to those who accompany Woman and, at the end of the play, the moment of death becomes a private transaction between her and Woman, as other characters are absent.

In contrast, Mr. Lockhart is visible to all the characters present on the stage; however, he shares a secret with only one of them but hints at sharing a similar secret with another one. He possesses the knowledge about Sharky's past and the deal made between them. He knows how to use this knowledge to manipulate and intimidate his victim both in private, in a most direct way, and when accompanied by the others, by means of ambiguous comments and oblique statements. In both cases he considers himself a powerful figure with superior knowledge and control over human beings in general, as manifested in one of his speeches delivered to Sharky: "I hate these stupid insect bodies you have. […] What are human beings? Two balloons – that's your lungs – and an annoying little whistle at the top where air comes out – that's your voice. […] You're nothing! Me? I live in the stars above St. Anne's Park! […] I'm the very power that keeps us apart" (McPherson 2007: 80). This speech shows Mr. Lockhart's belief in his power and superiority over people in explicit terms[10]; yet, he is able to suggest it, implicitly and indirectly, when entering into conversations with other characters and asking about the past in an intimidating manner and insinuating his prior knowledge of it. Scarecrow in Carr's play does not enter into any dialogues with Aunt Ah and the husband, but only completes and comments on the information delivered by them on the stage; Mr. Lockhart in *The Seafarer* is willing to involve Richard and his friends in the process of tormenting Sharky. Still, he remains ignorant of their actual role in changing the expected course of events and saving Sharky from death.

However, at the end of the play, it is exposed that Mr. Lockhart's knowledge, in contrast to that demonstrated by Scarecrow, is limited and he has only been trying to orchestrate and control Sharky's downfall or to frighten him. The stakes are high and Mr. Lockhart seems to have won the poker game. Yet it is Ivan, not able to see the cards properly at first, who has saved Sharky from death by defeating Mr. Lockhart (cf. Jordan 2019: 133). The win is treated like a miracle. Suddenly, the knowledge regarding Sharky's life and sins of the past becomes useless and can no longer be used as a source of control and power. Mr. Lockhart has to leave the stage in search of other debtors who have to pay him back. This resolution is one aspect which distinguishes *Woman and Scarecrow* from *The Seafarer*; others include, for example, the structure of dramatic irony, different dynamics of power and knowledge, and distinct patterns of manipulation used by the supernatural characters. Still, what links the plays is the processual disclosure of the knowledge possessed by supernatural characters and the ignorance of others.

The plays are also connected in terms of the instability as to who knows what: the observations made by Scarecrow are not always necessarily credible and Mr. Lockhart's knowledge of Sharky's crime and behaviour afterwards is only one version of the story, and no other version is voiced on the stage. Yet the use of knowledge by the supernatural characters, in both plays, makes it possible to influence, or subjugate, the others and to show the power, even if not ultimate, held by the spectral

---

[10] However, as Lonergan notices, there are aspects in which Mr. Lockhart, as the figure of Devil, and Sharky, as a human, are equal: "There are clear parallels between Sharky's situation and Lockhart's – both men have fallen from a state of grace, and both are tortured not just by the harshness of their circumstances, but also by the memory of what they have lost" (Lonergan 2013: 178).

figures over the humans: Scarecrow makes Woman aware of the aspects of her life experience that she would prefer not to remember (cf. Miller 2018) and Mr. Lockhart leads Sharky into accepting his guilt without questioning the validity of the story about him. Finally, Auntie Ah and Him are unaware of the presence of Scarecrow and of the game between this supernatural being and Woman. Similarly, the game in *The Seafarer* is played out by all the characters on the stage; yet only Sharky and Mr. Lockhart deal for the ultimate prize. Strangely enough, it is one of these unaware men that makes Sharky win his life over and show the superiority of God's love of humanity. Paradoxically, as Mr. Lockhart suggests, "Somebody up there likes you, Shark. You've got it all" (McPherson 2007: 103); and such a suggestion may be found in the stage directions as well: "Lockhart leaves. The light under the Sacred Heart blinks on. The first rays of dawn are seeping into the room. The front door slams" (McPherson 2007: 104). Sharky is saved and offered the opportunity to begin his life anew. What is worth noting is that such a conclusion has already been hinted at in one of Mr. Lockhart's monologues quoted before: "He loves you insects … (Lost and distant) Figure that one out" (McPherson 2007: 80). This statement is crucial in understanding Mr. Lockhart's knowledge and power, and the way he uses them to manipulate such characters as Sharky. It can be argued that he realises that human characters might escape him; still, he makes Sharky believe that, in the end, it is Hell that awaits him after the card game is over. The supernatural character does not win; yet, the moment of revealing to whom the victory belongs is deferred. Mr. Lockhart does not question the new result and accepts it; at the same time, he acknowledges the loss of Sharky's soul and his own control over others, contrary to Woman's predicament of death in Carr's drama: she "(throws herself on Scarecrow) Oh Scarecrow… the next breath isn't coming. […] And she dies in Scarecrow's arms" (Carr 2009: 225).

As a conclusion, it should be emphasised that both plays contain a lot of ambiguities, not only with reference to the scope of knowledge bestowed on Carr's and McPherson's supernatural characters but also in terms of the instability of such notions as truth, falsehood, negation. Within this uncertainty and the ambiguity of ghostly encounters on the stage *The Seafarer* and *Woman and Scarecrow*, on individual levels of the worlds depicted, contribute to the portrayal of spectral beings and spaces described by Morash and Richards. Mr. Lockhart and Scarecrow haunt Sharky and Woman in their private realities and in the intimate context of their families and acquaintances. The relationship between Scarecrow and Woman is different from that between Mr. Lockhart and Sharky. In Carr's play, the characters have known each other for a long time and the moment of Woman's death is their prolonged farewell (cf. Miller 2018). In McPherson's work, it is Mr. Lockhart who knows details of Sharky's life, but the mortal character can hardly recognise him. Nevertheless, in both dramatic situations the function of spectrality is to blur the boundary between the present and the past, and to make the latter part of the former. Similarly, the two plays show how the supernatural beings are neither present nor absent, taking into account the way in which they appear to the main characters, as well as others in the plays.

In terms of the relation between intimate spectral encounters and a more general context of spectrality, *The Seafarer* and *Woman and Scarecrow* are based on various European cultural and literary traditions of depicting a deal with the devil and death personified (cf. Miller 2018). Still, they prove the importance of intimate spectral encounters in the development of contemporary Irish drama, situated within discourses of revision, reconsideration, questioning and undermining the existing structures of power and sources of knowledge (see, for example, Singleton 2004: 258–70). This undermining occurs in the configuration of these characters and suggests the volatile ontological and epistemological status of the spectral beings. Such figures as Scarecrow and Mr. Lockhart serve to show how the dramatic position of supernatural beings changes in the plays and

how the relation between power and knowledge can be used to manipulate others. Nevertheless, this manipulation is not always successful, as the case of Mr. Lockhart demonstrates: the final word does not belong to the spectral figure and he cannot in fact decide about human life and death.

Works Cited

Carr, Marina. 2009. *Woman and Scarecrow. Plays 2*. London: Faber & Faber.

Davis, Colin. 2005. "État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms." *French Studies*, Vol. LIX, No. 3, 373–79. https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143

Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Transl. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge.

Gordon, David. 2018. "Death Becomes Her in *Woman and Scarecrow*." *TheaterMania*, 20 May 2018. https://www.theatermania.com/off-broadway/reviews/review-woman-and-scarecrow_85271. html, DOA: 4.03.2021.

Hill, Shonagh. 2019. *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108756327

Jordan, Eamonn. 2019. *The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities*. London and New York: Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Lonergan, Patrick. 2011. "Irish Theatre and Globalisation: A Faustian Pact?" In: Eamon Maher (ed.). *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 177–90.

Lorek-Jezińska, Edyta. 2013. *Hauntology and Intertextuality in Contemporary British Drama by Women Playwrights*. Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press.

McPherson, Conor. 2007. *The Seafarer*. New York: Theatre Communications Group. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781784600341.00000004

Miller, Deb. 2018. Review: 'Woman and Scarecrow' at Irish Repertory Theatre. DC Metro, 20 May. https://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2018/05/20/review-woman-and-scarecrow-at-irish-repertory-theatre/, DOA: 18.03.2021.

Morash, Christopher. 2004. *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morash, Christopher and Shaun Richards. 2013. *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139600309

Murray, Christopher. 2000. *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

Sihra, Melissa. 2018. *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98331-8

Singleton, Brian. 2004. "The Revival Revisited." In: Shaun Richards (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 258–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521804000.019

Trench, Rhona. 2010. *Bloody Living: The Loss of Selfhood in the Plays of Marina Carr*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Watt, Stephen. 2000. "Love and Death: A Reconsideration of Behan and Genet." In: Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, Shakir Mustafa (eds). *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 130–45.

White, Eva Roa. 2018. "Whose Dublin Is It Anyway? Joyce, Doyle and the City." In: Maria Beville and Deirdre Flynn (eds). *Irish Urban Fictions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98322-6_2

Małgorzata Hołda

University of Łódź, Poland

 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3772-6297

e-mail: margaret.c.holda@gmail.com

The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings

Abstract

Woolf's maturing as a writer was deeply influenced by her traumatic experiences in childhood, the (in)capacitating states of mental instability, as well as her proto-feminist convictions. Long before Barthes, she toppled the traditional position of the author, and her literary enshrinement of "the other reality" reached unity with the world rather than individuality. This article ponders Woolf's creative impulse and investigates her autobiographical writings to show the import of their impact on her fiction, which, as Woolfian scholarship suggests, can be viewed as autobiographical, too. I argue that philosophical hermeneutics sheds light on the self-portrait that emerges from Woolf's autobiographical writings and offers a rewarding insight into her path of becoming an author. I assert that Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of subjectivity, and, in particular, his notion of narrative identity provide a route to examine how Woolf discovers her writing voice. In light of his hermeneutics of the self, the dispersed elements of the narrative of life can be seen as a possibility of self-encounter. Woolf's writings bespeak her gradually evolving self-knowledge and self-understanding, which come from the configuration of those separate "stories" into a meaningful whole. The article also interprets Woolf's autobiographical writings through the prism of Michel Foucault's reflection on discourse and subjectivity, indicating that her texts instantiate his assertion of the subject's constant disappearance.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, autobiography, hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault

Introduction

After the publication of *The Waves*, which Woolf considered her greatest novel, she confesses: "Oh yes, between 50 & 60 I think I shall write out some singular books, if I live. I mean I think I am about to embody, at last, the exact shapes my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning – if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style!" (*Diary* 4, 1983: 53).[1] In this way Woolf writes about the many years of her writerly enterprise and the achievement of a unique writing voice, which she deems "the beginning." This diary entry records an important moment of self-discovery which conveys the reaching of a writing maturity. The truth about her outstanding creativity, which

---

[1] Virginia Woolf's writings are cited with title or acronym included in parenthetical citation wherever appropriate.

she self-consciously encapsulates as "the exact shapes my brain holds," manifests her attempt to control the proliferation of ideas and an exigency to put them down on paper in a satisfactory way.

Becoming an author, as a processual venture, invites us to pose a question about its constitutive elements. Woolf's autobiographical texts as well as her novels, which, as researchers agree, can be viewed as autobiographical (cf. e.g., Amselle 2008; Lounsberry 2015; Showalter 2016; Booth 2016), are a space in which one can locate the novelist's search for her self. Addressing Woolf's fictional and autobiographical writings in light of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self allows us to see her creative production as an intriguing self-narrative, in which all the diffused elements of her all at once dramatic and intriguing life find meaning. An employment of Ricoeur's critical perspective prompts us to view Woolf's "reach[ing] this beginning" as a hermeneutic process of self-understanding and unraveling of the writing "I." The many selves that emerge from Woolf's writings inspire us also to seek an insight into Foucault's examination of the human subject in discourse. The shifting positioning of Woolf's writing "I" – the polyphonic space that it occupies in discourse – prompts an investigation into how his query of "what is an author?", propounding the subject's ungraspable nature, its continuous partaking in the appearance/disappearance game, relates to her writings.

The Intimate Liaison between Woolf's Autobiographical and Fictional Writings

Without a shadow of a doubt, the scrutiny of the interconnections between Woolf's diaries, letters, memoirs, and her fiction enhances an understanding of the essence of her creative idiom. Her *oeuvre* shows a lack of the rigid generic distinction between the fictional and autobiographical writings; her novels look more like passages in diaries containing records of loosely connected thoughts; and her memoirs, letters, and diaries resemble novelistic writing in its concentration on extensive and detailed evocations of the inner and outer reality. Woolf's autobiographical writings display an innovatory touch in defying a rather inflexible, matter-of-fact way of chronicling life. Her diaristic style impacts the stylistics of her fictions, resulting in the superabundant, detailed accounts of events, but, also, her modernist, experimental fiction influences the way she records life in her diaries and memoirs. Woolf's diaries show a lack of a clearly demarcated line between writer and reader – she is a dedicated storyteller/chronicler, capturing the beauty of life phenomena, and a careful reader/interpreter of that which happens and calls for interpretation. Responding to an urge not only to depict but to fully comprehend, she captures the real in the epiphanic "moments of being" which are poetic disclosures of Being. Her hermeneutic sensibility of a patient reading/ interpreting of the inner world of the human mind and the outer reality results in the disruptions of the writer/reader boundary. Her autobiographical writing is a hyper-conscious reading in which she transgresses the barrier between her private self and the writing persona. Reflecting on her life in diaries and viewing it in hindsight, especially in "A Sketch of the Past," she disavows the self/ Other dichotomy – the writing self becomes the Other that is reading and *re*reading the private self.

In many ways the beauty of Woolf's fascinatingly autobiographical *oeuvre* (fictional and non-fictional) rests on upgrading the significance of everydayness. The particularity of the present moment is captured in exhaustive accounts of that which is happening. This exceptional rendering of minute elements of reality, as evidenced in her autobiographical writings, influences the creation of her fictional imaginings. Frequently, the spark of an idea, blooming and expanding in her diaries, finds its final, crystalized form in fiction. Lyndan Gordon notices that whereas Woolf "saw [her fiction] as 'the finished article'; the diary was 'the raw,' and one was in some indirect way dependent on the fertility of the other" (2005: 11). In a similar way, after Philippe Lejeune (2006: 36–37) and

Barbara Lounsberry (2014), Adele Cassigneul stresses that a diary functions as a "workshop … a reflexive space of creation," and emphasizes that this definition aptly applies to Woolf's diaristic writing (2015: 2).

The import of the quotidian in Woolf's works, however, draws attention to another, even more central aspect of her writing – her exquisite concentration on the "moment of being" – which is the moment of a heightened awareness of being, capable of disclosing something vitally real behind the façade of appearances that she names the "cotton wool" – the everyday, repeatable activities of "non-being" (Woolf 1985: 70). The "moment of being" is one of the elements of Woolf's experiment. There is a close affinity between her autobiographical writings and her experimenting with the novelistic form. The conceptual conjoining of the two results in a mature writing style in Woolf's masterpiece novels (Dahl 1983: 175). The evocations of "the moment of being" greatly contribute to the beauty of her mature novels and are the source of an unflagging critical interest. Giving examples from *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, Nicole L. Urquhart writes about Woolf's "moment of being" thus: "Unlike Joyce's epiphanies, these moments do not lead to decisive revelations for her characters. But they provide moments of energy and awareness that allow the character who experiences them to see life more clearly and more fully, if only briefly" (1998: 2). The "moment of being" as a staple feature of Woolf's fictions accords with its importance in her autobiographical writing, potently shown in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, which feature the epiphanic moments in her life. I discuss in detail the quotidian and "the moment of being" as contributing to the autobiographical visage of her novelistic writings in the later part of the present study.

The interdependence between Woolf's fiction and her autobiographical texts can be viewed as having two forms. Woolf either self-consciously prepares the ground for her yet-to-be novel in diaries before she sets off to write it, and/or converses with her imaginative self while the novel is in progress. For instance, in a diary entry from 30 April 1926, she writes:

> Yesterday I finished the first part of To the Lighthouse, & today began the second. I cannot make it out – here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to: well, I rush at it, & at once scatter out two pages. Is it nonsense, is it brilliance? Why am I so flown with words, & apparently free to do exactly what I like? (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

This and countless other diary entries show Woolf as an enticing self-commentator of her fiction. Being her own interlocutor, censor, and confidant, she lives in two inseparable worlds: the private, intimate world of chronicling (diaries, letters, memoirs), and the superabundant world of her imagination as reflected in her fiction. Woolf's adamant interpreting of her work, beliefs, gifts, etc., which demonstrates her profound hermeneutic sensibility, becomes her inimitable *modus scribendi*. Her diaries flourish with self-commentary and self-analysis. For example, in a diary entry from 9 May 1926 we read:

> Obscurely, I have my clothes complex to deal with. When I am asked out my first thought is, but I have no clothes to go in. Todd has never sent me the address of the shop; & I may have annoyed her by refusing to lunch with her. But the Virginia who refuses is a very instinctive & therefore powerful person. The reflective & sociable only comes to the surface later. Then the conflict. (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

Most importantly, Woolf's commitment to experimenting with both the novelistic genre and autobiography – an attempt to construe autobiography more in the vein of a novel and to create a novel in a way which would make it resemble autobiography – becomes one of the goals that she

passionately pursues. Interestingly, reflecting in her diary on the creation of her most experimental novel, *The Waves*, she shows her attempt to mold it in the vein of autobiography in its propensity to unify the otherwise disjointed mental elements – the portraits of "A mind thinking":

> Tuesday 28 May, 1929 I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp & a flower pot in the centre. The flower can always be changing. But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present. Autobiography it might be called. (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

As she confesses, in this innovative novel she does not aim to tell a story, but rather to capture "life itself going on." The work towards this effect involves Woolf's nearing the angle of vision to that which is traditionally attributed to (auto)biography. Her unique grasping of the ungraspable passage of time and the screening of the inconclusive processions of people, places, sentiments, moods, tastes, and sounds in her diaries resonate in her experimental, modernist prose. The thesis of the creative possibilities in Woolf's diarist production is effectively highlighted in Adele Cassigneul's review of Barbara Lounsberry's *Becoming Virginia Woolf* (2015: 2). Constructing her narratives, Woolf interweaves them with her non-fictional writing through meaningful allusions to events and reflections recorded in her diaries. For instance, Clarissa's love of walking about in London (in *Mrs. Dalloway*) and the discovery of a death within her party echo a diary entry from 25 May 1926:

> The heat has come, bringing with it the inexplicably disagreeable memories of parties, & George Duckworth; a fear haunts me even now, as I drive past Park Lane on top of a bus, & think of Lady Arthur Russell & so on. I become out of love with everything; but fall into love as the bus reaches Holborn. A curious transition that, from tyranny to freedom. Mixed with it is the usual "I thought that when you died last May, Charles, there had died along with you" – death being hidden among the leaves. (*Woolf Online*, *Diary of Virginia Woolf*)

Woolf's diaries do not only chronicle life events but reflect her continuous self-analysis and contain important commentaries on her writing process:

> When I read a bit, it [*To the Lighthouse*] seems spirited too; needs compressing, but not much else. Compare this dashing fluency with the excruciating hard wrung battles I had with Mrs. Dalloway (save the end). This is not made up: it is the literal fact. Yes, & I am rather famous. (*Woolf Online, Diary of Virginia Woolf*)

Woolf's autobiographical production is not a secondary source but a fully-fledged literary enterprise bespeaking her talents and literary aspirations. Her novels are accompanied by her diaristic and journalistic intertexts, which are captivating sideline narratives partaking in the process of their creation (Lounsberry 2014: 10–12, 62–63; cf. also Cassigneul 2015: 2). Lounsberry's analysis of the significance of the interconnections between Woolf's autobiographical and fictional writings is an important continuation of the earlier analyses developed by Philippe Lejeune & Catherine Bogaert (2006), and Frédérique Amselle (2008).

By their very nature, diaries monitor the events of some period; usually, they contain day-by-day recollections. Woolf's prose and diaries demonstrate a similar approach in "… keeping that fount of life going" (Gordon 2005: 11). She is an inveterate chronicler, an admirer of life, begrudging even a short period of time which slips by unreported: "She castigated herself if she did not catch every drop in the diary. If eleven days went unrecorded, it was a lapse – 'life allowed to waste like a tap left running'" (*Diary* 1: 239 in Gordon 2005: 11). Woolf's disconsolation when life passes by unattended or is painfully neglected, which Gordon's interrogation emphasizes, is

recuperated in her novelistic writing, in which she makes the most of the manifold sensations and observances she has, piling up images that ooze like shadows and inhabit her fictions – the "lost opportunities" regained.

Woolf's outstanding productivity in autobiographical writings ("nearly four thousand letters, thirty volumes of diaries, and unfinished memoirs" (Gordon 2005: 12) was backed up with her theoretical work on biographical writing (generically close but displaying a dissimilar focus – that space of reflexivity and chronicling is delimited to another author's life): "The New Biography" (1927) and "The Art of Biography" (1938), *Roger Fry* (a biography of Bloomsbury's famous member); as well as her pseudo-biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush* (Reviron-Piegay 2017: 2–3). Her search for a new form of biographical writing was assisted by the reading of the biographies of other famous writers. For instance, she was inspired to seek new ways of rendering an auto(biographical) form while reviewing Henry James's autobiography published posthumously. Similarly, her "discovery of Walter Scott's 'Gurnal'" expressed a keen interest in the genre of biography (Gordon 2005: 11). The impact of the biographies of other authors on Woolf's diaristic writing was meticulously examined in Lounsberry's studies (2015 and 2020). After Lounsberry, Adele Cassigneul cogently stresses the influence of autobiographical writings of famous literary figures on Woolf – "diary-reading and diary-writing"[2] (2015: 2–3).

Woolf's diaries, pseudo-biographies, and novels burgeon with countless thoughts and memories that are quicksilver and broken into pieces. She fashions her autobiographical writing against the fossilized rules of Victorian biography with its faithful, personality-centered approach, considering them shallow and defective (Reviron-Piegay 2017: 3–4). Shattering the conventions of realism, delving into the meanders of the mind and the flow of the outside reality that constantly impinges on the inner world, she poses the oft-asked query about *mimesis* anew and shows a novel, more flexible and more capacious approach to the notion. She meaningfully includes in her literary representations the interior reality of a human being's mind – associations, projections, and fantasies (Showalter 2016: 1). Woolf's supreme capability of representing the quotidian paves her path towards her mature novels, which show an exceptional aptitude in re-formulating the circumscriptions of mimetic writing. Her writing idiom embraces the new collusion of the inner and outer world. Scrupulous evocations of the inner workings of the characters' minds are accompanied by masterfully detailed accounts of the outside reality. A passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Woolf portrays Septimus' ecstatic infatuation with spring's beauty, instantiates the radical shift in her understanding of *mimesis* – a detailed description of a physical reality is filled with multiple thoughts and sensations that come through the character's mind and body. As the narrator notes in the excerpt, an ordinary walk in the park becomes the site of a refined, contemplative response to reality:

> Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round … and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper … – all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. (*MD* 47)

Woolf's portrayals of dailiness are not only beautiful evocations of the quotidian but, brimming with details, they show an agreement between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the

---

[2] This includes Woolf's reading of the diaries of Fanny Burney, Mary Berry, Lady Stanhope, Mary Coleridge, to name a few.

immanent and the transcendent. The world of objects is both contrasted and saturated with the fleeting sensations of that which is beyond and above. In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, an excerpt illustrates Woolf's deep understanding of reality – its immersion in Being. During the famous diner party scene, Mrs. Ramsay, the hostess, is depicted as sensing the subtlety of the belonging-together of the material and the immaterial. "It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity" (*TTL* 69). By the same token, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf sketches Clarissa, the eponymous heroine, as belonging to the material reality of London and wholly submerged in her spiritual world: "She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone" (*MD* 6). For Woolf, human everydayness is a captivating territory through which she explores the human mind:

> While Woolf sought to remove the heavy furniture of the realist and naturalist novel in order to render the inner workings of the mind – "the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" – she knew that the modern novel could not flee from the external world of everyday things … Woolf's finest writing calls attention to ordinary experiences in a world full of ordinary things. (Olsen 2003: 42–43)

The new formula of rendering dailiness which marks Woolf's novels is well noticeable in her autobiographical and biographical writings too, *Roger Fry* and *Flush*.

All the loosely connected thoughts and images in Woolf's multi-faceted (auto)biographical texts (diaries and memoirs) emanate the same kind of enticing appeal. Her capacity of presenting a free flow of thinking stretches *ad infinitum*, with the covers of a novel, or a decision to close a day entry in a diary serving as the only boundary. The lavishness of imagery in fiction echoes the extremely sensuous perception of human existence articulated in her autobiographical writings. In a similarly fascinating way, the individual, secretive, and intimate, as well as the collective, social, and convivial find a genius expression in both Woolf's poetic prose and her daily records or reminiscences in autobiographical texts. Delving in the joys and sorrows of the quotidian and exalting in the momentous epiphanies of the real thing, she attains ultimate mastery of a chronicler in a modern style.

The novelist's incessant quest to capture the ever-escaping reality powerfully marks both her autobiographical and fictional writings. Woolf's autobiographical writings reveal her unparalleled flair for grasping fleeting sensations; thus, her diaries and memoirs read not just as down-to-earth chronicles but as recollections suffused with a sense of an enigma of human existence. Aware that it is impossible to arrest life in its ever-changing potential, realizable in multiple ways, she follows the experimental, innovatory path of doing justice to life's factic changeability and unrepeatability. In a diary entry she confesses: "I have to some extent forced myself to break every mould & find a fresh form of being, that is of expression, for everything I feel & think" (*Diary 4* 233). In her fictional writings, this novel approach – the finding of "a fresh form of being" – gives rise to her attempts to picture "moments of being": the moments of unique awareness of Being which disclose something utterly important about human existence and the universe. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf creates her heroine, Mrs. Ramsay, as discovering, experiencing, and reflecting on the significance of the moments of sudden revelation – visionary moments that reveal some fundamental truth about Being against the backdrop of the ever-changing and ever-escaping reality:

> Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something

> different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from a change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (*TTL* 69)

In a similar vein to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, the artist in the novel, attempts to comprehend the significant "content" of the moment of being which encapsulates some important truth about human existence:

> And to those words, what meaning attached, after all? Standing now, apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity. (*TTL* 15)

In *To the Lighthouse* and her other works of fiction, Woolf captures reality "… in fits and glimpses, through impressions, comments, and discursions, through conviction and instinct" (Bimberg 2001: 2). Woolf's concentration on the moment of being, the inimitable feature of her fictional and autobiographical writings, can also be discerned in her new approach to biography. As Alison Booth emphasizes, Woolf was "… born and bred in a culture of biography and commemoration. …Woolf's version of fresh, vital biography for the new age resembles her father's principles for good biography, with the crucial difference that the subject might be obscure or female. Biography should be neither weighted down with fact nor idealized, but honed to essential moments of being" (2016: 13–14). The modern stylistics pertaining to (auto)biographical and fictional writings is discernible in the already hinted upon disavowal of the rigidity of genres' prescription. Woolf's famous *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the novel-cum-biography, debunks the factual mode of representation and argues for the *novelistic* form of a biographical account. The mixing of genres is taken even further when Woolf conceives a mock biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, *Flush*. Its satirical tone compellingly expresses Woolf's talent for deconstructing the idea of a "solid," traditional biography. The inclusion of personal details and of ordinariness molds modernist biographical writing. Woolf's biographies are a vivid exemplification of this new way of looking at biography:

> In her [Woolf's] lifetime, it became widely acknowledged that the truth about someone's life should include personal details and private moments rather than polite generalizations, and that many kinds of lives were worth noting, not just those of eminent public figures. These realizations about the value of ordinary experience inspired Woolf as a novelist, to be sure. Yet it is also worth noting how much of what Woolf wrote consisted of non-fiction life writing or commentary on documented lives of the past. (Booth 2016: 14)

This highlights the import of cross-fertilizations between Woolf's fictional and non-fictional writing; her meticulous evocations of human everydayness give shape to her modern novels.

Working towards biography's new form, Woolf engages narrative's discontinuity and fluidity. This kind of writing becomes her *modus operandi*. It is discernible in her experimental biography of Roger Fry and magnified in "A Sketch of the Past" – a portrait of her childhood memories, which Woolf writes as a break from *Roger Fry*. Defying the "fixed and lifeless" representation of life, she subverts the abiding ramifications of autobiography and aims to achieve "a portrait of a self created and constructed by the specificities of time, space, physical sensation and memory" (Kirkwood 2014: 1). In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf counterpoints the many memoirs that she

reads as mere records of events, which, to use her words, "leave out the person to whom things happened" (Gilbert 2011: 2). Clearly, an attempt to capture "the self as contingent and in constant flux coupled with the impossibility of defining it …" (Kirkwood 2014: 1) becomes the key feature of her autobiographical and fictional writing.

Woolf, Ricoeur, and the Contingent Self

Woolf's unwavering interest in the intangibility of the human self and its constructedness inspires us to investigate the self's representations in her diaries, letters, and memoirs in light of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of subjectivity. Her conception of the human self, as well as her projections of *self* (or *many selves*) onto her created selves analyzed through the prism of Ricoeur's state-of-the-art notion of narrative identity, engenders a possibility to understand the otherwise irresolvable nature of the human subject in a literary discourse in terms of a cohesive narration which embraces the versatility of the authoress' voices.

Ricoeur's *narrative identity* provides for the constancy of the self, the *idem* constituent, and identity that is changing in time, the *ipse* element. He ascertains that as the narrative of one's life unfolds, the self gradually and retrospectively grasps the meaning of her identity, recognizing and reconciling her many selves into a "synchronized," unified self (Ricoeur 1991: 74–76). Deploying his philosophy of the self in Woolfian scholarship helps appreciate hermeneutic insights into the process of her becoming an author. Hermeneutics as the art of understanding illuminates the pathway to uncover meaning in existence and enhances one's capability of self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) (Jervolino 1990: 40–42). And this also meaningfully applies to the activity of imaginative writing as a meaning-laden part of human (writer's) existence. To unveil its conditions, to near an understanding of the creative self remains within the domain of hermeneutic investigation.

There are three clearly distinguishable facets of Woolf's writing which contribute to her enterprise as an authoress. Each of them, in their own way, is expressive of her genius and a pathway to authoring books. First, there is the therapeutic stratum, which involves a continuous process of the synchronization of her life experiences. This is geared at reconciliation – an attempt to explicate, to come to an understanding, and to see via writing. Second, which interlinks with the first, is writing as a possibility of channeling her mental capabilities as well as instabilities into an activity structuralized in time and space. Third, Woolf's writing is an expression of her social and political thinking, her proto-feminist attitudes. Writing is then a creative, individual response to the problems of her time, for instance, to a woman's position in society (with the prominent example of her most influential "A Room of One's Own").

This study narrows an explication of the factors contributing to Woolf's career as an author to the therapeutic and structuralizing ones. There is a substantial body of research on the interconnections between mental instability, depression, and psychic syndromes and creativity (see e.g., Janka 2004; Rihmer *et al* 2006; Hetil 2004; Kaufman 2014; Alvarez 2020). It seems justifiable to pose a question whether Woolf's fiction arises to some degree from an impasse to effectively communicate her mental states to her family and friends, and thereby give meaning to her inner experience of desolation and despair as shown in severe nervous breakdowns and suicidal attempts. Whereas phenomenological hermeneutics does not attempt to give an answer to the enigma of one's mental predicament and its connection to creativity, it enhances – via the abundance of the investigated phenomena – the process of self's discovery and self-understanding (see e.g., Gander 2017), as well as an understanding of the relationship between mental states and writing capacity. Woolf's creative capability seems to be stranded between the times of ultimate, almost divine,

productivity and the most acute bouts of depression and physical exhaustion. Woolfian researchers posit that while the novelist's life was haunted by returning depression, she created her fictions in the intermittent states of relative mental stability (see e.g., Lombardi 1997; Koutsantoni 2012). With a poignant awareness of her encroaching madness, Woolf conceived her writing as embedded in the moments of stability. Her intense writing between depressive attacks is discussed, for instance, by Gustavo Figueroa (2005).

Most significantly, the extremity of her ups and downs, as well as the undulations of her creative activity, bespeak the fluid nature of her identity. The many selves that seem to be her, analyzed through the lens of Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, allow us to see them as greatly contributing to the persona of a writer – they are her writing self. The multiple, discordant, or even contradictory voices that emerge in her narratives (orphaned, androgynous, feminist, mentally distraught, political, etc.) are the outward expressions of her manifold selves, also of the socially constructed ones. Woolf grapples with her subjectivity by framing her diffused self that responds to the manifold external forces in autobiographical writings and projects her self onto the selves created in her fiction.

Her versatile and multi-layered self finds its meaningful expression in the way she sketches her characters with, at times, only a flimsy barrier between one character's self and that of another. For instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf creates Clarissa and Septimus, her *Doppelgänger* (both are the figures of the novelist herself) as two consciousnesses and yet, in the moment of the novel's climax – as one. The six children in *The Waves* do not seem to possess separate selves but are all part of some greater consciousness; the barriers between the self and the Other hardly exist. The impact of Woolf's multiple selfhoods on her writing self manifests itself in the autobiographical character of her narratives which are to a great extent literary epitomizations of the self caught in the toils of mental predicament. For instance, *To the Lighthouse* dramatizes Woolf's tragically curtailed relationships with her mother and father. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the two main characters who portray her own parents "… reflect Leslie Stephen's background as a former university don and intellectual, and Julia Stephen's visiting of the poor and ill" (Booth 2016: 22). *Orlando*, a literary expression of Virginia's love for Vita Sackville, features an androgynous hero, hinting upon Woolf's sexuality (Booth 2016: 22).

Undeniably, in her fictional writing the novelist traces her self, which seems to be more than one. The dispersed self, encrypted in the many stories of her life, in Ricoeurian terminology, is configured and reconfigured. Significantly, in the process of configuration and reconfiguration, which furnishes her texts, her writing self is being built: it undergoes a process of creation in response to the changing reality of her identity. For instance, Woolfian scholarship seems to agree on the interconnection between the novelist's attempts at suicide and medical treatment and the creation of Septimus and his suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her success in fictional writing was preceded by suicidal attempts but also it was haunted by fits of "manic depression" (cf. e.g., Booth 2016: 14–15). Woolf's wounded self is reflected in the suffering self of her characters. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the reconfigured reality of her self – the self-discovery of homosexuality– "inhabits" *Orlando*.

Woolf's confused voices of "the untold," finding their way in the "told" on the page, work towards a formation of her as an author. Explicating the creative, dynamic, and changing aspect of identity, Ricoeur uses the terms "concordant discord" and "discordant concord," which convey the movement from discordant and often highly tangled elements of the narrative of one's life towards a configuration of a cohesive life story, expressed in narrative identity (Ricoeur 1991b: 426). In the process of becoming a writer, Woolf emerges as a powerful reader of her own life story, or stories,

while attaining identity which comprises the entirety of her individuated voices. An analysis of authorship through the prism of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, explored mostly in *Oneself as Another* (1992), allows us to understand more deeply the import of authorship as a processual, formative, and self-creative phenomenon. According to Ricoeur, the self is not a ready-made entity, but is changing over time and is formed horizontally in relation to the present (one's relations with relatives and other people) and diagonally, by its sense of belongingness to a certain past and tradition, as well as anticipating the future (1991a: 75–78, see also e.g., Hołda 2018: 115).

The articulation of the many voices that comprised Woolf as a writer as well as the unrestricted "movement" of her self from one cameo appearance to another in her major fictional writings show her unflagging search for her personal and writing self. Her autobiographical texts and fiction-cum-autobiography demonstrate an indissoluble oneness of those two "streams" of identity. Woolf's cameo appearances in her fiction are her well-known device. For instance, Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf's stand-in) appears in a group of six stories, under the title *Mrs. Dalloway's Party*. Woolf discusses the process of composing *Mrs. Dalloway* but also her other novels in letters and journals (Showalter 2016: 8). The same observation is made in Monica Latham's essay "Clarissa Dalloway's itinerary: narrative identity across texts." The critic accentuates that the boundaries across her novels in terms of character's "existence" seem to be fluid (Mrs. Dalloway is present in *The Voyage Out* and in "Clarissa Dalloway in Bond Street") (Latham 2015).

Evoking the fluid self in her fiction, Woolf acknowledges the great impact of the outside reality on the formation of the human subject. Thus, her notion of the self is not that of a separate entity, but rather she reveals its free moving between selves, its melting with the self of the Other, or even its being meshed with some exterior phenomenon. Her texts manifest a pantheistic belief in the unity with the world of nature. For instance, Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* seems to be one with the stroke of the lighthouse light (Woolf 2018: 42). The dynamic, changeable self that emerges from Woolf's autobiographical texts and novels-cum-autobiographies expresses an inimitable conviction of self's oneness with some reality that is other than itself, even if those in-dwellings are temporary and unstable.

Woolf, Foucault, and Text as the Space of Self's Constant Disappearance

Woolf's versatile embodiments of her self across texts – the appearances of the same character (a stand-in) in more than one narrative, moving liberally between the writer/reader roles, and the self's various "habitations" – invite us to ponder Foucault's reflection on the function of the author and the space Woolf occupies as a writer in relation to her poetic discourse. The hermeneutic condition of writing is an engaging point of convergence of Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and Foucault's insistence on the self-creative or self-formative aspect of subjectivity (cf. Hołda 2018: 75–82), which by extension can be applied to the writing self and Woolf's articulation of her many selves in writing. While Barthes proclaims the death of the author, Foucault delves deeper into the enigma shrouding the function of an author and highlights the subverted status of the author. Echoing Beckett's provocative query, he asks: "What does it matter who is speaking?" (2000: 174).

Foucault makes two important claims in relation to the position of the author. The text is the dispersion of the writing self into many selves and it is the space of self's constant disappearance (Foucault 2000: 182). In "What Is an Author?" he ascertains:

> ... writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier.

> Writing unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exhaust the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (Foucault 2000: 175)

The impossibility of pinning the subject within language defies the illusion that we may cherish about the "solidity" of the subject in discourse. The last statement in the excerpt accentuates an impasse in articulating the univocal subjectivity as contained in writing and evokes the dynamic dispersion of the self into many consciousnesses. Foucault underlines the plurivocity of the self that the writing self is: "... all discourses endowed with the author-function do possess this plurality of self" (2000: 182). He explicates further: "The author-function is not assumed by the first of these selves at the expense of the other two, which would then be nothing more than a fictitious splitting in two of the first one. On the contrary, in these discourses the author-function operates so as to effect the dispersion of these three simultaneous selves" (Foucault 2000: 182). The simultaneous existence of more than one self provides a significant insight into the intricate world of Woolf's mediating selves. In her texts, the self generates a sense of originality and immediacy, while retaining the correspondences with other voice/voices. Woolf manifests her conviction that we possess multiple selves – "built one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand" (Woolf 2008: 293) – in her fictional and autobiographical texts, both through creating characters as shadows or alter egos and by "inhabiting" her characters in the form of versatile "embodiments" of her self in and across texts.

Going beyond the rules, transgressing the limits of the "writing game," Woolf's writing self continually disappears – which means it melts its own contours, it devours its own firmness – as none of the selves she seems to be takes on the monumental once and forever established quality. The remarkable variability of her selves partakes in the play of concealment and un-concealment, moving freely from the center to periphery, homodiegetically participating in the narrative, and viewing it from the extradiegetic perspective of an outside observer. Reflecting on the interrelation between authorship and subjectivity, Foucault endeavors to "grasp the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies," and raises a set of other related questions: "How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?" (2000: 186).

Showing an awareness of the misty ramifications of the author's position, Woolf moves freely between the status of writer and reader. Foucault's contention of the subject's continuous disappearance in discourse sheds an interesting light on Woolf's freedom in shifting the position of the subject. The most vivid example of the blurred distinction between writer and reader is her autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past," where she continually strives to grasp the clash between the self and the ways it can be represented in a text, devising strategies of rendering the unmatchable space between one's memory of the event and the event as such. Woolf observes that a memoir writer's difficulty lies in the focus on events themselves and not the person that experiences them (Goldman 2006: 2). The text of *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* inspires us to see how Woolf copes with the disparity between the mental image of an event and that which has happened when she adopts the position of a reader and remains in a dialogue with the subjective accounts of her youthful years.[3]

Displaying the anti-mimetic and anti-monumental approach to biography, Woolf participates in various modes of authorial functioning. She is not just aware of the unavoidable unreliability of

---

[3] A cogent discussion of Woolf's approach to the workings of memory is offered in McIntire. 2008. *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*. McIntire emphasizes Woolf's flair for evoking bodily sensations as the site of memories.

autobiography but crafts its new form. Her novelistic-autobiographical writing, professing the truth of the momentary glimpses of the past, rather than portraying reality as it was, indicates the veracity of Foucault's assertion that to "pin a subject within language" (2000: 175) is impossible. In her documentary texts, Woolf catches the truth of "the impossibility to write authentically about the self" (Kirkwood 2014: 2). As Kirkwood explains: "There is always a gap between the narrating voice and the subject; any attempt to unify the two and self-consciously analyze one's experiences results in false justifications and constructions of the self" (2014: 2). The unavoidable impossibility to grasp the subject – its intangibility – demonstrates not just an impasse in seizing the self, but also in seizing comprehension of the past in memoirs and autobiographies. Woolf responds to this insufficiency through her attempt at an autobiographical narrative, which dismisses the stark, downright factuality, and becomes a story that is agile and full of grace rather than a record, or a slavishly faithful account of events.

Conclusion

The insights afforded by philosophical hermeneutics in the interpretation of Woolf's autobiographical texts and fictional imaginings (viewed as predominantly autobiographical) help understand her writing self in light of the fluid subjectivity that she endorses, and which emerges from her novels, diaries, and memoirs. When Woolf subversively claims that, "There's no Shakespeare ... no Beethoven ... no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (1985: 70), she discloses her profound understanding of creative subjectivity not as refuting the individual human subject all together, but rather manifesting the loss of the boundaries in the creative process, the blurring of the distinctions between self and Other, writer/reader, and autobiography/fiction.

In the first part of the article, I posited that the self-interpreting stance Woolf takes in her diaries in relation to her novels in progress bespeaks an exceptionally intimate liaison between (auto)biographical and fictional writings. Woolf's formal experimenting is not just an issue of an awe-inspiring originality and newness but precipitates a gradual uncovering of her specific writing idiom. The entirety of her texts – fictional and non-fictional – constitutes a fabulous body of writing – a unique self-narrative. The second section of this essay rests on Woolf's remarkable propensity to approach human existence and writing as hermeneutically analyzable. The novelist is not only an interpreter of life, but a stunning interpreter of her own prose, which she does in her diaristic production. Her inveterate flair in interpreting and re-interpreting human existence, the self, and the Other (discernible in her fictional and non-fictional writings) draws attention to the wealth of her hermeneutic sensibility and opens an uncharted territory for an application of hermeneutics in Woolfian scholarship. Deploying Ricoeur's critical perspective heightens our awareness of the many selves and their evocations in fiction and non-fiction – the writing self comprises the many selves and completes the portrait of a writer.

The third part of this article draws attention to Foucault's reflection on the function of an author: how it helps reveal Woolf's awareness of an impossibility to seize the self in writing. Inhabiting many selves, Woolf moves unrestrainedly from one character's self to the other, as if changing one habitation for another. Dwelling in the many consciousnesses of characters in her autobiographically oriented fiction, she displays a sharpened awareness of dispersed subjectivity. In her autobiographical writings she renders the self as mirroring the spatio-temporal dimensions of the outside reality, and thus subscribes to Foucault's insistence on the formative aspect of identity as socially constructed.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self and Foucault's reflection on subjectivity and authorship help appreciate Woolf's continually evolving and maturing autobiographical texts as having an important bearing on her novelistic imaginings. The two critical perspectives employed here enable us to see Woolf-autobiographer as a hermeneutic thinker aware of the indispensability and universality of interpretation. Woolf emerges from the pages of her diaries, memoirs, and autobiographical novels as a modern writer open to the new ways of seeing human subjectivity and the possibility/impossibility of taking hold of it in a literary discourse. Undeniably, autobiographical writings can be viewed as nourishing her fiction, and her distinct approach to (auto)biography is the effect of her fiction's inspirational and fertilizing capacity.

Woolf's creative impulse and productivity, investigated through the prism of her autobiographical writings, shed light on the portrait of her as a writer. The self-portrait that emerges from her journals, letters, and diaries allows us to better understand the complex reality of her writing self and the richness of the motifs standing behind her fictional writings as remaining in close relationship to the events of her life. The fecundity of her diaristic writing reveals a writer whose unflagging interest in chronicling the outside reality and rendering the psychological reality of a human mind contributes greatly to the exceptional beauty of her modernist fiction.

Works Cited

Alvarez, Mike F. 2020. *The Paradox of Suicide and Creativity: Authentications of Human Existence*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books.

Amselle, Frédérique. 2008. *Virginia Woolf et les écritures du moi: Le journal et l'autobiographie.* Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. *The Death of the Author: Image-Music-Text*. Ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana.

Bimberg, Christiane. 2001/2002. "The Poetics of Conversation in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*." *Connotations* 11(1). Feb. https://www.connotations.de/article/christiane-bimberg-the-poetics-of-conversation-in-virginia-woolfs-a-room-of-ones-own/, DOA: 20.02.2021.

Booth, Alison. 2016. "The Lives of Houses: Woolf and Biography." In: Jessica Berman (ed.). *A Companion to Virginia Woolf.* Chichester: Willey Blackwell, 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118457917.ch1

Cassigneul, Adèle. 2015. Review of Barbara Lounsberry's *Becoming Virginia Woolf. Her Early Diaries & the Diaries She Read. Etudes britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne] 49, https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2763, DOA : 17.11.2018. https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.2763

Dahl, Christopher. 1983. "Virginia Woolf's 'Moments of Being' and Autobiographical Tradition in the Stephen Family." *Journal of Modern Literature*, 10(2): 175–96.

Figueroa, Gustavo C. 2005. "Virginia Woolf as an Example of a Mental Disorder and Artistic Creativity." *Revista Medica de Chile*, 133(11): 1381–88. https://doi.org/10.4067/S0034-98872005001100015

Foucault, Michel (1969). 2000. "What is an Author?" In: David Lodge and Nigel Wood (eds). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London: Longman, 174–87.

Gander, Hans-Helmuth. 2017. *Self-Understanding and Lifeworld: Basic Traits of Phenomenological Hermeneutics.* Trans. Ryan Drake and Joshua Rayman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005w6h

Gilbert, Richard. "Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past'." http://richardgilbert.me/virginia-woolfs-a-sketch-of-the-past, DOA: 25.11.2018.

Goldman, Jane. 2006. *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511607295

Gordon, Lyndall. 2005. "'This Loose, Drifting Material of Life': Virginia Woolf and Biography." In: Karen V. Kukil (ed.). *Woolf in the Real World: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Conference on Virginia Woolf.* Clemson, South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press, 11–18.

Hołda, Małgorzata. 2018. *Paul Ricoeur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject.* Kraków: Ignatianum University Press.

Janka, Zoltán. 2004. "Artistic Creativity and Bipolar Disorder." *Orvosi Hetilap*, 145(33): 1709–18.

Jervolino, Domenico. 1990. *The Cogito and Hermeneutics: The Question of the Subject in Ricoeur.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-0639-6

Kaufman, James C. (ed.). 2014. *Creativity and Mental Illness.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139128902

Kirkwood, Anna. 2014. "Writing the Moment: Virginia Woolf as Autobiographer in 'A Sketch of the Past.'" March 30. https://inthedustiwrite.wordpress.com, DOA: 19.08.2019.

Koutsantoni, Katerina. 2012. "Manic Depression in Literature: The Case of Virginia Woolf." *Medical Humanities*, 38(1): 7–14. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2011-010075

Latham, Monica. 2015. "Clarissa Dalloway's Itinerary: Narrative Identity across Texts," Character Migration in Anglophone Literature. *E-rea*. 13.1, http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4724, DOA: 8.08.2019. https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.4724

Lejeune, Philippe and Catherine Bogaert. 2006. *Le Journal intime. Histoire et anthologie.* Paris: Éditions Textuel.

Lombardi, Kate S. 1997. "Exploring Artistic Creativity and Its Link to Madness." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/27/nyregion/exploring-artistic-creativity-and-its-link-to-madness.html, DOA: 1.12.2018.

Lounsberry, Barbara. 2015. *Becoming Virginia Woolf. Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida. https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813049915.001.0001

Lounsberry, Barbara. 2020. *The War Without, The War Within: Her Final Diaries and the Diaries She Read.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

McIntire, Gabrielle. 2008. *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511485176

Olson, Liesl M. 2003. "Virginia Woolf's 'Cotton Woolf of Daily Life'." *Journal of Modern Literature*, 26(2): 42–45. https://doi.org/10.1353/jml.2004.0022, https://doi.org/10.2979/JML.2002.26.2.42

Reviron-Piegay, Floriane. "Virginia Woolf's 'raids across boundaries': Biography vs Photography." Bare Lives/Virginia Woolf: Becoming Photographic. *Etudes britanniques contemporaines.* https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3973, DOA: 20.10.2018. https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3973

Ricoeur, Paul. 1991a. "Narrative Identity." *Philosophy Today*, 35(1): 73–81. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday199135136

Ricoeur, Paul. 1991b. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rihmer, Zoltan, Xenia Gonda and Annamária Rihmer. 2006. "Creativity and Mental Illness." *Psychiatria Hungarica*, 21(4): 288–94.

Showalter, Elaine. 2016. "Mrs. Dalloway: Exploring Consciousness and the Modern World." https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/exploring-consciousness-and-the-modern-an-introduction-to-mrs-dalloway, DOA: 19.02.2020.

Urquhart, Nicole L. 1998. "Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf's Fiction." *Matrix*, 1(1): https://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/urquhart.htm, DOA: 6.08.2019.

Woolf, Virginia. 1979. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 1, 1915–19*. Ed. Anne Oliver Bell. Bell, Mariner Books.

Woolf, Virginia. 1981. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Woolf, Virginia. 1983. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4, 1931–35*. Ed. Anne Oliver Bell. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Woolf, Virginia. 1985. "A Sketch of the Past." In: Jeanne Schulkind (ed.). *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Woolf, Virginia. 2008. *Orlando*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Woolf, Virginia. 2018. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin English Library.

Woolf, Virginia. "Woolf Online, Diaries," http://www.woolfonline.com/?node= content/contextual/transcriptions&project=1&parent=41&taxa=42, DOA: 8.09.2019.

Notes on Contributors

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska is associate professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland. Her current research centres on disability studies and drama, trauma studies and hauntology as well as performance, art, site and archive. She is the author of *Hauntology and Intertextuality in Contemporary British Drama by Women Playwrights* (2013, Toruń) and co-editor of the special issue of *Avant* on *Listening to the Urbanocene. People – Sounds – Cities* (2020).

Nelly Strehlau is assistant professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Her PhD analysed feminist and postfeminist hauntings in American television series about women lawyers. She is the author of articles dedicated to American and British television and literature, published in English and Polish. Her current research encompasses interrogation of popular culture from the perspective of affect studies and hauntology, with a special interest in women's authorship and (post)feminism.

Katarzyna Więckowska is university professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Her research interests include the contemporary novel in English, ecocriticism, feminist criticism, studies of masculinities, and hauntology. She is the author of *Spectres of Men: Masculinity, Crisis and British Fiction* (2014), editor of *The Gothic* (2012) and co-editor of *Haunted Cultures / Haunting Cultures* (2017).

Anna Kisiel is an assistant professor at WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza. In 2019, she defended her doctoral thesis, *Corporeal Aesth/ethics: The Body in Bracha L. Ettinger's Theory and Art*. She also holds an MA degree in English studies based on her dissertation entitled *Tangible Trauma: Tropes of Gesture in the Context of Psychoanalytically Grounded Theories*. She has published extensively on Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial theory. Her academic research revolves around – but is not limited to – matrixial psychoanalysis, trauma studies, photography theory, and body and femininity in the visual arts and literature.

Andrea Roxana Bellot teaches English literature and cultural studies at the Department of English and German Studies, Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, Spain. Her research interests focus on the cultural and literary representation of war. Her main publications include: "The Faces of the Enemy: The Representation of the 'Other' in the Media Discourse of the Falklands War Anniversary" (*Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 2018) and "'During a period of total despair, I picked up a pen': Exploring Trauma, Writing and Healing in *A Soldier's Song*, Ken Lukowiak's Falklands War Recollections" (*Close Encounters in War Journal*, 2020).

Paulina Mirowska is senior lecturer at the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź (Poland), where she specialises in modern and contemporary British and American drama. She obtained her PhD from the University of Łódź with a dissertation on the micro- and macropolitical dimensions of Harold Pinter's oeuvre. She is co-editor of *Reading Subversion and Transgression* (Łódź University Press, 2013) and of *Diversity and Homogeneity: The Politics of Nation, Ethnicity and Gender* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). Her recent academic interests centre upon the Irish-American interplay in the work of contemporary American dramatist Sam Shepard.

Grzegorz Koneczniak is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland, where he teaches courses in editorial and textual aspects of literary works. His research interests include postcolonial literatures, postcolonial theatre (Canadian and Irish), Anglo-Irish literature, literary theory, and comparative studies. He is the author of *Women on Stage and the Decolonisation of Ireland. Counter-Discursiveness in the Drama of the Irish Literary Revival (1892–1926)* and a book in Polish on the history of Canadian drama and theatre. He has also written *Prompting In/Ex/Tensions inside the Manuscript and the Digital Folio*: *An Exploration of Selected Early Abbey Theatre Production Books*, a book on selected aspects of digital publishing and textual scholarship.

Małgorzata Hołda, PhD in English literature (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń), PhD in philosophy (The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Kraków), Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź. Junior Fellow of The International Institute for Hermeneutics. The author of *Paul Ricoeur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject*, "The Hermeneutics of Conversation: Silence, Epiphany, and the Irreducibility of Conversion," "Aporia of Time in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and 'Kew Gardens' in Light of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics," and numerous articles on philosophical hermeneutics, Anglophone modern and postmodern fiction.