
# EXT Matters

## A Journal of Literature Theory and Culture

No. 5 [2015]

Edited by
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UNIWERSYTETU
ŁÓDZKIEGO

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0001

# Editorial

The present volume of *Text Matters*, dedicated for the most part to North American literatures and arts, has been put together thanks to the efforts of numerous people. It was our former colleague from the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź, Matthew Chambers, who suggested the topic "Collecting, Archiving, Publishing North America." Inspired by Jeremy Braddock's 2012 book *Collecting as a Modernist Practice*, Chambers wrote the Call for Papers for *Text Matters* #5. His aim was to draw the prospective contributors' attention to the growing significance, throughout the twentieth century and up to the present, of collecting, archiving, and publishing as ways of "framing of how literary and cultural materials are received." Steady increase in the production of literary texts and cultural objects, since the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, has greatly strengthened the role of publishers, editors, librarians, and exhibition curators responsible for the reception and preservation of textual and cultural objects. As Jeremy Braddock points out, modernism introduced us to the idea of a "collecting aesthetics," recognizing that the role of the collection became central in the art world of the first decades of the twentieth century. The idea of "collecting aesthetics" has considerably influenced the artistic sensibility not only of that period but of our times as well.

The fifth issue of *Text Matters*, prepared by members of the Department of American Literature in cooperation with the journal's permanent editorial staff, is organized, for the most part, around the themes of collecting, anthologizing and publishing in American and Canadian literature and visual arts. The volume is divided into four sections: "Collecting and Archiving," "Publishing North America," "Exhibitions," and "Reviews and Interviews." The first section consists of four articles dealing strictly with museum collections, anthologies, and archiving. The second one, larger than the first, presents articles concerning American and Canadian literature and culture. "Exhibitions" is a special section of *Text Matters'* current volume. Although the art exhibits discussed there were both held in Europe, featuring European visual artists, we have decided to include them

because each of the articles is in some way connected with Łódź. Rod Mengham, Fellow in English and Curator of Works of Art at Cambridge University's Jesus College, taught at the University of Łódź as British Council lecturer in the years 1984–1988, while the installation *Madame B* which Dorota Filipczak is concerned with in her text, created by a Dutch cultural and literary theorist Mieke Bal, together with a British video artist Michelle Williams Gamaker, was shown for the first time at the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź between December 2013 and February 2014. In the fourth section, readers will find texts of a more personal nature, recollections, and records of conversations.

Aaron Angello addresses the problem of archiving digital poetry in the context of archiving literary works published in ephemeral digital media. Angello considers the question he poses in the title of his text not only from the point of view of digital poetry's ephemerality but also from the broader perspective of curation and preservation of contemporary art. In her article Brygida Gasztold writes about the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, created in the 1980s by Aaron Lansky with the intention of bringing together Yiddish and American cultures, presenting the experience of the Holocaust as it exists in the memories of survivors and in the reflections of the survivors' descendants. Anne Lovering Rounds's "Anthology and Absence: The Post-9/11 Anthologizing Impulse" focuses on the numerous poems and poetry collections dedicated to New York City after the tragedy of 9/11. The author points to the frequently recurring themes of absence and presence in the anthologies, relating them to what she terms "a discourse of memorialization."

Norman Ravvin's article, presenting two unconventional Canadian publishing presses, opens the second section of *Text Matters* #5. Ravvin argues that the Coach House Press from the 1960s and the more recent Gaspereau Press, dedicated to the idea of bookmaking as artisanal work performed by a cultural community, have influenced the Canadian literary scene. In her extensive essay, Paulina Ambroży analyzes two post-apocalyptic novels, David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* focusing on the relationship between language and the dehumanized post-apocalyptic reality, as well as on the ability of language to resist the apocalypse. Krzysztof Majer discusses the Coen brothers' film *A Serious Man* in the light of its dedication entirely to Jewish issues in the United States, a Jewish community in the Midwest and the character of *schlemiel*, the eternal loser, who in the film becomes a post-modern figure confronting the insecurities of our times and thus turning into a symbol of the present human condition. A monumental painting by Charles Willson Peale, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, a self-portrait

and a historical image reflecting early nineteenth-century American views on science and religion, is the subject matter of Bryan J. Zygmont's article. In Alicja Piechucka's text, a somewhat forgotten novel by Gladys Huntington, *Madame Solario*, is given a new reading. The author concentrates on the concept of *femme fatale*, represented in Huntington's book by the eponymous character. Piechucka shows Madame Solario as simultaneously a victim and a victimizer, caught in "an interplay between innocence and experience." Jacek Partyka's article takes us back to the turbulent 1930s. The author studies W. H. Auden's involvement in the politics of that decade from the perspective of the "English" and "American" periods of the poet's creative evolution. In her article dealing with the Puritan times in New England, Justyna Fruzińska analyzes the early immigrants' process of construction of their new identity in America; the author also discusses representations of the New World in their texts. Kacper Bartczak undertakes the task of juxtaposing the poetry of Wallace Stevens with that of John Ashbery, referring their works to the concept of "plurality of reality, the plurality that is concentrated in the phenomenon of change." Zbigniew Maszewski's article deals with Carl Gustav Jung's brief 1925 visit to the Indian Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. Maszewski discusses Jung's rendering of the experience of confrontation between the "European consciousness" and the Indian "unconscious" in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Slacker films, and specifically Richard Linklater's *Slacker* and Kevin Smith's *Clerks*, are the topic of Katarzyna Małecka's essay. She considers the films to be good examples of independent American cinema. In his essay Adam Sumera compares Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* with its film adaptation. Sumera analyzes the changes introduced for the purpose of the adaptation made by Stephen Gyllenhaal.

Rod Mengham's article, one of two in the third section, presents and discusses museum installations of paintings by Agnès Thurnauer, a French-Swiss artist, which were set up in Angers and Nantes in 2014. In Mengham's opinion, Thurnauer's experimental paintings create "a new space for critical viewers," particularly women, who may find themselves reflected in Thurnauer's works, described by Mengham as "territory without maps, in the uncertain borderland between the first and the second persons, that strangely familiar no-man's-land, a female *terra nullius*." In her article about the video installation *Madame B*, Dorota Filipczak argues that the already mentioned installation provides an innovative audiovisual interpretation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which she relates to the Polish context via Bolesław Prus's novel *Lalka* (*The Doll*), referring, like Flaubert's novel, to the dependencies between capitalism and romance. Filipczak's article creates a connection, a bridge of sorts, between the previous

volume of *Text Matters*, *Re-visioning Ricoeur and Kristeva*, and the present one. Mieke Bal, a visual artist and a critic in visual studies, was a special guest of *Text Matters* #4, which opened with Dorota Filipczak's conversation with her, "Mieke Bal: 'Writing with Images.'"

The volume's closing section contains Norman Ravvin's recollections and comments on the Canadian-Jewish conference held by the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź in April 2014, as well as two interviews. In the first one, Krzysztof Majer and Justyna Fruzińska, organizers of the Canadian-Jewish conference, talk to one of the event's distinguished participants, a writer and translator, Sherry Simon from Concordia University in Montreal. In the second interview, Agnieszka Salska, the founder of the Department of American Literature in Łódź and a co-founder of the Polish Association for American Studies, answers Jadwiga Maszewska and Zbigniew Maszewski's questions about the development of American Studies in Poland in the past few decades.

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# COLLECTING AND ARCHIVING

https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0002

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# To Archive or Not to Archive: The Resistant Potential of Digital Poetry

## Abstract

This essay addresses the much discussed problem of archiving digital poetry. Digital media are labile, and several writers of digital poetry are incorporating the media's ephemerality into their poetics. Rather than rehash arguments that have been taking place within the field of digital media and digital poetics for years, I turn to the field of contemporary art curation and preservation, a field in which curators and archivists are struggling with the very immediate concerns, ethical and otherwise, related to archiving works that are made from ephemeral media. One particular digital poem that has recently broken, has recently become unreadable, is Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. Memmott composed the poem in 2000, and he incorporated the poem's inevitable obsolescence into the text of the poem itself. He has since refused to "fix" or "update" the poem, because he contends that that would make it something other than what it was intended to be. Rather, he is choosing to let the poem die because that is what the poem is supposed to do. This essay concludes with a discussion of the political implications of acknowledging the ephemerality of digital media, the resistant potential of the poem when its ephemerality is embraced, and some ways in which archivists can preserve the memory of the poem without necessarily preserving the poem itself.

## Introduction

The topic of ephemerality in digital literature and poetry is one that has been at the forefront of critical inquiry in the field of contemporary digital poetics for the past several years, often in relation to achievability. Its writers seem to exhibit a kind of anxiety that arises from the fact that their work will inevitably be lost, unplayable, or unreadable, and it is indeed likely that their work will become so. Each software update, each development in hardware, can provide myriad challenges for a given born-digital poem, and the writers of these poems have been struggling with what they perceive as the "problem" of their poem's rapid and inevitable evanescence. One only need visit the Electronic Literature Organization's online anthologies, the *Electronic Literature Collection*, *Volumes 1 and 2*, to find a host of links to works that no longer function as they were intended to, if they function at all. Deena Larsen, foundational hypertext author of *Marble Springs*, laments on her website in reference to a series of 13 "kanji-jus" poems, or "short poems based on the Japanese kanji or ideogram for the word itself":



> Note that the javascript in all of these has gone on to bigger and better things. If anyone would like to help me upgrade these, I would be eternally grateful. . . . Further, we mourn the loss of Cauldron and Net. (Larsen)

*Cauldron & Net* is an online "journal of arts and new media" that published a number of prominent writers of digital literature and poetry, including Larsen, from 1999 until 2002. The website is still active, but many of the works are, as one would expect of works of digital literature composed more than a decade ago, now broken. Larsen's quote is representative of the anxiety many digital poets are currently articulating: a fear that these works are fading away before their very eyes.

A decade ago, Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, writing on behalf of the Electronic Literature Organization, published "Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature," a sort of how-to manual intended to instruct the writer of digital literature and poetry in the ways of writing works that last. Joseph Tabbi, in the introduction, says that this "document is a plea for writers to work proactively in archiving their own creations, and to bear these issues in mind even in the act of composition," and the authors write that although the preservation of digital literature is "the work of a community," "the practices of authors and publishers will determine whether preserving particular works is relatively easy or nearly impossible" (Montford and Fruin). They recommend a litany of principles that the writer can employ in order to ensure the longevity of her/his work, including preferring open systems to closed

ones, providing copious comments in the code, choosing plain-text formats over binary formats, keeping multiple copies on various, "durable" media, and so on. It is necessary, they seem to argue, that the poet or writer think consciously about the longevity of her/his poem before, during and after its composition. And this would all seem to make perfect sense. After all, we should certainly make every effort to ensure this poetry exists for generations to come.

Or should we? Is there not, perhaps, a value in embracing the fact that these poems are short-lived? Is there not a value in the fact that the very lability of these poems allows the poet an opportunity to assume a somewhat different position within a complex web of power relations than the more traditional, print-oriented poet?



The intention of this essay is to explore the resistant potential inherent in digital literature and poetry, a potential that exists, at least in part, because of the very fact that digital media is ephemeral. First, I will discuss archival strategies, not from within the discussion of digital media archives, but from within the related field of contemporary experimental art. I take this approach because there is, among the archivists and curators who are working with contemporary, ephemeral art, a concern with the ethical or political implications of archiving art pieces that are not intended to last that is somehow lacking among those whose sole focus is digital media. I will then look closely at a relatively well-known digital poem, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*, as an example of a work of digital literature that acknowledges and embraces its own ephemerality. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which this acknowledgement and embracing can function as a form of tactical resistance within a larger system of power.

## Archiving the Ephemeral

In her essay, "Curating Ephemera: Responsibility and Reality," Jan Schall, the Sander Sosland curator of modern and contemporary art at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, writes that although we all know that "the essence of life is change, and life itself is impermanent," we still have a desire to make our present permanent. She says:

> We want to know the world we live in, and we want the future to know us as we have come to know the past. We understand that we are part of a vast cultural stream that has been flowing since time immemorial and will continue to flow into time unimaginable. We have the cultural artifacts to prove it. (Schall 15)

The archive is a site wherein that past can be made present, and the present can have a chance at lasting into the future. It is a repository for our cultural heritage, a place for us to experience our past and to provide for our future. It is a physical manifestation of human memory, and it highlights our desire to remember.

It also determines an artistic or literary canon. For every object that is archived, there are others that are excluded from the archive. For every poet whose handwritten manuscripts and typewritten correspondences are archived at a university library, there are countless poets whose literary output will be forever lost to time. The function of the archive is to preserve, but not everything can or will be preserved. As Derrida says, the theory of the archive is a theory of "institutionalization, that is to say of the law, of the right which authorizes it" (Derrida 10). Archiving implies exclusion. It implies a choice that is made regarding which cultural artifacts are worthy of preservation and which will be lost to time. There is "no archive without outside" (14), Derrida reminds us, and it is crucial that we keep this in mind. And it must be noted that many curators and archivists do keep it in mind; they are intently aware of their responsibility when it comes to issues such as inclusivity, equal representation, and so on. There are journals and conferences dedicated to the subject. The intention of this essay is not at all to argue that archiving as a practice is somehow unethical. On the contrary, it is necessary and culturally valuable.

But what of archiving the ephemeral? Particularly, what of archiving works of digital literature, poetry, net art, and other digital cultural objects, objects that rely upon technological apparatuses that are always changing, evolving, and rendering the object unreadable? The approaches taken by those who curate and archive contemporary visual art could prove useful here. Museum curators are continually struggling with the fact "that the contemporary world is fixated on change, obsolescence, speed, impermanence and ephemera," and for that reason, "[m]uch modern art is ephemeral, and contemporary art is ephemeral in the extreme" (Schall 24). Of course, from a certain perspective, all art is ephemeral. Everything will decompose eventually. Paintings fade and chip, sculptures crumble, books fall apart. It is the archivist's job to try to prolong the life of these objects. But that job becomes particularly difficult when the works being preserved are made of media that are chosen by the artist because they are short-lived.

In their article, "It's Only Temporary," Margaret Hedstrom and Anna Perricci say that "archivists and curators make a careful distinction between preservation, conservation, and restoration" (29). Preservation is a process of minimizing deterioration. The archivist may create protective cases, maintain optimal temperature and humidity in the space within

which the work is stored, shelter the work from destructive light, and so on. Conservation is the "repair or stabilization of materials through chemical or physical treatment to ensure that they survive in their original form as long as possible" (Pearce-Moses qtd. in Hedstrom and Perricci 29). And restoration is repair and rehabilitation of the object, the goal of which is to bring the object back, as closely as possible, to its original condition.

One issue that archivists are struggling with is how one should preserve, conserve or restore ephemeral work, and if one should. After all, the artist, if he or she intentionally created the work using materials that would break, decompose, be consumed, etc., never intended the work to last. The piece only "works" or "makes sense" if its lability is embraced. One might think of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, as a series of pieces that were not intended to be preserved. His "candy pieces," sculptures made of stacked pieces of individually wrapped candy that exactly match the weight of his lover's body, and which the audience is invited to take and consume piece by piece, function as "sweet and sad eulogies" imbued with "a profound sense of mourning and loss" (The Renaissance Society). Gonzalez-Torres, like many of his contemporaries, was dealing with the devastating effects of the AIDS virus on the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s, and he saw his art as an analogue to the crisis that surrounded him. He said in an interview not long before his death:



> I wanted to do a show that would disappear completely. It had to do a lot with disappearance and learning. It was also about trying to be a threat to the art-marketing system, and also, to be really honest, it was about being generous to a certain extent. I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it with them was very exciting. Freud said that we rehearse our fears in order to lessen them. In a way this "letting go" of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross [his partner] disappear day by day right in front of my eyes. (Gonzalez-Torres et al. 13)

However, regardless of his intentions, we look for ways to preserve, conserve, or restore his work, perhaps rightly so. He has become "one of the most influential artists of his generation . . . mixing political activism, emotional affect, and deep formal concerns in a wide range of media." His work has come to be highly prized for its uniquely emotional engagement with themes such as love and death, and is "a profoundly human body of work, intimate and vulnerable even as it destabilizes so many seemingly unshakable certainties" ("Felix Gonzalez-Torres at MMK").

Since his death in 1996, his work has become ever more prized as a commodity within the art market. In 2010, a stacked candy piece he called *"Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)*, a piece that is composed of 200 pounds of candy pieces each individually wrapped in blue cellophane, sold at a Philips de Pury auction for $4.5 million (Cahyka). Perhaps Gonzalez-Torres was attempting, in part, to "be a threat to the art-marketing system," yet that system is remarkably resilient, and that system managed to subsume into itself a piece that was intended to disappear. One can imagine that the person or organization that purchased *"Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* is not interested in letting it disappear. They will undoubtedly be employing all of the archival tools at their disposal to make sure the piece lasts a very long time.

So certain questions present themselves: is it the same piece if it doesn't "disappear"? Is the integrity of the piece compromised by the very act of preservation? Are there archival strategies that can preserve an ephemeral work that don't compromise its intended political position in relation to, for instance, the market?

Hedstrom and Perricci outline a separate but related archival strategy that is particularly relevant to archiving ephemeral works: preserving surrogates. According to the authors, "surrogates are representations of some sort that stand in for original documents" (32). These surrogates can take the form of photographs, audio or video recordings, written accounts of the pieces, and so on. To be sure, "surrogates are always inferior substitutes for originals, and in most cases they are many steps removed from the activity, event, or transaction that they purport to represent" (32). A videocassette recording of a performance art piece is not the piece—but importantly, it doesn't pretend to be. The surrogate announces itself as a documentation of the work, and the knowledge that the piece is gone remains a part of the piece—or at least of the memory of the piece.

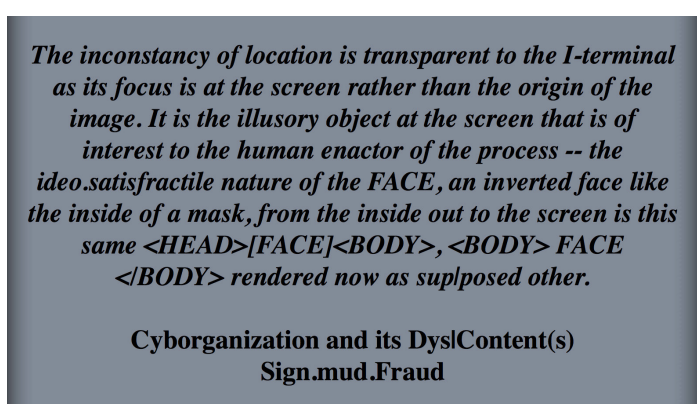
Preserving, conserving, or restoring an ephemeral work of art can be, perhaps, a bit problematic because the piece is no longer functioning the way the piece was intended to function; it is serving, so to speak, a different master. The version of *"Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* that was sold for $4.5 million is not the *"Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* that was consumed by its viewers piece by piece until there was nothing left.

## *Lexia to Perplexia*: The End of a Poem

Like *"Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)*, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* is composed of ephemeral media, and Memmott was entirely aware of that as he wrote the piece. It is, in part, about its own demise.

If digital literature and poetry can be said to have a canon, *Lexia to Perplexia* is a central part of it. It was initially published on the Iowa Web Review, and later anthologized in the Electronic Literature Organization's *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One*, which is available online and on a CD-ROM that accompanies N. Katherine Hayles's landmark 2008 book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. It has received much critical attention, and it has been a part of countless course syllabi. Hayles has called it a "brilliantly designed and programmed" (*Horizons* 7) work in which "Memmott devises an idiosyncratic language, a revisioning of classical myths, and a set of coded images that invite the reader to understand herself not as a preexisting self with secure boundaries but as a permeable membrane through which information flows" (Hayles, "Metaphoric").

*Lexia to Perplexia* is a literary hypertext poem composed in HTML and JavaScript. It is presented in four sections, "The Process of Attachment," "Double-Funnels," "Metastrophe," and "Exe.Termination." Each section provides a platform to explore the complex relationship and illusory borders between subject and machine, between reader and text, between human language and computer code, and between flesh and silicone. It illuminates the fact that the screen is a meeting place between the "I-terminal," or the human subject, and the network. It sees the screen as a site that appears to be stable and constant, but is in fact the quintessence of lability. The first *lexia*[1] the reader encounters if she or he begins with the first section, "A Process of Attachment," reads:




Screenshot of Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia/index.html. Used by permission of the author.

[1] "Lexia" is a word adopted from Barthes by early hypertext writers to denote a block of text that is connected, via hyperlinks, to other lexia, or blocks of text.

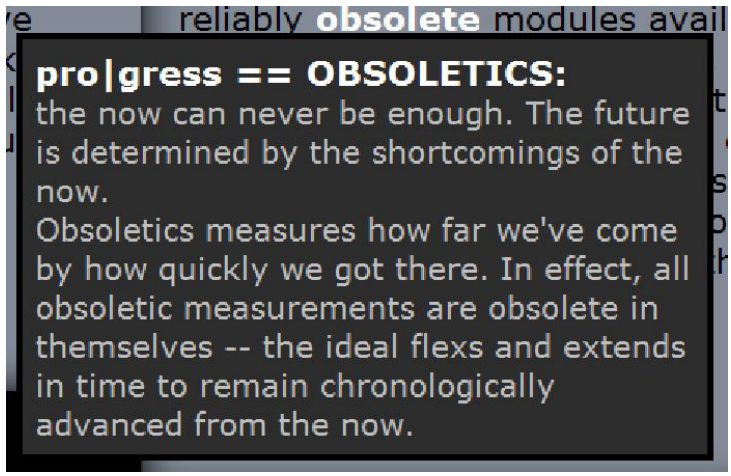
The "illusory object at the screen" is the thing with which most readers engage, be that thing text, image, sound, or animation, yet we know it is, in actuality, a manifestation of the machine's rendering of code and data. But the reader's connection to the network is tangible because of her/his engagement with the screen. As Memmott articulates in the *lexia* above, the reader sees her/his face reflected in the screen, and that reflection metaphorically represents the level of integration the I-terminal has with the machine, with the network of machines and other I-terminals. We see in that reflection that face; we see ourselves a part of, not apart from the machine. It is articulated quite poetically in the code-worked line: "<HEAD>[FACE]<BODY>, <BODY> FACE </BODY>." In it, the [FACE] and its reflection "FACE" are contained within both flesh (head and body) and code/silicone (<HEAD>, <BODY>,</BODY> are ubiquitous HTML tags).

As we move deeper into *Lexia's* web of *lexia*, as we "exit the exo, / taking fingersteps into the apparatus," we are confronted with a reworking of the myth of *Echo and Narcissus*. We are put in the position of the beautiful boy who falls in love with his own reflection. We become "the terminal-I, a Cell.f, or, cell . . . (f) that processes the self as outside of itself." Echo then becomes a recursive feedback loop reminding us just how integrated we, the machine, and the network are. As Memmott writes in the section "Metastrophe," in his "Minifesto 2," "We *.fect the atmosphere as we move through it, construct the infosphere as we move through it, striving toward communification." And once we've sounded our call, "sen[t] out signals, smoke and otherwise," we wait eagerly for the Echo, a recognition of ourselves as a singularity within the network. In a certain sense, there is no us without the network.

But *Lexia* also is entirely aware of its eventual obsolescence. In "Minifesto 3," Memmott writes:

> The machine is not equipped with the modern, yet reliably obsolete modules available today. The machine is built in expectation, more than as an object—the tangible machine, the one you are seated before, is dead already, or returns a dead eye—slowly—I can't think fast enough; or, if today you think I think fast enough for you, tomorrow you will reject me—this is my destiny I know. (*Lexia*)

If the reader clicks on the word "obsolete"—it is a hyperlink—a new *lexia* pops up in which one of Memmott's neologisms, "obsoletics," is defined:






Screenshot of Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia/index.html. Used by permission of the author.

One of the most significant aspects of *Lexia to Perplexia* is its awareness and acknowledgment of its own "obsoletics," of its ephemerality. And the piece, at the time of this writing, due to "advancements" in web browsers and JavaScript,[2] is no longer functional.[3]

Memmott, writing about the piece, says that it "began as an observation of the fluctuating and ever-evolving protocols and prefixes of internet technology as applied to literary hypermedia" (Memmott, *Lexia*). He makes it clear that these "ever-evolving" technologies result in an ever-increasing lack of functionality within the piece, and this is an intentional part of its poetics.

At the 2014 annual convention of the Modern Language Association, digital literature scholar Zach Whalen gave a talk on *Lexia to Perplexia* and its obsolescence during a panel entitled "Electronic Literature after Flash." He later published the text of the talk on his blog. During the talk, he

[2] Zach Whalen, in his talk/blogpost addressing *Lexia's* ephemerality, specifically identifies the problem thus: "October 17, 2013. Microsoft publishes version 11 of its Internet Explorer web browser, including in its release notes a statement that the `document.all` mode will no longer be supported and that websites relying on this feature should update their code."

[3] In order to write about this piece, I had to find an old, but still functional, computer with a version of JavaScript that could run the poem. I was able to run it on a PC that has been lying unused for about seven years. I was able to turn the computer on; it booted up, but the noises coming from the cooling fan were frightening. Given the fact that a computer is only built to last from three to five years, I count myself lucky that the machine was able to run at all.

said that after struggling with a piece that no longer worked beyond a few clicks[4] (he was teaching the piece in a course on the subject) he "decided to fix it." He said, "With surprisingly few edits, I did succeed in making an unauthorized update to Lexia to Perplexia that now works fine in all four of the major browsers, but since the author has asked me not to share that version, it remains offline" (Whalen).

Whalen's very thoughtful and well-researched talk is excellent in its discussion of the reasons *Lexia* no longer functions in current browsers, in the reading of the code, and in an understanding and explication of the piece in general. But I was particularly struck by the quote above—that the author asked him not to share the "unauthorized fix." So I contacted Memmott to ask him about this; I asked him why he asked Whalen not to share the "fixed" version. This was his reply:



> Within the piece itself . . . there is a discussion of obsolescence . . . or, as it is dubbed in the piece—obsoletics. The piece sort of predicts its own demise. As such, I think of its slide into no longer functioning as part of the text itself. That said, the piece itself has not eroded; it remains the same, but the conditions of the platform have changed. By altering the piece to make it function, is to actually destroy the work. Or, to make something other than itself. A fully functioning Lexia to Perplexia would not be the work I created, and would ignore one of the theoretical issues dealt with in the work, or embodied through it. (Memmott, "Interview")

## The Ephemeral Digital Poem as Tactical Resistance

The question then becomes, in this context, is the piece's "obsoletics," its embracing of the ephemeral nature of writing in digital media, a political act? After all, the content of this piece doesn't deal with tactical concerns; it doesn't represent itself in its content as struggling against something. But I contend that, in its way, it is very much a political poem. One could argue (and many poets and critics do argue) that all poetry is political because it is standing in relationship to the world in which it was written.[5] A poem

[4] As of this writing, *Lexia to Perplexia* can be accessed on current web browsers via the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One, but, as I mentioned above, the JavaScript is no longer viable. The browsers can read the HTML, and so one can click into the first page of each section. At that point, however, one can access no more of the poem.

[5] The idea that all poetry is political is a common notion that has become more accepted as poetry has increasingly been examined through the lens of cultural studies. If the poem is an object of cultural production, and if, as Maria Damon and Ira Livingston

is a social act, and the very writing and presentation of a poem articulates a social and political point of view. But when a poem does what it's *not supposed to do*, when it breaks established rules and order, then, one might argue, that poem becomes an act of resistance. The poet takes a tactical stance against what Mary O'Neill calls "considerable cultural and economic pressure to make permanent art" (157) when she or he chooses to create an ephemeral poem.

Rita Raley, in the introduction to her book *Tactical Media*, says that tactical media "projects are not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event; rather, they engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education" (1). She quotes the activist art collective, the Critical Art Ensemble, as saying, "After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears—authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted" (qtd. in Raley 10). The possibility of "the grand, sweeping revolutionary event" seems to no longer be a possibility. Ever since the networking of power, ever since the globalization of financial capital, more and more contemporary theorists argue that there is no outside of power (e.g., capital). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, argue that "[t]here is nothing, no 'naked life,' no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money" (Hardt and Negri 32). But that doesn't mean that resistance is futile. Raley says that "tactical media's imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal" (12). The key term here is "imagination"; the imagination of a temporal outside of power (for there is no outside of power) allows the producer of tactical media to act in a conscious way to alter relationships within the field of power. She continues by saying that "tactical media do not necessarily evade the us-them dialectic, but they do recast it such that 'us' and 'them' are no longer permanently situated" (12).



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say in their introduction to the anthology *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader*, "cultural practices are likewise inconceivable except as constellations with material, social, and political dimensions, then poetry and cultural studies might be said to bear 'withness' to each other and to their worlds; that is, they become fellow participants" (2). Furthermore, one can find countless examples of poets making similar claims about poetry. Andrew Joron says that poetry is "the uncanny reflection of an unfinished world" (10), and Joan Retallack says that "[t]his is a question of po*ethics*—what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood" (9). The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai made the following remark in an interview with Lawrence Joseph: "I've often said that all poetry is political. This is because real poems deal with a human response to reality and politics is part of reality, history in the making. Even if a poet writes about sitting in a glass house drinking tea it reflects politics."

I'd like to consider Raley's claim in relation to digital (ephemeral) poetry. She says, referencing Michel de Certeau, that "shifting from strategy to tactics is important because it renders the phenomenon of resistance fleeting, ephemeral, and subject to continual morphing" (13). Employing the tactic of writing in an ephemeral medium and then letting the poem break, as Memmott has done, shifts the poem from the realm of the spatial (strategic) to the realm of the temporal (tactical). It is here that it does what it needs to do, and then it's gone before it can become subsumed into capital.

One way we can consider the resistant potential of an ephemeral poem like *Lexia to Perplexia* is to employ the theoretical notion of exit or exodus. After all, when a poem refuses to engage the pressures placed upon it by capital, pressures to maintain, to keep existing, to be permanent, it refuses to play capital's game. It intentionally avoids the trappings of the market, for instance. It even, on a certain level, reconsiders the social role of poetry in that it shifts the focus from the poem as object to the poem as experience. It undermines the belief that the poet must be individuated and celebrated as an individual. Rather, the poem enters a system of relationships, a system in this case of linguistic, visual and affective communication, and in its small act of micropolitical resistance, in its willingness to evanesce, perhaps it alters that system of relationships.



The biopolitical theorist Paulo Virno tells us in *A Grammar of the Multitude* that:

> Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting. Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives. In short, *exit* consists of unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance. (70)

Perhaps Virno's passionate claim that exit can "throw the adversary completely off balance" is hyperbolic, but it is not entirely untrue. After all, if we in fact do exist within a complex web of relationships, as so many theorists claim we do (cf. Deleuze, Braidotti, Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri), then surely all a poet can hope to do if she or he wants to effect some sort of change is to alter those relationships.

Furthermore, poetry might seem an unsatisfactory site for resisting through exit. After all, it's only poetry—few people read it, it's often thought of as a marginal art form that has little impact on the world of

politics and power relations. However, one can make a strong argument that it can be an ideal place. Let's return to *Lexia to Perplexia.* The fact that it is built in an ephemeral medium, that it makes its ephemerality a part of its content and poetics, and that the poet, Memmott, has consciously allowed it to exit, in Virno's sense, makes the poem a site of resistance in two ways: it becomes disruptive, and it becomes instructive. It becomes disruptive in the sense that it refuses to act like a poem—it doesn't strive for permanence, for canonization, despite the fact that the institutional systems that determine such things have already made attempts to canonize it. By refusing to struggle for permanence, the poem upsets that relationship, so easily taken for granted, that cultural production has with capital.

Poetry is sometimes spoken of as something that is not a part of the workings of capital, that because of its relatively small readership, its "difficulty," it somehow escapes the all-encompassing reaches of global capital, the "pool of liquid power," as the Critical Art Ensemble calls it (Critical Art Ensemble). But through subverting expectations, it reveals the presence of those expectations. It reveals that poetry, that apparently "pure" form of cultural production, is in fact just as much a part of the workings of capital as everything else—it reveals the ubiquity of power. And in this way, the disruption caused by the poem's exit proves instructive. We, as readers, are made aware of just how much a part of capital we all are, how there is no outside of power, as Foucault so often reminds us (93). But at the same time, ephemeral art, and especially ephemeral poetry like *Lexia to Perplexia*, reminds us that we can, as Virno says, "[modify] the context within which a problem has arisen" by choosing a path that is other than the one expected of us, the one that seems a part of the "unalterable horizon" (70).



## Conclusion

The title of this article is perhaps a bit misleading. The question is not whether or not a digital poem should be archived. Rather, one must ask: "What is the best way to archive a digital poem, particularly one that purposely engages its own ephemerality?" If an artist or writer intends her or his piece to break, fade, or die, then it is the responsibility of the archivist to allow that to happen. If the archivist makes an ephemeral work permanent, she or he changes the piece to such an extent that it is no longer the piece at all—it is something entirely different. If the poet/artist intended the piece to stand in opposition to a particular manifestation of power, then preserving it can make it function in precisely the opposite way of that in which it was intended.

Digital poetry, because of the constantly changing nature of digital media, has a unique opportunity to act as a site of micropolitical resistance. It can disrupt the relationships that cultural producers have to the systems within which they work because of its uniquely short life, and a growing number of poets working in digital media are embracing this fact. Yet the anxieties mentioned at the beginning of this essay persist. The rhetoric around archiving digital poetry continues to focus upon the ways in which archivists can extend indefinitely the life of particular works.

It seems that the more appropriate path is to document and let die. The archivist can create surrogates of pieces, certainly, to contribute to cultural memory, but she or he should be wary of the temptation to change a piece in order to extend its life beyond that which the poet intended for it. She or he ought not, by preserving a digital poem, reinforce the structures of power that it is acting to subvert. Archiving the ephemeral is not about preservation, but documentation.



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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0003

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# The Continuing Story of the Yiddish Language: The Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts

## ABSTRACT

The focus of my article is a unique place, the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, which connects Yiddish culture with the American one, the experience of the Holocaust with the descendants of the survivors, and a modern idea of Jewishness with the context of American postmodernity. Created in the 1980s, in the mind of a young and enthusiastic student Aaron Lansky, the Yiddish Book Center throughout the years has become a unique place on the American cultural map. Traversing the continents and crossing borders, Lansky and his co-workers for over thirty years have been saving Yiddish language books from extinction. The Center, however, has long stopped to be merely a storage house for the collection, but instead has grown into a vibrant hub of Yiddishkeit in the United States. Its employees do not only collect, distribute, digitalize and post online the forgotten volumes, but also engage in diverse activities, scholarly and cultural, that promote the survival of the tradition connected with Yiddish culture. They educate, offering internships and fellowships to students interested in learning Yiddish from across the world, translate, publish, and exhibit Yiddish language materials, in this way finding new users for the language whose speakers were virtually annihilated by the Holocaust. To honour their legacy, a separate project is aimed at conducting video interviews that record life testimonies of the speakers of Yiddish. Aaron Lansky's 2004 memoir, *Outwitting History*, provides an interesting insight into the complexities of his arduous life mission. Today, the Center lives its own unique life, serving the world of academia and Yiddishkeit enthusiasts alike.

Founded in 1980, the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts is a unique place, which houses the world's largest collection of Yiddish books. The history of the place is closely connected with its founder, Aaron Lansky, whose youthful vitality and unrelenting belief in his cause made his vision come true. Accompanied by like-minded enthusiasts, Lansky, a student of Yiddish literature, began to journey in the early 1980s across the United States to collect Yiddish language books, first from the homes of aging, Yiddish-speaking Jews, then from the homes of their children and grandchildren who did not know the language any more. Lansky's story is not only one of a group of young people who embarked on a mission to save Yiddish books from destruction, but it is also a story of their owners. From basement storerooms, attics, garages, and book cabinets, and with the assistance of many helpers, the volunteers located and collected the forgotten volumes. The initial estimates mentioned the possibility of recovering about 70,000 volumes, a number which ultimately grew to over a million in the next years. Lansky's quest for Yiddish language books took him to Eastern Europe and South America where he not only collected but also distributed the sought-after volumes. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the rebirth of Jewish synagogues and educational centres, the Yiddish Book Center answered the demands of the re-emerging Jewish reading public by shipping volumes to Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Lithuania. Aaron Lansky published his story in 2004 in a memoir entitled *Outwitting History*, in which he describes an arduous task of saving thousands of volumes from extinction.



Language is a repository of cultural capital. Whenever one of its constituting elements loses its significance, another is endangered. Children who reject their parents' inheritance leave an open space that is difficult to bridge with other aspects of culture. With the linguistic generation gap, the thousand-year legacy of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was doomed to oblivion. As assimilated American Jews forgot how to speak Yiddish, they did not feel the need to preserve its literature. Consequently, Yiddish books were not reprinted for lack of a readership. For example, the complete works of Sholem Aleichem were last published in the United States in 1928, and I. L. Peretz's in 1948. Most of the literature written in Yiddish perished during World War II. However, some volumes that survived the Holocaust, the Stalinist purges, displacement and assimilation, were still there to be recovered. As Lansky recollects in his memoir, the Yiddish books always came with the stories of their owners: sometimes those who acquired them personally and could tell the stories about their whereabouts, other times those who inherited them and knew nothing about their origin. The aged owners did not only hand over the books, but their own

lives attached to them. The process of collection, as Lansky recalls it, became a kind of ritual: first, the volunteers had to listen to people's stories, then help themselves to ample amounts of homemade food, and only then could they mention what they really came for—the Yiddish books.

Lansky understood the significance of Yiddish and the need to preserve access to the records of this important part of the Jewish diaspora's history. Language and literature provide a link to the past that is otherwise gone. This connection results in the continuation of an intellectual legacy. Uprooted and landless people perpetuate stories, whether in oral or written form, to confirm and sustain their shared identity. For diasporic nations, books become a "portable homeland" (Lansky 48). Passing on the language is an act of cultural transmission and preservation that ensures historical continuity. When Aaron Lansky decided to look for Yiddish books, he initially met with indifference and scepticism, largely expressed by the American Jewish establishment. "Who needs Yiddish in America now?" they asked. The opinion that the Yiddish language is dead and that they should embrace American culture, not linger in the past, was common. For assimilated and acculturated American Jews, Yiddish was "an unwelcome reminder of the immigrant culture they had worked so hard to forget" (Lansky 359). Moreover, it was Hebrew—the official language of the State of Israel—not Yiddish, which was regarded as the future for Jews. According to Lansky, "[t]he priorities of the Jewish establishment had been set in stone years before: Israel, anti-Semitism, social services" (63–64).

Individual people, however, were pleased that somebody had finally shown interest in their lives. Yiddish was a vital part of their youth, their mother tongue in which they first got to know the world. In America, the demands of immigrant life forced them to give it up for the sake of English. If still remembered, Yiddish was used at home, among the older generation, while becoming foreign to their own children and grandchildren. For the Yiddish-speaking generation, a young man such as Lansky represented the future of American Judaism, and his interest in the past meant that their Eastern European legacy might not be completely forgotten after all.

There has been a long debate about the importance of Yiddish for the Jews. Yiddish was originally the language of Ashkenazi Jews. At the height of its usage, Yiddish was spoken by 11 million Jews in Eastern Europe and all over the world, according to the approximates provided by the Jewish Virtual Library. The *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* estimates the number of speakers of Yiddish on the eve of World War II at approximately 13 million (Katz). Yiddish had been spoken for hundreds of years by strict traditionalists when, in the latter part of the nineteenth

century, it was taken up by intellectuals who broke from the constraints of the Talmudic law and wanted to reinterpret Jewish tradition in a modern way. Their texts were modern, often too modern for traditional Jews, who regarded them as forbidden (unkosher). Pious Jews were to concentrate on religious texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, whereas novels and stories written in Yiddish represented a departure from the traditional world of Judaism, and were claimed to corrupt the Jewish mind with inappropriate knowledge. Therefore, the Jewish vernacular, referred to as zhargon, was long denigrated by mainstream Jewish scholarship. Jeffrey Shandler comments on its character:

> Yiddish is imagined as autochthonic, indigenous, a part of the Jewish soul—and, like the Jewish soul, part of the Jewish body. Associations of Yiddish with the corporeal and the vulgar (in its multiple meanings) are vital for much of the discourse on the language going back to the Enlightenment, both in disparaging Yiddish, and in expressing its appeal. (141–42)



The debate about the "national" language for the Jews, such as the one held during the first international conference on Yiddish language and its role in Jewish life in 1908 in Czernowitz, "was characteristic of the age of linguistic nationalism, where language was thought to express the quintessence of a people and to determine the character of the nation" (Davis 5). The organizer of the conference, Nathan Birnbaum, proclaimed Yiddish to be the national language of the Jewish people. Looking back, Pinsker points to a complicated relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, claiming that, first of all, as "the young State of Israel neglected and sometimes forcefully rejected Yiddish, this topic elicits strong emotional, psychological, and ideological reactions. Second, scholars have, until recently, almost totally neglected the place of Yiddish within Israeli literature and culture" (278), despite a large number of Yiddish-speaking refugees and settlers relocating to the new state. A different situation was observable on the European continent, where the end of the First World War granted special rights to ethnic minorities of Eastern Europe and prompted a Yiddish-language revival. According to Dovid Katz, "[i]n the early Soviet Union, Yiddish became a government-supported language and literature, and the state financed school systems, advanced research institutes, and literature (and in some areas, Yiddish enabled courts, post offices and other public institutions)." Intellectual life flourished, marking a time of cultural renaissance in Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe. The Yiddish language, preferred to Russian and Hebrew, became a political tool for the Bund

(a leading Russian-Jewish socialist party). The prosperity of Yiddish ended in the 1930s in the USSR with Stalin's orders to close most of the Yiddish-language institutions. According to Katz, "[i]n the purges of 1937, leading Yiddish writers and cultural leaders were arrested and executed; later, in a postwar purge, the most famous surviving authors were murdered in 1950s."

The Holocaust brought the annihilation of this vibrant culture in Europe. Zionist ideology, with its rejection of the Jewish Diaspora, saw no future for Yiddish, which was then seen as the embodiment of "Jewish marginality" (Lansky 102). Yiddish was stigmatized for a lack of sophistication and the use of lowbrow humour. The Jews who escaped Europe had to learn the local vernacular, making Yiddish their secondary language, if they did not forget it altogether. Attitudes towards Yiddish began to change in the 1960s and were attributed to many factors:



> [T]he gradual death of the last masters (and of Yiddish-speaking parents and relatives) that evoked nostalgia for the "old country"; growing consciousness (and knowledge) of the Holocaust; a recognition that Israeli Hebrew was now secure and that its proponents need not "fear" Yiddish; the changing evaluation in the United States of black and other ethnic cultures; and, an emerging cultural and scholarly consensus that saw a great world literature in Yiddish prose, poetry, and drama in 150 years that can schematically be dated from 1850 to 2000. (Katz)

Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature confirmed and endorsed the changing attitude towards Yiddish.

In regard to the history of Jewish immigration to America, Yiddish publications played an important role in helping newly arrived East European immigrants to settle into a new life. Between 1881 and 1924 their numbers reached 2.5 million. *The Tageblat*, which was established in the 1880s, "preached two fundamental themes—the necessity of clinging to Orthodoxy in faith and practice and the obligation of the immigrant to appreciate the blessings of his adopted country" (Martin 185). Socialists, anarchists and Zionists established various Yiddish-language organs for propagating their views. Beginning in 1897, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, edited by Abraham Cahan, educated the greenhorns in all aspects of life. Reading *A Bintl Brief* (A Bundle of Letters), immigrants learned the intricacies of American etiquette, prepared for citizenship exams, and chose American names for their children. Cookbooks and cooking tips helped them to standardize traditional recipes by adapting them to American ingredients. According to Lansky,

> When Jewish immigrants first arrived in America they assumed that coffee beans, like other beans, were not kosher for Passover—until an enterprising Maxwell House advertising agent came along. First he found a rabbi who publicly declared that coffee beans are really berries and therefore acceptable for Passover fare. Then, to reinforce the point, he began distributing free Haggadahs (books used at the Passover Seder) emblazoned with the Maxwell House logo. To this day, "Maxwell House Haggadahs" can be found on Seder tables across the country. (95–96)



Popular science books taught the newcomers the basics of science: physics, chemistry, and geology. Bilingual editions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, phrasebooks in English, Yiddish and Ladino, and letter writing guides helped immigrants to find their way in a new linguistic and cultural environment. The Yiddish press paved the way for Yiddish literature, since novels, short stories, and poems were first published in the press and, if they were successful enough, they would appear in book form. Yiddish writers chronicled the lives of the immigrant Jews; for instance, Morris Rosenfeld presented the difficulties of immigrant life from a socialist perspective. Joseph Opatoshu wrote the first fully developed historical novel in Yiddish entitled *In Polish Woods*, 1938 (the original version was from 1921). Isaac Raboy explored the myth of the Wild West in *The Jewish Cowboy*, 1942, and Halper Leivick conveyed spiritual anguish after the Holocaust in his poem *I Was Not in Treblinka*, 1945. Translations of world literature into Yiddish opened the East European Jewish world to writers such as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jack London, Mark Twain, Leo Tolstoy, Oscar Wilde, and Guy de Maupassant. One Yiddish translation of William Shakespeare's works was accompanied by a note: "Translated and Improved" (Lansky 97). Yiddish readers were acquainted with Chinese legends and Finnish folktales. Women writers were represented by Kadya Molodovsky, Rachel Luria, Celia Dropkin, Anna Margolin, Rajzel Zychlinsky, Miriam Raskin, and Rokhl Korn (who first published in Polish). Finally, the New World became home to famous Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Ash, I. B. Singer and I. J. Singer, who came to America for various reasons, such as poverty, anti-Semitism, or as war refugees. Sholem Aleichem, nicknamed the Jewish Mark Twain, was the central figure in Yiddish literature, and the author of the popular stories about *Tevye the Dairyman* on the basis of which the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was produced. The Yiddish theatre became a vibrant scene for the Yiddish-speaking cast and audience, when "the first

Yiddish play professionally performed in New York was staged on August 18, 1882" (Martin 189).

Aaron Lansky's quest began a campaign to bring the Yiddish language back into focus. As far as the situation of Jewish immigrants was similar to the situation of other ethnic groups, the specificity of Yiddish rested in its unique position as an endangered language. Other ethnicities could still rely on their homelands, whereas the Yiddish civilization perished during the Holocaust. According to Lansky, "[t]here were 11 million Yiddish speakers in the world when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939; by 1945 one in two had been murdered, and the great Jewish cultural centers of Eastern Europe lay in ruins" ("The Yiddish Book Center" 22). Yiddish is a language without a country, surviving solely in the presence of people who speak it. Nowadays, Yiddish is spoken mainly by Hasidic ultra-Orthodox groups for which "the language functions to shield them from the corrupting influence of the outside world, reinforcing the sense of identity totally focused on religious observance" (Davis 7–8). The revival of Yiddish in the 1970s and 1980s can be best observed in academic circles, where the Yiddish language became of interest to younger Jews, especially those fascinated by East European Jewish social history and cultural studies. Max Weinreich taught the first Yiddish college course at City College in New York in 1947. Another college-level Yiddish program was launched in the 1950s at Columbia University by Frank Atran, who was later succeeded by Uriel Weinreich, Max's son, the author of the first modern textbook in English, *College Yiddish* (1949). Max Weinreich's scholarly work helped to establish the notion that "Yiddish is a unique language from which modern linguistics can glean vital insights" (Katz). The inclusion of Yiddish in places like Harvard, where Ruth Wisse began a Yiddish studies program, finally legitimized its validity in the field of Jewish studies. In 1991, UNESCO passed a resolution which declared Yiddish an endangered language. Today, Yiddish has recovered its validity, granting direct access to a thousand-year-long cultural tradition. It may be heard not only in ultra-Orthodox communities in America and Israel, but at about twenty colleges and universities throughout North America; its resurgence as a foreign language is a fact. Baruch College at the City University of New York is the only place in the United States which has a resident Yiddish theatre company—The Folksbiene Theater. This is how I. B. Singer talked about the uniqueness of Yiddish in his Nobel lecture:

> The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language, a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which

> possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics: a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews. (Lansky 219)

Although the influence of Yiddish on host languages was limited, as the groups lived next to each other rather than together, there is a large number of Yiddish words that have found their way into modern English: bagel (a hard ring-shaped bread roll), blintz (a thin pancake), chutzpah (shameless audacity), dybbuk (the wandering soul of a dead person), kosher (food that conforms to dietary laws), lox (smoked salmon), meshuga (crazy), shlep (to carry something with great effort), and schmuck (a contemptible person), to mention a few. Benor specifies two phrases of Yiddish origin that have successfully become part of the American English language: "enough already" and "money shmoney" (322), whereas words such as shmatta, Shabbas, shiksa, kasha, bachor, cymes, kelner and kapcan sound familiar to the speakers of Polish, even if their meanings are often no longer congruent with the original versions. For example, the word "bachor" in Yiddish means a young man, and in Polish, an unruly child.



Even though Yiddish literature is finite, it can be a source of inspiration for modern writers. Henry Roth, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud spiced their English with Yiddish syntax. Cynthia Ozick and Irving Howe translated from Yiddish into English. A post-vernacular work by Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), describes a culture invented on the basis of Yiddish. The world of the shtetl comes to life in Allen Hoffman's *Small Worlds* (1996), as well as in Nathan Englander's *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (1999), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), and Steve Stern's *The Angel of Forgetfulness* (2005) and *Frozen Rabbi* (2010). Chava Rosenfarb's *Bociany* (2000) was originally written in Yiddish, and later translated by her daughter into English. Popular imagination associates Yiddish with the expression of folk culture; however, Anita Norich observes its complex position in Jewish history:

> [I]t is a language of the majority of Holocaust victims and has increasingly become a metonymy for them, as if it constituted the very shrouds they were denied. As a language of mourning and commemoration, it is a sign of absence, carrying the authority of the dead with whom one cannot argue and who therefore always have the last word. ("Yiddish" 298)

Founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky, the Yiddish Book Center is a nonprofit organization, which is sponsored by member contributions (there are around 20,000 registered members), gifts, and grants. The Center's primary aim is the preservation of Yiddish literature and culture. Books

acquired by the Center come not only from the United States, but from those parts of the world that hosted Yiddish-speaking immigrant communities, such as, for example, Zimbabwe, the former British colony of Rhodesia, where Jewish World War II refugees found shelter. Yiddish books have come from Israel, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Cuba, and South Africa. For example, many copies of books in the series *Dos Poylishe Yidntum* (Polish Jewry), a 175-volume series published in Buenos Aires between 1946 and 1966, are available at the Center. Because old books were printed on cheap, wood-pulp, brittle paper, they turned yellow in time and crumbled. Reprinting was too expensive, so the books were scanned and digitalized. A big project of digitalization of the whole collection started in 1997, making the whole depository accessible to world-wide readers. The Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library enabled the Yiddish Book Center to place thousands of texts online, which then can be downloaded free of charge.

A newly constructed building designed by Allen Moore became in 1997 the Center's permanent quarters. The wooden structure brings to mind the synagogues of Eastern Europe. Over the years, the Yiddish Book Center has grown to become the largest Jewish cultural organization in the United States. Its aim is not only to save and preserve Yiddish books, but to find new readers for the forgotten volumes. That is why the Center does not only store books, but distributes them to libraries, educational institutions and private parties, at the same time offering duplicate copies for sale. All books are digitalized and posted online, except those for which the author's estate or the publisher has refused permission. In practice, the priority is given to books in better condition, simply because they are easier to handle. There remain about two thousand rare and fragile books to be digitalized, and ephemeral materials are not digitalized. The requests for original copies of the books from readers who have found the PDFs online and the reports of the Center's international students and fellows confirm that people around the world are using the digital library. At the last count (2014), there have been 400,000 downloads. The Center collaborates with educational institutions and libraries wherever in the world Jewish studies are taught. In 2013, for example, nearly 3,000 volumes were shipped to universities and cultural institutions in Poland. Over the years, the Center has become a vibrant cultural hub that educates, translates, publishes and exhibits Yiddish language materials. The best Yiddish books are translated into English under the program "The New Yiddish Library." The Wexler Oral History Project collects video interviews that record life testimonies of speakers of Yiddish. The Center's English language magazine *Pakn Treger* (The Book Peddler) publishes news about the world of

Yiddish. For example, recent issues discuss the work of Yiddish cultural activists, explore Yiddish food vocabulary, and reproduce examples of Yiddish primers. Since 1989 the Center has been offering internships and fellowships to students from across the world interested in learning Yiddish. The courses are accredited and many of their alumni join the field of Jewish or Yiddish studies, becoming educators and community leaders. The Book Center's programs include education, Yiddish books and translation, events and exhibitions, oral history, production and publication, with a variety of on-site and online courses at different levels, for teenagers and adults alike. The Book Center is developing a new textbook that would incorporate contemporary pedagogical methods in learning Yiddish. An interactive website allows translators from all over the world to post their works in progress and get feedback from more fluent speakers of Yiddish. The Center hosts exhibitions on modern Yiddish culture, as well as conferences, concerts, performances, readings, and lectures. There is a theatre, a bookstore, and offices. The Center's activities which move beyond its premises include lectures at synagogues and colleges.



The significance of such places as the Center for the preservation of Yiddish cannot be overlooked, especially that the language's appeal has been shifting depending on the agenda:

> For atheists it was Jewishness without religion; for feminists, Judaism free from patriarchy; for those uncomfortable with Israeli politics, nationalism without Zionism; for socialists, the voice of proletarian struggle; for more contemporary radicals, a *shtokh* [a jab] to the establishment. (Lansky 286–87)

Bearing in mind its extensive use by ultra-Orthodox Hasidic communities, it seems that the future of Yiddish is not imperilled. As the spokesperson for the library claims, there is great interest, if somewhat clandestine, in the digital library among Orthodox Yiddish speakers, many of whom live in communities that consider secular Yiddish literature *treyf* (forbidden). The post-vernacular use of Yiddish and the younger generation's interest in Yiddish culture allow one to hope that Yiddish will continue to thrive. However, as a medium through which one may examine the Jewish past, Yiddish cultural representations evoke a question of authenticity. Since Yiddish has become a proxy for all those speakers whose voices have been muted by the Holocaust, the politicization of Yiddish studies has been unavoidable. One example may be the presentation of the shtetl in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* as poor and oppressive, but familiar and comforting. This image, as Anita Norich argues,

> has long held precedence over the evidence of literary and historical sources pointing to a much more complex picture. Dan Miron's *The Image of the Shtetl*, Tel Aviv, 1981 examined the shtetl from a fuller perspective that challenges nostalgic re-creations of history. ("Yiddish" 298)

Another example might be an all-inclusive culture of neo-Ashkenaz Yiddish enthusiasts, such as

> the sole Japanese klezmer musician, Kazutoki Umezu, . . . [and] the participants in mock shtetl weddings. . . . The epitome of neo-Ashkenaz is Ariel, a so-called Jewish restaurant in Kasimierz, which was the pre-Shoah center of the Cracow Jewish community. The food features such Eastern European delicacies as *heldzlekh*, but Mediterranean specialties are also available. The music is a bizarre and unsettling mix of secular and religious melodies. And among the musicians and restaurant employees, there is not a single Jew. (Hadda 15)



As long as those contemporary trends illustrate the accommodative qualities of Yiddish, none of them, as Janet Hadda argues, "can claim to be direct continuations of the rich, conflict-ridden, and sometimes contradictory realm that existed in Eastern Europe before World War II" (17).

Hebrew has been an unquestionable element in American Jewish religious upbringing. Its presence is highlighted especially during religious ceremonies. Learning Yiddish, however, does not have to be religiously mandated, and can be seen as a step toward the exploration of an interesting aspect of Jewishness. To secular Jews and non-Jews, studying Yiddish culture offers a connection to Judaism that is not religious. Whether out of nostalgia for the lost world of their ancestors, or a curiosity about its exotic nature, Yiddish has enjoyed a revival in modern times. Yiddish offers an interesting medium for the study of the idea of multiculturalism and transnationalism, as it embraces

> a wide range of cultural forms and influences, including but not limited to traditional Jewish education; American, eastern, and western European literatures in their originals and in (abundant) translations; the cadences of Tanakh (the Jewish Bible); and *di yidishe gas* (the Jewish street). (Norich, "Writing" 11–12)

Knowledge of Yiddish helps students in scholarly research, during which they can read primary texts. New learners who begin their adventure with

Yiddish often become the ambassadors of this endangered culture. "In the twenty-first century," Benor claims, "young American Jews are using Yiddish-influenced English to indicate facets of their ethnic and religious selves, even when their parents and grandparents do not" (319). What is more, there will probably be more haredi Jews, raised in Yiddish, who will leave their communities and bring their Yiddish fluency to a wider Jewish community. An example of this trend may be such novelists as Pearl Abraham, the author of *The Romance Reader* (1996), Tova Mirvis's *The Outside World* (2004), Nathan Englander's *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (2000), Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls* (1999), and Tova Reich's *Master of the Return* (1999). Yiddish will probably never be part of the mainstream of American Jewish life, nor will it be replaced by English as the Jewish language, as Cynthia Ozick speculated in her essay "America: Toward Yawneh" (1970), but as long as there is still an important minority who can speak Yiddish, its role in American Jewish culture will not be forgotten, and institutions such as The Yiddish Book Center will play a vital role in its preservation.



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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0004

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# Anthology and Absence: The Post-9/11 Anthologizing Impulse

## ABSTRACT

The decade after the attacks of 9/11 and the fall of the World Trade Center saw a proliferation of New York-themed literary anthologies from a wide range of publishers. With titles like *Poetry After 9/11*, *Manhattan Sonnet*, *Poems of New York*, *Writing New York*, and *I Speak of the City*, these texts variously reflect upon their own post-9/11 plurivocality as preservative, regenerative, and reconstructive. However, the work of such anthologies is more complex than filling with plurivocality the physical and emotional hole of Ground Zero. These regional collections operate on the dilemma of all anthologies: that between collecting and editing. Every anthology, and every anthologist, negotiates the relationship between what is present and what is missing. In light of some of the emerging and established scholarship on the history of the English-language anthology, this article reads closely the declarative paratexts and the silent but equally powerful canonical choices of several different post-9/11 poetry anthologies. In so doing, the article comes to suggest the ways the anthology's necessary formal incorporation of absence and presence, rather than its plurivocality alone, connects collections of New York's literature to the fraught discourse of memorialization and rebuilding at the site of the World Trade Center.

After 9/11, poetry literally covered New York City. Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians, editors of the 2002 anthology *Poetry After 9/11*, vividly describe a city of poems

> stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations. In neighborhood newspapers the letters-to-the-editor pages were full of them. Downtown, people scrawled poems in the ash that covered everything. And on the brick walls of police stations and firehouses, behind the mountains of flowers and between photos of the dead, poetry dominated. (ix)



Johnson and Merians sought to channel this poetic plurivocality: to recreate the anthologizing they saw the city itself perform. Motivated by a similar spirit, City Lore, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving New York's cultural heritage, performed a related task, preserving many of the poems and other writings left throughout the city (Aptowicz 255). Poetry scholar Ann Keniston also aptly describes the effect of 9/11 on a newly collective national aesthetic landscape in which

> poets . . . began prolifically to write poems responding to the attacks. Many websites were set up where amateur poets could post their poems; Sam Hamill's website *Poets Against the War* . . . had received nearly thirty thousand poems when it closed in 2010; and nearly a fifth of the poems in *The Best American Poetry 2003*, edited by Yusef Komunyakaa, related to the attacks, New York City, or other public or historic events. (659)

The Twin Towers' fall elicited a desire not only to write about or for New York but also to collect such writing. One voice was not enough. It must be plural; it must be anthologized.

Many literary anthologies of New York writing appeared in the decade following 9/11. They range from slender paperbacks and a book in the Knopf Everyman's Library Pocket Series to a hefty 1050-page volume, and their intended markets extend from academic to trade readerships. Some include only living poets; some are diachronic; some feature both poetry and prose. Those published closest to 9/11 are explicitly intended as sources of solace and strength; others are broader reference texts. But each of their editors has either explicitly posited or indirectly implied a new need for anthologizing in the post-9/11 cityscape. The anthologies under consideration here—*Poetry After 9/11*, *Manhattan Sonnet*, *Poems of New York*, *Writing New York*, and *I Speak of the City*—

variously reflect upon their own plurivocality as preservative, regenerative, and reconstructive.

The work of such anthologies is more complex than filling with plurivocality the physical and emotional hole of Ground Zero. These regional collections operate on the dilemma of all anthologies: that between collecting and editing. The anthologies closest to 9/11 claim to create a newly holistic narrative around the city: to fill a void; to heal with multiple voices. Even the more general anthologies suggest that 9/11 has given special relevance to accumulating city writing. Each of these books offers an implicit or explicit theory about literature's ability to preserve and reconstruct New York in the face of tremendous loss. Generic convention necessitates the incorporation of absence into such meaning-making: every anthology and every anthologist negotiates the relationship between what is present and what is missing. By reading closely the declarative paratexts—including prefaces, forewords, and other moments of editorial metacognition—and the silent but equally powerful canonical choices of several different post-9/11 poetry anthologies, I would like to suggest the ways the anthology's necessary formal incorporation of absence and presence, rather than its plurivocality alone, connects collections of New York's literature to the discourse of memorialization and rebuilding at the site of the World Trade Center.



Popular poetry anthologies in Victorian England had titles like *The Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* and *A Thousand and One Gems of English Poetry*. During this period, "the cultural value of poetry was frequently expressed in metaphors of accumulation and wealth" (Houston 365). Post-9/11 anthologies of New York writing endorse this sentiment and also send a message about the value of accumulating their regional literature. The message is that, gathered from various sources, writing—and poetry especially—has the power, if only belatedly, to rebuild what was lost.[1] The editorial and production choices of the first edition of *Poetry After 9/11*, for example, strongly suggest this. The book's cover image of the Lower Manhattan skyline includes the Twin Towers, and after the foreword and introduction, a single poem appears as a frontispiece before the bastard title page: David Lehman's "The World Trade Center." Through its title alone, Lehman's poem begins to give back the Towers—even if, as he writes, "I never liked the World Trade Center. When it went up I talked it

[1] Cf. Keniston: "Poetry suddenly seemed crucial to the national experience of processing the attacks. . . . Poetry, including the kind of occasional and politically motivated poetry that may earlier have seemed aesthetically suspect, offered a crucial intervention in a national dialogue widely perceived as lacking reflection and temperance" (659).

down / As did many other New Yorkers" (1–3). The speaker describes how, after the first World Trade Center attacks in February 1993, his "whole attitude toward the World Trade Center / Changed overnight" (16–17). The poem's concluding lines draw us into a stunning experience of vision:

> . . . I began to like the way
> It comes into view as you reach Sixth Avenue
> From any side street, the way the tops
> Of the towers dissolve into the white skies
> In the east when you cross the Hudson
> Into the city across the George Washington Bridge. (17–22)



For the editors of *Poetry After 9/11* to take this poem as prefatory material, with its declarative title and its means of placing us in the presence of the Towers, is a defiant statement of rebuilding. The Towers "dissolve into the white skies," but the poem and those it foregrounds in the anthology reveal them. Pre-9/11 view is translated into post-9/11 reconstruction.

*Manhattan Sonnet*, an anthology of contemporary Indonesian prose and poetry in English translation, seeks to project a double solidarity in response to 9/11—not only around Indonesian national literature, but around the Indonesian experience in New York City. In her foreword, Adila Suwarmo describes why the Lontar Foundation put together the short anthology: "Because we believe that words can heal and that true peace will only be found through communication we offer this book as salve for the wounds of that wonderful city" (viii). The Towers no longer stand, but "communication" is present in the form of writing. In Suwarmo's therapeutic logic, the more utterances the book can gather, the more it can heal, and the anthology is recuperative partly because its writings can be "put together."

Perhaps the most frequently lamented aspect of the composite literary anthology is its tendency to promote browsing—extensive rather than intensive reading. As Barbara Benedict has argued in an eighteenth-century context, the practice of extensive reading is tied to the anthology's perpetuation of literary consumerism. By collecting a variety of literature, anthologies heighten the sense that it is a commodity readers can skip over at will. According to Benedict, eighteenth-century anthologies and miscellanies also

> establish the concept of contemporary "taste" itself by presenting in one book works from many current authors . . . [S]pecializing in fresh, topical publications, literary anthologies thus exploit opportunities of print by representing social power to the reader as the mastery of current literary culture. (211)

While they might encourage skipping and dipping, anthologies also make big promises. Benedict's link between topical publication and lexical mastery is useful for thinking about the New York literary anthology, because the topos of New York itself is the big promise of these books. Each imagines and names the city differently: "Manhattan," "New York," or "the city." *Poetry After 9/11* offers an extremely specific, historically rooted vision of place; along with *Manhattan Sonnet*, it presents exclusively living authors. Many of its poems locate themselves in Manhattan, on 9/11. In contrast, Elizabeth Schmidt's *Poems of New York*, Stephen Wolf's *I Speak of the City*, and Phillip Lopate's *Writing New York* are diachronic. Their motivations are not particularly political—unlike *Manhattan Sonnet*, which is dedicated to "the innocent victims of terrorism the world over"—and they include texts about 9/11 as part of a broader continuum of representations of New York. Schmidt's first inclusion is Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." *I Speak of the City* begins with a poem in translation from Dutch, Jacob Steendam's "The Complaint of New Amsterdam to its Mother." Lopate opens with excerpts from Washington Irving's *A History of New York*, claiming in a headnote that the history's "ironic, disenchanted voice set the tone for much New York literature to come" (Lopate 1). An anthology that opens with Whitman, Steendam, or Irving obviously has a different aura from a collection of contemporary voices. Diachronic New York anthologies draw attention to a tradition of representation, whereas one subtext of *Poetry After 9/11* is the contemporary, as evidenced in the poets' biographies in the book's back matter: "She lives in the East Village"; "He lives six blocks from the site of the World Trade Center" (Johnson and Merians 108). Yet through the inclusion of writers living or dead, through slenderness or weightiness, these anthologies link the collection of literary representations to a kind of mastery over New York.



They often do so by remarking on the preserving power of the literature they collect. Stephen Wolf introduces *I Speak of the City* by calling it "a testament to the city's spirit, preserved and newly created in the most ennobling expression of the human heart" (xxxi). In Wolf's view, it is implied, the "city's spirit" would exist without written expression, but it would not be lasting: "*Preserving what has vanished*, poems speak from Ellis Island . . . atop a skyscraper's thrilling observation deck and deep in teeming tenements, or sidewalks, in taxis . . ." (xxx, emphasis added). In the foreword to *Poems of New York*, Elizabeth Schmidt also argues for poetry as a means of temporary mastery over the changing city. More than Wolf, Schmidt dwells on 9/11: she describes the way she personally witnessed the fall of the Twin Towers, and she names this the impetus for her collection, "New York continually reminds us that time passes.

New buildings go up and old ones come down" (Schmidt 20). But in this sometimes violently changing urban environment, poetry provides constancy: "Poets who have written about New York are masters at preserving, and allowing us to cherish, moments of life in this theater of chance and change" (20). Schmidt and Wolf stop just short of declaring that anthologists, too, are "masters at preserving." Poems preserve; anthologists collect these objects of preservation.

Schmidt's and Wolf's anthologies make New York navigable. Both books—the slender, guidebook-like *I Speak of the City* and the pocket-sized *Poems of New York*, with its place-keeping ribbon—are eminently portable. Both frequently feature only one poem (and at most three) by a given poet. The city might be a "theater of chance and change," but organizing its literary representations allows us to control our place in it. If the city is ephemeral, its poems can be permanent. To anthologize them is to assert mastery over an unstable, vulnerable environment, a city in which 9/11 could occur; or, as Johnson and Merians put it, "[t]he ashes have blown away; the poems have not" (x). In their paratexts and in the production choices that resulted in books-as-objects, Wolf's and Schmidt's works similarly endorse the argument that the anthology performs the work of the poem on a larger scale. Poems preserve; anthologies encompass and organize. They allow not only readerly mastery over current literary culture but mastery over death.



Phillip Lopate's later, larger, transgeneric, and diachronic anthology *Writing New York* (2008) also supports this ideology. When Lopate discusses 9/11 in a postscript, he notes that it was not the first large-scale catastrophe to cause radical change to the New York cityscape. This view matches the anthology's broad scope: among so many city narratives, 9/11 appears as part of a continuum, not an all-defining event. Yet Lopate is highly aware of his publication's context. He notes the changes in the cityscape since the anthology's first edition, and the literary response to those changes; the first such change he names is the terrorist attack of September 11. Lopate addresses the same issue that the more explicitly 9/11-motivated anthologists do, namely what it means to write about the city and what it means to anthologize such writing.

On this subject, his thoughts echo the framing remarks of *Poetry After 9/11*: the ashes have blown away, but the poems have not. Agreeing with Robert Moses that "New York is just too big, too complex to be served by any one writer," Lopate hypothesizes that "the only way to undertake a literary portrait of the city would be piece by piece, through a full-scale anthology of the best New York writing" (xvii). Then he declares: "This volume attempts such a literary record" (xvii). For Lopate, a single writer

cannot preserve the whole city, but multiple writers can approximate this task; the paucity of writing on the subject, not the tension implicit in the very idea of creating a comprehensive literary record, is the main problem of representing New York. If New York is big and variable, anthologize bigger. While he acknowledges what he has had to leave out, Lopate presents *Writing New York* as functioning on the theory of a treasury: a little is good, a lot is better.

In other contexts, critics have addressed a constellation of problems around anthologies' omissions, selections, and absences. Alan Golding has described Federalist editor Elihu Hubbard Smith's various exclusions and "silent criticism" at work in the 1793 anthology *American Poems* (Golding 286). Jed Rasula has suggested a conspiracy in poetry anthologies of the 1990s to silence the Language poets. Rasula asks, "Are we witness to an academic delusion? Or is there a conspiracy on the part of anthologists and publishers to deny the existence of Language poetry?" (Rasula 262). Without editorial acknowledgement, omissions provoke readerly anger, and this coercive yet silent form of criticism causes even the selected writers to be skeptical of inclusion. The poet David Antin's remark that "[a]nthologies are to poets as the zoo is to animals" underscores the ambiguity with which anthologies are fraught (qtd. in Price 2). They are totalizing, conservative, and authoritative: we see this in everything from canon-determining Norton volumes to a multi-media project like Capitol Records' 1995–96 *The Beatles Anthology* that comprised three double-CD box sets with flubbed takes and rare versions of songs, thus preserving a rich recording backstory. At the same time, anthologies are fragmentary and selective. There is more to Walt Whitman than "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; anthologies featuring only "The Day Lady Died" give readers only part of a portrait of Frank O'Hara. Behind each choice lies an editorial assumption about which parts can stand for the whole—more fundamentally, an assumption that parts can stand for the whole. Without editorial acknowledgement and readerly understanding of these assumptions, anthologies risk magnifying a single performance into an entire literary-historical narrative.

As we can learn from scholarship like Rasula's and Golding's, which investigates how the silences of anthologies speak, the notion that collecting regional texts is purely conservative is disingenuous—that "piece by piece," in Phillip Lopate's phrase, writing can eventually cover all of the changed, changing city of New York. At the same time as they rally diverse poets around a single city, the anthologies I have mentioned curtail the length of each entry. One or two poems per poet, ten or twenty pages of prose: these accumulative bodies are populated with absence. Destined to contain gaps, at once heteroglossic and omissive, anthologies are themselves only

part of a topic they can never fully encompass. In collections about New York, just as in collections of national literature, that topic—"Manhattan," "New York," or "the city"—is evasive and mutable. An evolving built environment, a space of living crowds, New York is always enfolding disintegration and death. Before, on, and after 9/11, this is the paradox of its community-making.

If we want to make the comparison between the collecting city and the collecting volume, then, perhaps this is the basis on which to do so: like the five-borough city, the anthology is an amalgamation, but one that subsists on absence. Leaving out poems to make a collection is apt for a city in which "something missing" has become a recognizable, even definitive, part of the total skyline: an absence that seems to persist even as the Freedom Tower has risen to completion.[2] Both New York and its literary collections are mosaics of presence and loss.



In January 2004, a jury voted Michael Arad and Peter Walker's "Reflecting Absence" the winning design in the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition. Arad and Walker's memorial is part of Studio Daniel Libeskind's "Memory Foundations," the master plan for the entire complex. "Reflecting Absence" features two recessed pools in the footprints of the twin towers, and a plaza with rows and clusters of trees. Visitors gradually descend beneath this plaza, eventually standing behind a thin waterfall, facing out at another pool circumscribed by the victims' names. The architects described the memorial plaza as "a mediating space" belonging both to the city and to the memorial. In their words,

> [l]ocated at street level to allow for its integration into the fabric of the city, the plaza encourages the use of this space by New Yorkers on a daily basis. The memorial grounds will not be isolated from the rest of the city; they will be a living part of it. (qtd. in Young 158)

Walker and Arad address the difficult double purpose of memorialization: to preserve a sense of loss, but also to put something in its place.

This dynamic between preservation and progress came up frequently during initial discussions of site planning, and in public forums held by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. James Young, a member of the jury that chose "Reflecting Absence," describes the city's "gridlock of competing agendas" during this time: commemoration of the dead, and

[2] David Lehman captures this disorienting sensation of present absence in the last lines of "9/14/01": "we've taken this hit, and in case you forget / all you have to do is / look up and it's not there" (20–23).

the need for renewal and economic recovery (Young 144). After the city had chosen Libeskind's "Memory Foundations," the jury for the following memorial competition continued to face the difficult question of what was to be remembered, and how. In the jury's opinion, Arad and Walker best met the different agendas set forth for the memorial contestants. As the jury wrote in its final decision, "[n]ot only does this memorial creatively address its mandate to preserve the footprints, recognize individual victims, and provide access to bedrock, it also seamlessly reconnects this site to the fabric of its urban community" (qtd. in Young 159).

The literal architecture of "Reflecting Absence" and the literary architecture of the New York anthology address versions of the same questions: what is to be represented here and how? How can we read absence, and how should we fill it? "Reflecting Absence" cannot replace the Twin Towers, but instead repeats their narrative in a changed cityscape. It asks us to begin to fathom that change; to take with us the idea of the void as we reconnect "to the fabric of . . . urban community." In the same way, post-9/11 literary anthologies of New York take pride in the positive capability of their assembled representations; but at the same time, the space within and between entries reminds us that these anthologies ultimately send us back out into the mutable New York, literal and literary, from which their own representations are drawn.



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PUBLISHING NORTH AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0005

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# Thoreau and Spadina Dreamers Unite: Idealistic Communities in Canadian Publishing

## Abstract

The rise of Canadian national identity in the 1960s contributed to a flourishing small press movement across the country. One of the most impressive, long-standing and influential presses of this era was Coach House Press, located near the University of Toronto. Book design, creative forms of editing, collaborative and community-oriented work all became a focus of idealism in the Coach House context, as its founders borrowed from earlier international models, but relied, too, on the Canadian moment to devise new ways to disseminate and create literary culture. More recently, a similar idealistic model in publishing and press work has appeared in Nova Scotia at Kentville's Gaspereau Press. Gaspereau's founders, like those at Coach House, have searched for an alternative plan and method—through an in-house dedication to the craft of design and bookmaking—that is unlike that applied by mainstream publishers. One could argue that the two outfits represent a counter-tradition in Canadian cultural life, a dedication to artisanal work, as well as to forms of collaborative editing and design. With the publishing and bookselling industry under great pressure in Canada from shifts in technology and government support, counter-traditional models like Gaspereau Press present the possibility of unique forms of cultural output and marketing. Behind such efforts we recognize philosophies and notions of cultural community that run counter to major trends. This paper examines the history of both presses, specific publications, and the impact of such work on the broader Canadian literary scene.

In the spring of 2012 mass student demonstrations filled the main boulevards of downtown Montreal. Police on horseback boxed hundreds of students at intersections, arrested them and carted them off to detention. A short fifteen-minute bike ride across town, in my leafy neighbourhood, one would not have had a clue that anything was amiss in the city. A similar experience—seemingly absurd but somehow common in moments of historical importance—is described in Stefan Zweig's posthumous memoir *The World of Yesterday*. Zweig reports that life in his corner of Austria in the mid-thirties—collapsing as it was under the pressures of rising fascist politics—retained a relative calm and routine from the point of view of the local street corner. Newspaper readers in London, he felt, had a better understanding of the shifting ground than those in the immediate vicinity of change. Zweig was witness to shattering events, yet his sense of our experience of important cultural shifts is applicable to less momentous occasions as well.

In the spring and summer of 1988, quite unknowingly, I was a bystander to the dismantling of one of the key idealistic enterprises of post-war Canadian creative life. At the time I was a twenty-four-year old would-be writer between graduate programs, who had offered his services to the designers and printers at Toronto's Coach House Press. The press was run out of modest red brick buildings that were found by way of an alley behind Huron Street, in the neighbourhood of the University of Toronto. My luck was good the day I wandered into the place, though I was shabbily dressed and brought no background experience in bookmaking or design with me, and the owner-manager and house genius of the Press, Stan Bevington, and his book designer Gord Robertson took me on. I would learn to strip up film, which is how type and book covers were set in those days. In the meantime, in the background, at board and editorial meetings I did not attend, the relationship between Bevington's Coach House print shop and its better known publishing arm was collapsing, the beginning of the end of one of the most idealistic and influential independent cultural outfits in post-war Canada.

The founding of Coach House Press predated by two years the brouhaha and government largesse surrounding Canada's 1967 centenary. But its haphazard early years echoed aspects of the counterculture. In 1968, Bevington was appointed house printer at Rochdale College, which was housed in a concrete apartment tower on nearby Bloor Street. A short-lived experiment in student-run education and co-operative housing, it reflected a tentative meeting ground between mainstream goals and the city's counterculture. At Rochdale, Bevington shared an apartment with Rochdale's semi-official "writer in residence," the still green and as yet

unpublished fiction writer Matt Cohen. Cohen's appreciation of Coach House in its earlier years—its peculiarity and its difference from other mainstream publishers—is noteworthy:

> What was liberating and unique about Coach House was that it was a community that had given itself over to the exploration of aesthetics and aesthetic experience, in truth more visual than verbal. Oh, the scorn that was heaped on these bedraggled hippies for caring more about art than commerce. But why? At twenty-five years old should poets be worrying about how to increase their audience to 113 people or should they be exploring the possibilities of verbal expression? . . . Although Coach House did print and sell books, in the late sixties and early seventies, it was less a commercial press than a movement. This put it in step with the new political currents of the time, but of course in opposition to the much more old-fashioned political and literary precepts of the old-line houses like M&S and Macmillan. . . . At Coach House everything was questioned: the nature of narrative, the very acceptability of narrative itself, the nature and construction of sentences. (Cohen 145–46)



Cohen's view of the Press's activities is telling, in light of his tendency to dismiss the more popular expressions of counterculture dissent and youth activism at the time. Cynical about leftist sit-ins, the mayhem at Rochdale, and the drug culture that imbued Yorkville with a kind of Haight Ashbury-esque zaniness, the goings-on at Coach House struck him as, in many ways, too idiosyncratic, too deeply felt, too independent and unpredictable to be lumped in with the broader Yorkville scene.

It is fair to say that Coach House formulated its goals in a haphazard and non-ideological way. Bevington had learned to use linotype while working for small-town newspapers in Edson and Fairview, Alberta—cow towns on the fringes of the oil boom. And though he was attracted to Toronto by his acceptance at the University of Toronto's Fine Arts Department, his first foray on the fringes of the downtown counterculture represented a combination of printing know-how and streetwise entrepreneurial verve. In answer to the national discussion about the search for an appropriate national flag, Bevington printed, distributed and sold thousands of would-be Canadian flags to the denizens of Yorkville's hippie hangouts in the student neighbourhoods around the University of Toronto (Reid 23). The first book he hand-set was Wayne Clifford's 1965 *Man in a Window*, which set the stage for Coach House's early productions. A slim poetry volume, illustrated using nude photography by collaborator Dennis Reid, it fit the category of book making that a compatriot from those early years described as "aesthetic adventures in their own

right" (Barbour 16). This goal was reflected in early Coach House output, which focused not only on experimental writing, but challenged mainstream, market-driven notions of what a book should look like and feel like in your hand. Coach House eschewed the 8½ x 5½ inch trade format in favour of unusual shapes—some more commonly found among children's trade books—which included such notably spectacular experiments as George Bowering's *Baseball*, published in 1967. Shaped like a college dorm athletic pennant, its cover made from green felt, this was a book that defied bookstores and libraries to come to terms with how to shelve it. In a similar vein, in 1967, the Press produced bpNichol's Gaspereau *Wild Thing for the Troggs*, a flip poem in celebration of the Troggs' 1966 hit. And in 1967, poet-artist Roy Kiyooka's *Nevertheless These Eyes* asserted the idea of a book that paid equal attention to text, illustrative materials and unusual print and binding. The cover of Kiyooka's volume was wrapped in a shiny, almost reflective tin foil, which echoed the poems' reiteration of mirrors, faces and eyes, while the colour of print in the book's interior shifted from black to aubergine. As the Press developed its distinctive look, further design distinctions, familiar to collectors of fine books, included heavy paper inside and uncoated cover paper, making use of minimal illustrative content with special attention to the design potential of type.

A development that distinguished Coach House after 1975 was its editorial board, made up of writers, each of whom brought titles to the Press and saw them through the editing and publication stage. Early writer editors included bpNichol, poet and later novelist Michael Ondaatje, poet Victor Coleman, and the poet-critic and academic Frank Davey, who were joined by Bevington in his role of printer-cum-publishing manager. Editorial meetings were held in the press building's loft, at a rough wooden kitchen table, in sight of shelves full of the press's past publications, and in close proximity to the coffee maker and Bevington's wheels of colourful paper samples used to choose cover stock.

One of Bevington's early compatriots characterizes his founding of a publishing house this way: "Neither would he do it with arts grants nor with academic dispensation—but rather through his commercial operation of job printing. How often in a century is such a person born?" (Rosenberg 10).[1] This depiction of the Press, making unusual and challenging books while also printing all forms of ephemera, religious newsletters and

[1] One encounters here the mythmaking that descended on Coach House as its early accomplishments faded from view; in fact, early books do acknowledge government support, although in some cases this may have gone directly to the authors, rather than to the press. Kiyooka's *Nevertheless These Eyes* acknowledges The Canada Council, as does Bowering's *Baseball.*

posters, reflects another key aspect of the Coach House equation. One not only controlled, but *had one's hands on* all sides of the business, content, craftsmanship, all the way down the line to distribution. In fact, in the summer of 1988, in what was a period of transformation at the Press, Bevington was still known to fill the back of his gold Porsche with oddball novels and slim poetry volumes in order to make deliveries to far-flung bookstores. Outside on a picnic bench, eating lunch with a pressman or the master of the binding machine, we would watch him head for the hills, his car's back end weighed down with literature.

In an expansive memoir, published in 1997, ex-editorial board member Frank Davey highlights a number of the Press's key characteristics. Rather than relying on a traditional promotion and advertising budget, the Press pursued what Davey thinks of as community building. Rather than promote single titles, the focus fell on



> promoting the press, its various cultural connotations and its authors collectively. . . . Through this strategy we hoped to create a nation-wide community of people who would regard themselves as Coach House Press booksellers, readers, aficionados, and collectors . . . who would seek our books out even though they were not widely advertised or distributed. (46)

Lavish posters—for Michael Ondaatje's 1973 collection *Rat Jelly* and Matt Cohen's poetry book *Peach Melba* (1974)—followed the trends in music postering, toward creating beautiful, fanciful and provocative things that stores would want as much for permanent decoration as for short-term promotion. An "annual entertainment," a kind of hootenanny for poets and more prosaic creators, furthered the notion of a Coach House community, and was likely inspired by the late sixties trend, à la Andy Warhol's Factory, of Happenings (Davey 47).

Davey opposes these undertakings to what he suggests represented mainstream publishing culture in Toronto of the late sixties and seventies, a culture, in his words, of "prizes, the media celebration of prizes, commercial editorship, cocktail parties, regular CBC appearances, hard-cover novels, one-season fads . . . a culture that tends to equate sales success with quality, celebrity and international recognition with social importance to Canadians . . ." (52). By the mid-eighties, with Bevington tiring of the twin responsibilities of running a print shop and overseeing, or, at least, collaborating on a publishing program, many if not all of these mainstream goals had come to guide Coach House's output and marketing strategies. One

of the most devastating shifts, which took hold in 1987, was the transformation of the editorial board, the "replacement," as Davey tells it,

> of a group of friends who had got together in 1975 to publish books they would like others to be able to read with a group of strangers who got together as employees, corporate directors, and editorial advisors to run a business. The process of alienation of the editors from each other and of the editors from management had begun. (Davey 64)



In this portrayal of the Press's collaborative approach, and even in its earlier guise, a decade before, in Bevington's collaborative experiments with silkscreen and handset printing, we find a suitable analogy to the Press's activities in the development of a band of musicians: the crucial role of personal chemistry; the guidance and talent of a lead figure in the collaborative effort; the awareness of each player's specialized talents, what each player might bring to the band's distinctive sound; the awareness of predecessors' influence alongside the willingness to experiment, to not necessarily have a plan, a packageable goal; and, certainly, the acceptance of the margins as a suitable place to develop one's creative chops. In the Coach House scenario the goals were local, though to an extent focused on links to like-minded communities and writers in western Canada, or among writers and publishers of a particular stripe in the United States. On this front, the press sought out like-minded Americans, such as Allen Ginsberg, who donated his long poem "Iron Horse," which Coach House brought out in 1972. They were certainly anti-corporate, pro-counterculture, though they were not, as seems inevitable today, ever insistent on being part of some wider, ever-expanding globalized populist movement. In the alley off Huron, you could look through the many-paned windows at the Heidelberg offsets, whirring like a well-oiled jet engine, and that, surely, was the heart of the matter.

As seems inevitable with great musical outfits, the source of idealism, personal chemistry and creative energy and idiosyncrasy runs its course, or is shuttered by outside interference, by the overweening goal of making it big, or simply by the inability to remain on the cutting edge of a cultural and creative milieu. The disappearance of that special Coach House recipe in the 1980s, however romantically one might wish for another outcome, may have been inevitable. The surprising story in present-day Canadian publishing, at a time of otherwise overall darkness, strangeness and precariousness among book publishers and sellers, is the rise of Gaspereau Press, formed in 1997 by Andrew Steeves and Gary Dunfield in the town of Kentville, in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley. How different the setting of this undertaking from downtown Toronto, though the Press does have creative neighbours: not

far down the highway at Acadia University in Wolfville, at Halifax's Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and, a little further off, at the creative writing program at Fredericton's University of New Brunswick. Just as the inception of Coach House depended on key personalities, Gaspereau Press was founded by a pair of practical-minded polyglot figures, who began as hit-and-miss novices in bookmaking and editing. As Andrew Steeves tells it, he began haphazardly—in a fashion not unlike the early days of Coach House—first with a computer-designed literary magazine, before moving, almost inadvertently, toward the publication of a first book of poetry, then, gradually acquiring the materials needed to make books in-house. First among these tools was a Selby binder, coincidentally the same machine used at Coach House—looking, to the novice, like a set piece from Chaplin's *Modern Times*. This was followed by a twenty-year-old Omni-Adast 724p Press, which led Gaspereau to move toward design choices that included the use of heavy paper inside, uncoated cover stock with illustrative features drawn, most readily, from a lively and artistic use of typography. All of this highlighted, in a way more spectacular than that seen at Coach House, that books might be viewed and handled and appreciated as "physical objects" as much as for their content. In an account of his vision entitled "The Right Kind of Crazy," Steeves highlighted the need to create



> cultural objects that are meaningful in their conception, execution and result. It is a vision for keeping the manufacturing process small enough—close enough to craft—to ensure that everyone involved can keep their sights on the common goal and share in the value and the dignity of the work. It is a vision for publishing books whose commercial purpose does not override their cultural purpose. Not many people of my generation have attempted to combine the range of technologies and activities we combine at Gaspereau Press. (40–41)

This statement, in an uncanny way, recalls the depiction of Stan Bevington, early in this paper, which ended with the query, "How often in a century is such a person born?" (Rosenberg 10). In view of Steeves's goals, the answer seems to be: at least twice. Steeves's difference from his predecessors can be seen in his intellectual, even philosophical approach to his project, his more straightforward presence through interviews, essays and introductions to certain Gaspereau titles, where he accepts the role of spokesperson and interpreter of the work at hand. Some of his statements directly recall the early Coach House project. "You are a better publisher," he told one interviewer, "if you control projection. And you are a better printer if you have control over the content. It's a response to the fragmented manufacturing

process of the post-industrial world: a process where the same hands and minds are involved from start to finish" (Moulton 13).

This summation of the commitments that motivate work at Gaspereau, its roots in the handiwork of bookmaking, collaboration with local writers, photographers and artists rooted in the local landscape, highlights the importance that place can claim in creative work of all kinds. We might view this as an ecological approach to book publishing—the mining of a cultural network that surrounds one's immediate workplace. One recent Gaspereau publication highlights the possibilities of this approach. In 2009 the Press brought out an annotated edition of Henry David Thoreau's 1851 essay *Walking*. Catalogue copy for the title informs us that the essay was "inspired by the author's habit of working in the mornings and devoting the afternoons to local explorations, thinking, observation and exercise—that is, walking." Thoreau's essay opens with a lament over neighbours stuck indoors, and turns to the matter of choosing a walk's direction, offering, as Steeves's catalogue copy puts it, an opportunity to examine the "quality of the wilderness" in the Massachusetts woodland surrounding the cottage he built on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Thoreau, the exploration of "the wilderness in his country" helped him consider the "wildness in literature, and the process of learning" associated with discovering these things (*Gaspereau Press Catalogue*).



Naturally, Thoreau's essay is readily available to be downloaded as an electronic document on any number of web sites devoted to the author and his work. The Gaspereau edition might be considered a thing hewed, handmade, not unlike the kind of artefact that Thoreau himself hacked out of the forest lands that surrounded him as he sauntered on his afternoon way. The book is unusual in size—just 4½ x 7 inches—so a cosier fit in the hand than the average trade paperback; its signatures are sewn, rather than glued; it is bound in a cover using a handmade paper jacket produced at the Press by Gary Dunfield. (When I visited the Press, I was shown a bucket which was part of this process, so low-tech expectations, patience and good humour might be considered part of the recipe). Gaspereau's edition of *Walking* includes illustrations made from wood engravings by Wesley Bates.[2] It behaves, then, as an object of great personal dedication, handiwork and thoughtful design. Herein one finds a crowning example of the idealism asserted by both the early Coach House and presently at Gaspereau: a highlighting of in-house craftsmanship and design; collaborative work shared by writer,

[2] Bates was born in the Yukon in 1952. He was based at Nova Scotia's Mount Alison University until 1977, when he moved to Ontario to pursue a career as a painter and printmaker.

artist and pressman; some echo of place, which may reflect the local ecology of the press or something more diverse and further afield; all of which follows from goals that defy, or aim to rewrite, market expectations.

The Coach House Press, in the decade between 1965 and 1975, existed on the fringes, as some sort of counterpart to the explosion of independent cultural activity that was partly motivated by Canada's newfound national identity. The rise of Gaspereau Press reflects no such context, but rather, the independent impulse and accomplishment of its two founders. No doubt, the Coach House example offered a model by which Gaspereau could find its way. One enters all such communities, if one wishes to, with great idealism, a certain intrepid adventurousness and a lack of pre-set expectations. Such literary outcomes tell a particular, even peculiar story about the writing and publishing life in Canada, and they present some of the pleasures of a walk in unfamiliar woods.



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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0006

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# The Limits of Language as the Limits of the World: Cormac McCarthy's and David Markson's Post-Apocalyptic Novels

## ABSTRACT

The article examines the correlation between the world and the word in two novels which engage with a post-apocalyptic scenario: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Shifting the focus from the very event of catastrophe to the notion of survival through memory and storytelling, both novels problematize the strained relationship between language and reality in an increasingly diminished and dehumanized world. My aim is to investigate the limits of language as well as its capacity to withstand the chaos, loss, trauma, and death that follow the apocalypse. The issues to be considered include the influence of external experience on forms of communication, the role of central metaphors (the archive and the museum in Markson's novel; cinders and the road in McCarthy's) and their relation to the form of both novels, as well as the word's (in)capacity to preserve human values and hopes. Both novels will be discussed as deconstructionist projects in which language becomes a habitat at once impossible and life-preserving: in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* it plays the role of both home and prison, whereas in *The Road* it functions as messianic discourse which simultaneously carries, propels and extinguishes the human hope for a transcendental reality beyond the post-apocalyptic emptiness and doubt.

> How to comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between "to be" or "not to be"?
> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* 10

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (80). The aim of the following study is to juxtapose two literary experiments in which language serves to create a very special form of existence, namely life in the post-apocalyptic world in which the dominant experience is that of fear, social upheaval, alienation, and loss. As acknowledged by one of the modern thinkers of the apocalypse, Jacques Derrida, the apocalyptic and its aftermath confront us with the unspeakable and unimaginable; hence the frequently cryptic, disruptive, ambiguous, and secretive idiom used to describe them. "By its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres and codes," Derrida observes, "apocalyptic discourse can also, in dislocating destinations, dismantle the dominant contract or concordant. It is a challenge to the established receivability of messages and to the policing of destinations" ("Apocalyptic Tone" 159–60). The post-apocalyptic messages in the novels under scrutiny here will likewise reveal a strong penchant for dislocation and broken circuits of semantic and "postal economy" (the code's simple trajectory from the sender to the receiver) (Derrida, *Post Card* 121). In the post-apocalyptic text, words and the imagination are pushed towards the extreme ends of history and humanity, as they oscillate between presence and absence, memory and forgetfulness, articulateness and silence, impotence and healing power, exteriority and interiority. For the purpose of this analysis, I have selected two texts in which the problem of discourse and memory at the end of history comes to the fore: David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer-awarded novel *The Road.* Both share the "apocalyptic temper" which is connected to moments of "radical discontinuity" and change, and which has informed American mythology since early Puritan times (Dewey 10). The apocalyptic temper, as Dewey argues, "is an attempt by a culture that is genuinely puzzled and deeply disturbed to understand itself and its own time," revealing "[a] culture caught by a crisis that challenges the very undergirdings of its make-up" and yet "strive[s] to create a workable if radical method to respond to the intolerable evidence of its own history" (10–11). In Markson's and McCarthy's works, the cataclysmic imagination—marked by the crisis of representation (Markson) and the catastrophe of 9/11 (McCarthy)—is haunted by Derrida's questions about the impossibility of comprehending the discourse of the end and about the end. The cultural make-up from which those texts derive yields different ways

of seeing and understanding the extremes of history and different defensive strategies, realized with particular poignancy in the novels' ghostly rhetoric, and rich but highly ambiguous and deconstructive metaphorization.

As befits the apocalyptic paradigm, the action of both novels takes place in the aftermath of a catastrophe. In the case of McCarthy, it is most probably a meteor crash, although the author himself does not provide the answer to this question, describing the event in two vague and characteristically minimalist sentences: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (52). In Markson's novel we are offered even less in that respect, nor can we ascertain if the catastrophe is real or imagined. The reader learns only that one morning the sole protagonist and narrator, Kate, awakes as the last person on earth and begins searching the globe for signs of human life. In the narrative's present, Kate has abandoned her desperate yet futile search for "anybody, anywhere at all" (Markson 17) and, using a found typewriter, has started writing a journal that becomes the narrative offered to the reader, as well as a message to the world. Having shifted the very event of catastrophe to the background and keeping the sources of the catastrophe unidentified throughout, both writers focus on the struggle for survival with a special emphasis on the role and limits of discourse and memory in the dehumanized world.



It is exactly the problem of limits and capacities of language in the context of post-apocalyptic American fiction that will be the subject of my scrutiny. I propose to examine two major questions in this comparative argument. The first concerns the already cited proposition of Wittgenstein, concerning the limits of our language as the limits of our world, and the influence of a reality reduced to a bare minimum on human communication. The second question pertains to the significance of the novels' central metaphors—the road and cinders in McCarthy's text and the museum in Markson's novel—which, as I shall suggest, apparently offer two different visions of the vanishing world's attempted preservation. The visions, however, share a common core—they partake of the paradoxical nature of language understood as a Derridean *pharmakon*—at once a carrier of death and a remedy, a poisonous trace of the irretrievable past and a source of human values and hope.

In both novels, the spaces which the protagonists inhabit and travel through are at once literal and deeply symbolic, affecting all forms of the former's communication. In McCarthy's work, the main hero traverses the desolate and scorched America together with his son—the axis of the story is their hope to get to the South and the sea, where they expect to find better living conditions. The quest begins in the menacing wasteland, a skeletal desert hostile to all life, "chockfull [*sic*] of unforgettable hor-

rors, awash with blood and gore" (Kunsa 58), inhabited by hordes of cannibals who "would eat your children in front of your eyes" (McCarthy 154). "Barren, silent, godless": thus the narrator introduces the landscape. "Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop" (McCarthy 2–3)—the broken, staccato sentences seem to perform the world's continual reduction. On their way to the sea, the characters pass dead trees, lifeless rivers, desolate cities, grey meadows, while the air is thick with cinders: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (1). The ghostly urban horizon is captured well through the metaphor of a charcoal sketch: "The shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste" (7). McCarthy clearly shows us a world of chaos, a reality in the state of erasure and self-annihilation—losing its contours, colours and shapes: "[t]he world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (93).



Cinders, dominating the landscape, become a trace of the irretrievable world:

> The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. (McCarthy 93)

According to Jacques Derrida, cinders are that kind of nothingness which can exist, which remains an entity while breathing destruction; it is thus a visible sign of reality that is no longer possible—a trace of the world forever severed from its ground (*Cinders* 35). The power of the trope of cinders, as Derrida claims, lies in its spectral nature—it is the sign in which the absent other appears and persists: what remains without remaining, visible but scarcely readable, but what nevertheless exerts constant pressure on our thinking and memory. Cinders are also temporal—both the fire and what has become ashes can never be recreated, at once pointing to and obliterating specific times, singular events, texts and places. As noted by Cetinić, "the cinder signals past in its fragility, while its circulation activates a persistent relation to the future, the movement of memory" (77). However, it also "name[s] the resilience and the intractability of what is most delicate and most vulnerable" (Lukacher qtd. in Cetinić 77). Cinders, which in McCarthy's novel cover everything, make the protagonists' orientation in the landscape impossible, becoming a trace that hides other traces, muffles sounds, and leaves them with a sense that the ashen reality at once exists

and vanishes. A most perfect trope of destruction and memory, cinders mark an increasingly illegible fragment of the past's disappearing script as they suspend the world in the state of its tangible vulnerability, keeping the ghosts of the past alive, and thus separating the father, whose fading world they represent, from his son, who—brought up in the post-apocalyptic world—is unable to read their meaning.

In this world, it is also language that turns to ashes, as words detach from their signifieds:

> The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (McCarthy 93)



The reduction of the world affects the language of narration: the sentences are often incomplete, brief, simple, paratactic, and asyndetic; sometimes they erode into single words, fragile and broken phrases, repetitions, and echoes. The characters observe that entire categories and concepts become irrelevant in the new reality, for example the notion of the state: "These are the roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads," the father explains, instantly realizing, however, that states no longer exist and that he cannot quite clarify their nature to his son, born after the catastrophe (McCarthy 36). The lack of relational markers and the fragmentation of syntax reveals the continuing desiccation of language, whose condition mirrors the shapelessness, the acute cold and monochromaticity of the post-apocalyptic nothingness. Furthermore, dialogues between the principal characters reveal the plodding reduction and exhaustion of language:

> I'm really hungry, Papa.
> I know.
> Will we be able to find our stuff?
> Yes. I know where it is.
> What if somebody finds it?
> They wont find it.
> I hope they dont.
> They wont. Come on.
> What was that?
> I didnt hear anything.
> Listen.
> I dont hear anything. (McCarthy 84)

The short, nervous, monosyllabic sentences—reduced to the communicational minimum and difficult to attribute—capture perfectly the characters' loneliness, exhaustion, anxiety, and deprivation. The reality which is devoid of depth, light, and variety, and in which the dominant experience is constant fear and hunger, empties language of its depth and shades. "There is nothing left to talk about" (McCarthy 54)—those words, uttered by the protagonist's wife shortly before her suicide, serve as an apt summary of the survivors' situation.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress* the situation is similar, but Markson goes even further—the reader is deprived of the comfort afforded by detailed descriptions, explanatory dialogue, and linear structure. The writer intertwines the large-scale drama of total human extinction with the protagonist's private traumas and unmourned losses that affected her life before the catastrophe—the terminal illness of her parent, the death of her child, and the loss of her husband. The global extinction might thus be a hyperbole of a subjectivity deprived of its communal and social bonds, which normally anchor our sense of interiority. From the dispersed thoughts and scraps of memories that structure the narrative, we learn that, just like the father and the son in *The Road*, the protagonist is "wandering through an endless nothingness," in a terrible "eternal silence" (Markson 31), through deserted streets, with abandoned buildings and cars, encountering only her own reflection in shop windows and mirrors. Here, things and facts also burn and turn to dust, either of "natural happenstance" or by the protagonist's own actions, leaving "bits and pieces of residue" that are "wafted great distances, or astonishing heights" (29). With Kate, however, we are placed at the end of history and the end of memory, experiencing the state of absolute loneliness: there are no other characters here, nor is there a narrative which could organize the events of the plot. As Sherrill E. Grace puts it, nothing actually happens in the novel (209). Another critic, Marija Cetinić, even dubbed Markson's novel "a post-apocalyptic anti-narration" (82), denying the teleological development of the plot towards any sense of futurity. Its epigrammatic and fragmentary structure, as with *The Road*, mirrors both the condition of the world and the mental state of the protagonist, who is trying to communicate her presence to others:

> In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.
>
> Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or in the National Gallery. Naturally they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in New York.
>
> Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages. (Markson 7)

Here too the language is subject to erasure: sentences are short, usually occupying no more than one indented line; often they are unfinished, digressive, and associative. Lacking stabilizing communal reference and external criteria, Kate's private language, as Sue-Im Lee observes, "wavers between a state of absolute omnipotence and one of absolute powerlessness. As the only person alive, Kate can use language in whatever way she wants" (143). At one point in the narrative, Kate admits to having invented her own language, or—more specifically—her own version of "Greek":

> In fact I have even written in Greek.
>
> Well, or in what looked like Greek, although I was actually only inventing that.
>
> What I would write were messages, to tell the truth, like the ones I sometimes used to write in the street.
>
> Somebody is living on this beach, the messages would say.
>
> Obviously it did not matter by then that the messages were only in an *invented writing* that nobody could read. (Markson 57; emphasis added)



As the solitary speaker, cut off from any form of public consensus, the protagonist begins to play her own "language game" which makes her Greek legible only to herself. Referencing Wittgensteinian theory, Lee argues that "Kate's private language lacks the kernel of normative game-playing—agreed-upon rules," thus becoming "a game that does not hold the possibility of making a 'transaction,' 'making sense,' 'making oneself understood,' or 'being able to explain'" (153). As noted by the critic further on, paradoxically, this private game, however errant, incomprehensible and complex, enables her to invent and impose the rules and constraints which can be used to protect her against the ultimate erasure of language-as-system and destabilization of truth (Lee 153). By creating this private language, the protagonist becomes not only responsible for the stability of her own reality but also able to give expression to her inner experience, which ultimately cannot be named, represented or articulated in the normative public discourse. The "postal economy," broken by the catastrophe and the ensuing extinction of the community, is thus reinvented according to Kate's own idiosyncratic needs and can be seen as partly liberating. However, the unilaterality of her expression entraps her in a solipsistic language game, ultimately denying her a chance to break out of her isolation (Lee 156).

The turbulent and shifting psychic landscape that emerges from the character's solitary idiom is riddled with both blanks and information overload. Moving between moments of recognition and misrecognition, Kate structures her subjectivity along uncertain recurrent points

and events, rehearsals of facts (at times utterly trivial and of no apparent significance), iterative obsessive concerns, fantasies, texts, and memories. Yet, since she can rely only on her insecure ontological grounds, none of those experiences can be agreed-upon, confirmed, or verified, which is the basis for normative language use. As a result, the reader is instantly lost in a plethora of uncertainties and questions, such as: who is the mysterious narrator? how old is she? why is she alone? what happened? and who is the addressee of her story? Is she fifty years old, as she claims at one point, or forty-eight, or thirty, as she acknowledges elsewhere? Is her son's name Adam, Simon, or perhaps Terry? (all three versions appear intermittently in the narrative).



Markson does not offer easy answers to those questions—the incomplete truth is unveiled very slowly, in broken and solipsistic thoughts; Wittgensteinian propositions and their subsequent refutations; repetitions of names, motifs, and sentences; palimpsestuously layered misattributed citations and labyrinthine references to music, history, literature, art, and philosophy. The reader accompanies Kate in her insecure steps on the brittle surface of memory, touched by unspeakable losses, as she searches for stable ground in the ruins of the world. The blanks in her memory reveal the mental condition of a self traumatized by absolute loneliness, a condition which she herself repetitively calls "time out of mind" (Markson 9), as her mind continuously hovers between madness and forgetfulness. The increasingly unmoored signs and texts become separated from experience, in spite of Kate's desperate efforts to give them substance and meaning. Since they cannot be confirmed by anybody else, they escape logic and narrative structure, pointing to the central question posed by the protagonist herself: "But then what is there that is not in my head?" (Markson 227).

The circumstances force Kate to construct her own world and confront the necessity of becoming an absolute ontological authority, which ultimately will enhance her anxiety, resulting in a failure to control her language and in subsequent madness. The solipsism of her mind and the position as the exclusive rule- and world-maker fuels the solipsism of her idiom and the epistemological instability of her propositions, claims, and speculations.

Despite the radical reduction of language in both works, and an obsessive recurrence of scenery as well as events that exhibit an anti-narrative thrust, McCarthy's novel is more traditional in its form—it progresses linearly, as the author binds the plot with the motif of the road and wandering. Such a structure and the author's decision to uphold traditional elements of the plot both have profound implications for the narrative: the character and the quest-driven action are both part of the hope for the existence

of a post-apocalyptic order. The road and the open-space quest are firmly rooted in American mythology, serving as a synonym of a search for spiritual fulfilment, self-knowledge, truth, and freedom. McCarthy also draws on this myth, informing it with religious (more specifically, messianic) discourse, and the biblical trope of wandering in the desert. The journey of the father and son to the South prevents the maddening solipsism which drives Markson's narrative, especially since it becomes the main goal and the very condition of the characters' survival, as stopping and finding a home is tantamount to death. In darkness and silence, houses turn into a space of estrangement, violence, death, and horror: the encountered buildings are charred ruins which at best hide desolation and emptiness, at worst rotting or dried corpses, or else mutilated victims of the cannibals. McCarthy locates hope in the relationship between the father and the son; it is they who "carry the fire" (234) in this valley of death and violence; the light whose source lies in love, dignity, and faith in the inner moral compass and mutual care.

In Markson's novel, roads eventually disappear. At first, Kate traverses the globe, covering a wide geographical span, visiting cities and countries, sailing to the Greek islands and England, driving to Russia or France, but, at one point, when she has settled in a beach house, she admits that her "failure to locate the road eventually began to become a wholly new sort of perplexity in [her] existence" (Markson 89). In McCarthy's novel, the road and movement sustain hope for change; in Markson's text, the vanishing of the road symbolizes Kate's inability to communicate, to transcend the context of her inner experience and her entrapment in the solitary use of language. Interestingly, in the completely empty world, the museum—or rather what is left of it—becomes the protagonist's home, while her mode of survival is her journal: her private archive of names, places, and memories. The protagonist herself realizes, in horror but also with some sense of omnipotence, that fate has cast her in the role of the last "curator of all the world" (Markson 227), whose mission is to find meaning among the desolate ruins.

Derrida defines the function of archives as a combination of an archontic aspect (i.e., its ordering, unifying, classifying function) with consignation, which implies collecting and preserving artefacts—for the French philosopher, the latter means, above all, "gathering signs" (*Archive Fever* 10). The archives and the museum organize the fragmented reality, repairing rifts between signs, absorbing ruins and changing them into monuments, turning broken pieces into meaningful narratives, art works into collections. Derrida proves that the essence of the museum and the archives lies in a paradox—what fuels the need of collecting and preserving

signs is the threat of their destruction and vanishing. The threat comes from the outside, as Derrida claims, for "there is no archive without the outer reality" (*Archive Fever* 14).

As Cetinić notes, what thus seems more interesting is the fact that it is museums which Markson chooses to preserve in his post-apocalyptic world, and that they provide his protagonist with shelter. Kate lives in the Louvre, London's National Gallery, and in New York's MoMA, burning paintings and artworks to keep warm as well as to signal her presence. Cetinić points out that the museum becomes her home in a reality in which there is nothing but ruins, empty names, and scraps of meaning. Thus, in the critic's own words, she inhabits a world in which



> the museum cannot reabsorb the catastrophe into organized artefacts; here, the unearthing of ruins cannot be covered over with monuments. So that "here" is all wreckage, archive outside in, contents and context unbound. The radical gap between site and citation undoes the museum's hold over its artefacts. (Cetinić 82)

In Markson's world, the museum is deconstructed as it is no longer able to absorb and bring together the excess of ruins and signs severed from their contexts (Cetinić 82). Gathering, cataloguing, and writing down signs, followed by an attempt to lend them meaning, become a mission and an obsession of the protagonist, whose mind—as the fragmentary narration shows—is unable to order their surplus. The idiosyncratic discourse (in which repetition intensifies the experience of language and text as the only possible world, and where private history continuously mingles with the public one, memory is checked by moments of amnesia, while language stumbles over metalanguage) reflects the failed attempt at "controlling random and chaotic data of memory and human consciousness" (Grace 211). Kate's mind generates an apocalyptic archive of memory, filled with ever newer variations, infinite chains and networks of signs and associations; nevertheless, these fail to mask the emptiness around her, highlighting instead the thin boundary that separates her from chaos and the total loss of the semantic horizon, caused by a dissemination of unanchored signs. Here is an example:

> Certainly I am familiar with Nietzsche, for instance.
> Well, or with Goethe.
> Although by saying that I am familiar with either of these writers I do not necessarily mean that I am extraordinarily familiar with them.

> As a matter of fact by saying that I am familiar with them I do not even necessarily mean that I have read a solitary word that either one of them ever wrote.
>
> Actually the sum of that familiarity may well extend no farther than to my reading of the backs of the jackets on phonograph records.
>
> Such as the back of the jacket on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Richard Strauss, for instance. (Markson 172–73)

Through a rejection of sense, this technique of "deep nonsense," to quote David Foster Wallace (221), paradoxically reveals the inability of articulating deeper meanings; in this case, it is "millennial loneliness," as the condition of the protagonist is described by the author of *Infinite Jest.* Kate's profound loneliness can also be seen in her compulsive reiterating of various historical figures' misfortunes, in her obsessive search of a name for a non-existent cat, in her concern with the trivia of famous lives and in her imaginative inventions of impossible relationships. This is aptly illustrated in the following passage:



> So who is to argue that one day Rembrandt might not have been standing next to Carel Fabritius's easel, and Carel Fabritius said he was going to paint something russet, and Rembrandt said that russet is a color one calls a bedspread?
>
> So in a manner of speaking Willem de Kooning was actually a pupil of Rembrandt. . . .
>
> This is scarcely to suggest that Willem de Kooning was anywhere in the vicinity when Giotto was drawing the perfect circle freehand either, of course.
>
> Unless, on the other hand, I suddenly make up my mind to imagine that he was. (Markson 147–48)

However, Markson's novel does uncover deeper layers of meaning. Both the title and the form of the text, as well as the often cited sentence, "the world is everything that is the case" (78), evoke Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), and his later *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), in which the Austrian philosopher used a fragmentary form of open propositions. In his introduction to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes his method as what he calls "sketches" reflecting the natural order and progression of thoughts (v); similarly, the eponymous "Wittgenstein's mistress" avoids absolute statements—all her utterances are subjected to endless refutations, modifications, and supplementations. Here is a sample fragment, directly parodying the Wittgensteinian mode:

> The world is everything that is the case.
>
> I have no idea what I mean by the sentence I have just typed, by the way.

> For some reason I seem to have had it in my head all day, however, although without the vaguest notion about where it might have come from. (Markson 78)

In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein poses seven logical propositions, which, as he writes, are "the construction works" (71) of the world. Markson tests the truthfulness of those propositions, at the same time shaking the works and pulling them from beneath our feet, in a ceaseless movement of supplements and traces. Wittgenstein's system, which, as Wallace observes, was "a metaphysical heaven" for the philosopher, and which proposed that language is in its nature a perfect logico-mathematical system, capable of reflecting the image of the actual world, in Markson's text becomes a "physical hell"—Kate is not able to distinguish between real facts and imagined ones, having at her disposal only her own imagination and her apocalyptic museum without walls. In Wallace's apt words, "[Wittgenstein's] mistress . . . asks the question her master in print does not: What if somebody really had to *live* in a *Tractatus*ized world?" (219).



Markson uses the apocalyptic framework to demonstrate the solipsistic nightmare of the private game, the danger of the ultimate instance of language without intersubjective community, shared reason, or rules of public agreement. For Kate the consequence of that game is her descent into madness and something that Cetinić aptly describes as "traumatic intertextuality" (85)—her ultimate dissolution into contingent textuality and her failure "to navigate the physical world" (Lee 160). From the experience of the protagonist, we learn that the isolation of language equals the isolation, and subsequent destruction, of the self. A Wittgensteinian critic, Stanley Cavell, summarizes the limits and perils of an isolated idiom as follows: "Without criteria, conditions under which things may be called thus and so, there is no possibility of making sense of the world. They enable our conceptualization of experience, our comparing of things to one another" (qtd. in Lee 160). Kate's growing obsession with madness in the course of the novel reveals her own anxiety and fears concerning the control over her life and the stability of the truths of her own making:

> Once, when Friedrich Nietzsche was mad, he started to cry because somebody was hitting a horse.
>
> But then went home and played the piano.
>
> On my honor, Friedrich Nietzsche used to play the piano for hours and hours, when he was mad.
>
> Making up every single piece of music that he played, too.
>
> Whereas Spinoza often used to go looking for spiders, and then make them fight with each other.
>
> Not being mad in the least. (Markson 232)

The deeper we go into the loops of Kate's mind and idiom, the darker it becomes—from initial trivia we move to issues such as exile, poverty, loss, madness, blindness, death, and suicide. The sympathetic communities of illustrious madmen and loners created by Kate show her urge to sustain, even if only in language and signs, an intersubjective fabric of relationships for the cathartic *out*-pouring of her thoughts, deprivations, and longings.

"Apocalyptic literature," as Elizabeth K. Rosen argues, "has traditionally been written to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption" (xii). The apocalyptic temper, Dewey observes on a similar note, "offers a counter-reality, one hidden in the present chaos, a positive presence that counters the evidence of absence and gives heart to those still living within history's experience" (12). As I suggested in the introduction, one of the questions which both texts pose is the problem of language as a vehicle of human values and moral strength. In that respect McCarthy comes to the fore, as he reveals a deep religious sensibility residing in countless metaphors of light and darkness, references to the Bible, biblical names, as well as ethical or even messianic rhetoric. The flame is "a fire-breathing dragon of God" (McCarthy 33); the child is a golden chalice (64), the word of God, God's breath, or even God himself (266). Their mutual mission is to "carry the light" (62). The only properly named character, as Kunsa notes, is the old man who introduces himself as Ely (63). Washing off the remnants of a dead enemy from the boy's hair, the father says:

> This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. . . . All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (McCarthy 77–78)

The ceremonial, ritualistic nature of those simple activities is reinforced by rhetoric—the incantatory, prayer-like recurrence of the phrase "we are the good guys" who "carry the fire" (Kunsa 60). In agony, the father asks his son to continue their mission; and, as argued by Frye, it is this messianic hope for a trace of God, his breath and a stubborn dream of his existence, that is the force of the novel. In the critic's apt word, "[t]he trace of God's presence is the very fact of the heroes' survival and their capacity to dream and think" (56); their faith endures thanks to their relentless search for God and his waning breath in the cinders of language and human gestures, rather than seeking to confirm his existence.

The last paragraph of *The Road* evokes a memory from before the catastrophe:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy 306–07)



The "maps and mazes" suggest

> something essential at the centre of their journey, and tellingly, the novel closes not with the intersection of arbitrary and nonsensical lines, but with the patterns on the back of the trout . . . forms suggesting an inherent order and underlying purpose yet undiscovered. (Kunsa 68)

It is certainly true that the trout in the stream symbolize a world which is no longer possible and which cannot be repaired. And yet, the last word of the novel is "mystery." When combined with the image of the fish, it suggests the beginning of the world as much as the beginning of redemption. Thus, the "mystery" in the conclusion suspends the novel between hope and its lack; between the presence and absence of metaphysical order. The etymology of the word "mystery," from the Latin word *misterium*, also suggests a hidden religious truth revealed in mystical revelation. McCarthy's mystery, sheltered deep in the valleys of memory, and covered with the thick cinders of the vanishing world—just like the novel's language—simultaneously reveals and conceals the transcendental dimension of post-apocalyptic existence.

In his novel, McCarthy offers his readers a story of a mythical quest for the Holy Grail, which here becomes his faith in humanity, illustrated by the exemplary love between the father and the son, and their messianic hope against all doubt; hope whose essence is nevertheless unfulfilment. For Markson, as Sherrill Grace argues, the Grail is the heroine herself, and more specifically, her identity, constructed in the process of "writing" history (215) which intertwines private and public realities. The boy in McCarthy's novel survives thanks to the faith instilled in him by his father that something good will happen at the next turn of the road—this prophecy is in fact fulfilled after his father's death, for the boy finds another family of

"good guys" who accept him as one of their own. The limits of the language in the post-apocalyptic world of this novel are best summarized by the figure of the omnipresent cinders—at once a reality and a metaphor. "Pure is the word. It calls for fire," says Derrida of cinders, adding that "there are cinders only insofar as there is the hearth of its own burning" (*Cinders* 37, 41). In their fragility, ashen greyness and ghostly dispersal, cinders suggest both the disappearance and vulnerability of the world and its language; however, they also point to fire, at once destructive and warming, which still burns at their heart, rekindling memory and hope.

Markson's text can be interpreted twofold: either as an account of life after an actual apocalypse or else as a reflection of the protagonist's descent into madness, her apocalyptic melancholia in which language, deprived of intersubjective community, becomes a Derridean *pharmakon*—at once remedy and poison. In a truly postmodernist gesture, the author has his heroine survive by solipsistically gathering elusive signs and leaving messages which in the post-apocalyptic world-text no longer attach themselves to phenomena or reality. Therefore, Kate's house is language itself, and her survival is guaranteed by her storytelling, thanks to her imperfect writing of the world, in a hope that she can thus confirm and affirm its existence, and escape the depths of her sorrow and solipsism.



In her study of trauma in the post-apocalyptic novel, Katherine V. Snyder observes:

> the post-apocalyptic at once allegorizes and literalizes the psychic mechanisms of trauma, both everyday, systemic, "quiet" traumas and unimaginable yet inescapably real historical traumas. By portraying such cataclysmic endings and new beginnings, post-apocalyptic fictions . . . enable us to witness the unwitnessable and to survive the unsurvivable. Such fictions allow us imaginatively to rehearse the end, a rehearsal that itself stands as both traumatic symptom and potential cure, as acting out and working through, as repetition and repetition-with-a-difference. (486)

In their desire to confront us with the unwitnessable in post-apocalyptic reality, both Markson and McCarthy create discourses that work at once as traumatic symptoms and as potential cures. They probe the broken "postal economies" of communication and seek both the limits and potence of words vis-à-vis the trauma of absolute solitude, vanishing realities and disappearing human bonds, thus pointing to the ultimate unreceivability and ambiguity of the apocalyptic message. In both novels, language can be seen in its "ghosting" mode, i.e., suspending the reader between presence and absence, life and death, despair of finality and its continuously undertaken

refusals. The modern sense of the word *apocálupsis,* as Derrida makes clear, signals also acts "of a specifically apocalyptic unveiling, of the disclosure that lets be seen what until then remained enveloped, withdrawn, held back, reserved" ("Apocalyptic Tone" 121). Markson's verbal excesses, maddening repetitions and loops of language "veil" the unmournable losses in the ruins of the solitary mind, while McCarthy's messianic discourse of suspended delivery discloses moments of light and order in the overwhelmingly disordered and darkly post-human world.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0007

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# "Receive with Simplicity Everything That Happens to You": Schlemiel (Meta)Physics in the Coens' *A Serious Man*

## ABSTRACT

Before Joel and Ethan Coen's 2009 production *A Serious Man*, Jewish motifs have consistently appeared in their cinematic output. However, the Jewish characters functioned in an ethnically diverse setting and rarely took centre stage, with the notable exception of the eponymous struggling leftist playwright in *Barton Fink*. Nevertheless, even here the Jewishness seemed to be universalized into "humanity." Elsewhere, through their accessory characters, the Coens primarily offered a nod to the illustrious and/or notorious Jewish presence in various spheres of American society (e.g., small-time gangster Bernie Bernbaum in *Miller's Crossing* or movie mogul Jack Lipnick in the aforementioned *Barton Fink*). In addition, steadfast religious observance has been an object of affable ridicule (e.g., store owner Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*). *A Serious Man*, however, reveals an unprecedented strategy. Described by the Coens as their most autobiographical film to date, it has a predominantly Jewish cast, deals almost exclusively with a Jewish community in the Midwest, and is heavily steeped in themes which have long been the staple of the Jewish literary tradition. Most evident is the familiar figure of the *schlemiel*, the eternal loser, embodied in the protagonist Larry Gopnik, whose seemingly endless predicaments form the spine of the plot. Marketed as a comedy, *A Serious Man* nevertheless consistently exhibits a dark, existential undercurrent, which renders its decidedly grim ending a rather logical payoff. Drawing on the research of seminal scholars on the subject of schlemiel narratives (e.g., Ruth Wisse, Sanford Pinsker), the essay is an attempt to situate the film within this tradition. Furthermore, I argue that the Coens reinvest the figure of the schlemiel with a philosophical charge that it possessed in folk legends and Yiddish literature; at the same time, they adapt the schlemiel to the postmodern condition. This allows them to address the fundamental uncertainty of our age, signalled in the film through the formulae of Heisenberg and Schrödinger.

The main attempt of this essay is to showcase what I consider to be an unusual contemporary use of a figure familiar from Jewish folklore—the schlemiel—in Joel and Ethan Coen's 2009 film, *A Serious Man.*[1] In sketching a brief portrait of the schlemiel so as to argue the existential and potentially transgressive dimension of the comedy which he engenders, I shall draw on the work of Ruth Wisse, author of the classic study *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (1971), in which she traces the fates of that figure in folk legends, Yiddish literature, and the prose of key 1950s and 1960s Jewish-American writers. Subsequently, on the basis of recent research into mainstream American cinema and prime time television series, I wish to demonstrate that, for the most part, the schlemiel has been divested of his ethnicity, while his comedy has lost its metaphysical aspect. Further, after arguing the extraordinary position that *A Serious Man* occupies within the Coens' cinematic output—due to the film's intense focus on Jewishness—I wish to analyze the ways in which Joel and Ethan Coen reestablish the schlemiel firmly in his original cultural and religious framework. In order to do so, I intend to focus firstly on the importance of the short fable preceding the narrative proper, and, secondly, on demonstrating how the opening quote (attributed to Rashi) generates the film's philosophical underpinnings, with particular attention paid to the notion of "receiving." Among the numerous possible meanings of "receiving" with which the Coens consistently toy in the film, I wish to discuss the paradoxically similar reception (as interpretation) of the world through the lens of science and religion, the prominence of the senses (particularly hearing and sight), and, lastly, the foregrounding of language as one of the obstacles to comprehension.

The most succinct way of introducing the schlemiel is to allude to a definition which, I am told, has been particularly popular in the United States. The schlemiel—the eternal loser—is here paired with the *schlimazl* (in Yiddish the phrase *shlim mazl* means bad luck): the schlemiel spills the soup, which then inevitably falls into the schlimazl's lap. Ruth Wisse asserts that this concise definition captures the fundamentals of the distinction; namely, she argues, "the schlemiel is the active disseminator of bad luck and the schlimazl its passive victim" (*Schlemiel* 14). Nevertheless, it is the schlemiel who has attracted the bulk of literary attention. This is hardly surprising, since—as Wisse explains further—while the schlimazl only encounters misfortune by chance, "[t]he schlemiel's misfortune is

[1] I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Jody Myers (California State University, Northridge) and Dr. Alex Ramon (University of Reading) for their careful reading of this article and their valuable comments, which I have incorporated into its final version.

his character. It is not accidental, but essential" (*Schlemiel* 14). Thus, the comedy of his adversities is inevitably existential in nature.

Clearly, then, the agenda of "schlemiel literature" amounts to more than descriptions of soup-spilling, although the comic or even absurd element appears to be requisite; in any case, the schlemiel must always remain irreconcilably at odds with the environment in which he finds himself. Wisse posits that, as in the case of Jewish jokes, schlemiel literature aims "to use [the] comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo" (*Schlemiel* 3). In this way, the scholar emphasizes the figure's inherently transgressive potential; the schlemiel's failure to succeed in a particular environment throws into focus that environment's grotesque nature and asserts the existence of a different, superior moral order. In political terms, a Jew's moral sanity may be demonstrated in the face of the madness of war, as in the joke about Katsenstein being drilled by an Austrian officer:



> Officer: "Why does a soldier give up his life for his country?"
> Katsenstein: "You're right, Sergeant, why does he?" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 3)

Couched in religious terms, it may be—to quote from Isaac Bashevis Singer's classic schlemiel tale, "Gimpel the Fool"—faith in a "true world" to come, in which "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (14). Although the transgressive potential may also undermine the philosophical assumptions of the culture from which the schlemiel himself springs—in which case the narrative borders on or becomes blasphemy—the blade of the humour seems predominantly directed away from what may be conceived as the core of Jewishness, and towards that which threatens it. In that sense, the schlemiel must lose, so that the principles to which he adheres in the face of all adversity may be seen as victorious, if only by the recipient of the tale.

Wisse notes that in the postwar decades schlemiel figures disappeared almost entirely from Yiddish fiction, but simultaneously became very popular in American literature and culture, "highbrow" as well as "lowbrow," both Jewish and otherwise (*Schlemiel* 60). As the scholar notes, in the face of the Holocaust the subject of defeat-as-victory, or else of moral triumph in a brutal world, became practically insupportable in Yiddish writing (*Schlemiel* 60). Singer's aforementioned short story, published in 1945 and translated into English in 1953, appears to be a notable exception, but Wisse chooses to interpret the history of its publication in both languages as a symbolic act of transplanting an element of Yiddish folklore onto American soil (*Schlemiel* 60). The simultaneous popularity of the figure in American culture—most notably in novels and short stories by

Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud or Bruce Jay Friedman—may be explained, on the one hand, by mainstream culture's increased tolerance of all things Jewish in the post-war period, and, on the other hand, by the radical semantic expansion of the very term "schlemiel," in which process he incorporated, or else was equated with, the "absurd man" and the anti-hero. As regards the increased tolerance, the ever contrary Leslie Fiedler claimed in the mid-1960s that "Jewish writers have discovered their Jewishness to be an eminently marketable commodity, their much vaunted alienation to be their passport to the heart of Gentile American culture" (65). At the same time, the variously oppressed Jewish American, with clear markings of a ne'er-do-well—whether Malamud's shopkeeper or Bellow's intellectual—became the contemporary everyman. As Canadian writer and journalist Mordecai Richler sneered in a 1971 review of John Updike's *Bech: A Book*, "[a]fter the take-over, following Bellow, Mailer, Roth & Co., a mere *goy* would no longer be archetypal" (111). In the 1970s, the figure also entered popular culture, perhaps most memorably in Woody Allen films such as *Sleeper* (1973) or *Love and Death* (1975). Those, however, visibly emphasized the comical effect of absurdity while downplaying the existential drama (sustained for the most part by the literary works mentioned earlier).

Over the last two decades, film and television researchers, e.g., Carla Johnson, David Gillota, and David Buchbinder, have observed and discussed the centrality of the schlemiel figure to such popular series as *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, both co-scripted by Larry David; also on the radar was the series *Friends*, mainstream comedy feature films (especially those starring Ben Stiller, e.g., *Meet the Parents* or *Along Came Polly*), and even the *American Pie* movies. At least some of the above research suggests a further widening and redefinition of the term, in some cases divesting it altogether of ethnicity while foregrounding other features. For instance, Buchbinder invokes Judith Butler's theory of performative gender to reinterpret the schlemiel as "the inadequately or incompetently masculine male," i.e., one who, despite his feverish attempts, fails to "pass" as male (230). Crucially, masculinity perceived as inadequate is indeed one of the central traits of the traditionally understood schlemiel, who, as Sanford Pinsker asserts, is often a cuckold or a henpecked husband (17–18). Nevertheless, ethnicity remains a focus for Gillota's analysis of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: the critic argues that in the series the qualities of the schlemiel have been updated to fit twenty-first-century America, but the key traits have been kept intact (Gillota 153). Thus, Larry David's schlemiel persona (the premise of the show being that the comedian supposedly plays himself) tries to "reassert the seemingly assimilated, successful American Jew as a cultural other" (Gillota 153).

By contrast, the critic endorses Daniel Iskovitz's negative view of the "new schlemiels" of American cinema—typically played by the likes of Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler or Jason Biggs—who "do not challenge the status quo, [but] *embody* it" (qtd. in Gillota 154).

As can be gathered from this short introduction, although the ties between the schlemiel figure and broadly understood Jewish culture have been loosened, the character has retained at least some of his transgressive potential, albeit narrowed to its social or political dimension. Meanwhile, the association with the religious sphere and what Wisse refers to as "existential comedy" seems to have practically disappeared. All of this makes *A Serious Man*—Joel and Ethan Coen's 2009 contribution to schlemiel narratives—astonishing not only in the context of their own previous efforts, but also as a refreshing return to the figure's origins in Yiddish folklore.



Although critical accusations of cynically mongering style over substance have accompanied the Coen brothers since the days of their first feature film, *Blood Simple* (1984), they have also been labelled as no less than "secular theologians," their cinematic output described as "one of the most sneakily moralistic in recent American cinema" (Seitz qtd. in Falsani 17). Rabbi Allen Secher went so far as to highlight the illustrious source of the brothers' surname (the *Kohanim* were Jewish priests of patrilineal descent from Aaron) and hypothesize, only half in jest, Joel and Ethan's career in theology; he even offered to recommend good rabbinic schools (qtd. in Falsani 8–10). It is true that while the Coens have consistently offered stylish, clever, and highly eloquent riffs on distinctly American genres—e.g., film noir (*Blood Simple*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*), gangster thriller (*Miller's Crossing*), crime thriller (*Fargo*), or screwball comedy (*Raising Arizona*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*)—in most of their works, excepting the all-out comedies, they have essentially used these postmodernist stylistic trappings to tell, again and again, the story of tragic consequences stemming from seemingly minor missteps. Although neither the characters nor the frameworks in which the narratives are realized are visibly religious, the satiric portrayal of a grotesque world in which the odd decent person is surrounded by a host of crooks and hypocrites resembles—I would argue—the Southern Gothic landscape of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Not impossibly, the arrogance and condescension of which both O'Connor and the Coens have been accused stem from a similar positioning vis-à-vis the dominant culture: a Catholic in Savannah, Georgia, the heart of the Bible Belt; two Jews in the suburbs of the predominantly Christian Minneapolis.

Even in the context of the Coens' previous offerings, *A Serious Man* is an unusual proposition, since neither Jews nor Judaism have ever featured

this prominently in their work. In their earlier films the Jewish characters typically functioned in an ethnically diverse setting and rarely occupied the central position, with the notable exception of the eponymous struggling leftist playwright in *Barton Fink* (1991), played by John Turturro. Even in this isolated case, however, the Jewishness appeared for the most part to be universalized—in the spirit of Malamud or Bellow, perhaps—into "humanity." Elsewhere, through their accessory characters, the Coens seemed primarily to offer a nod to the illustrious and/or notorious Jewish presence in various spheres of American society: one need only to think of the small-time gangster Bernie Bernbaum (again John Turturro) in *Miller's Crossing* (1990) or the movie mogul Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) in *Barton Fink*, apparently an amalgam of Jack Warner, Harry Cohn, and Louis B. Mayer (Rowell 104). If steadfast religious observance was thematized at all, it became an object of ridicule, as in the portrayal of the store-owner Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Conversely, *A Serious Man* deals almost exclusively with the Jewish community and takes "ethnic-appropriate" casting to an entirely new level; furthermore, the brothers have described it as their most autobiographical film to date. Although the Coens keep the staples of their acerbic comedy intact, they make their first serious attempt (I imagine this to be one of the numerous meanings suggested by the title) at evaluating their cultural heritage and aligning it with their consistently exhibited philosophical position.[2]

The film tells the story of Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a professor of physics, who, by his own admission towards the end, has "had quite a bit of *tsuris* lately" (*Serious Man*). His relatively stable Midwestern, middle-class, suburban life in the late 1960s begins to unravel when his wife Judith (Sari Lennick) informs him that she wants a divorce. She cites problems that the couple have been having and, since she refuses to specify their nature, the viewer may assume sexual impotence on Larry's part. She also informs her husband that she has been seeing Sy Abelman (Fred Melamed), a rival professor, whose telling surname suggests yet another blow to Larry's already embattled virility. Problems also begin to mount in Larry's professional environment: a Korean student named Clive (David Kang) wishes to have his grade changed and may have left a bribe in

[2] Interestingly, the brothers' apparently abandoned project, following *A Serious Man* and *True Grit* (2010), promised to continue their intense explorations of Jewishness: the Coens were rumored to be working on an adaptation of Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, an alternate history novel, the Chandleresque plot of which is set in an all-Jewish Alaskan city called Sitka (Purcell). Instead, however, they delivered *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), which revisited the figure of a ne'er-do-well, but returned to an ethnically homogeneous, universalized narrative.

an envelope; as if this were not enough, someone has also been writing denigrating letters to the committee which is to consider Larry's tenure. As calamities proliferate around him, Larry, despite his self-avowed and repeatedly emphasized rationality, turns to his religion, but finds little or no consolation in the advice of three different rabbis; the failure to obtain an audition with the last and apparently wisest of these, Rabbi Marshak, is a blatant send-up of Kafka's parable "Before the Law."[3] The script seems practically to exhaust all its potential for misfortune; in fact, Ethan Coen admitted that "[t]he fun of the story for [him and Joel] was inventing new ways to torture Larry" (Sklar 58). In the course of the narrative—among other things—the protagonist is forced to move out of his house into a motel, pay exorbitant legal fees, cover the costs of his wife's lover Sy Abelman's funeral when the latter is killed in an accident, as well as bail his ill, unemployed brother out of jail. He is disobeyed and jeered at by his own children, pestered by the Korean student and his father, bullied by a WASP neighbour called Mr. Brandt (Peter Breitmayer), and hounded over the phone by a Columbia Record Club salesman. At the end of his tether, both emotionally and financially, he decides to change Clive's grade and keep the bribe, regardless of its source, in order to cover the various legal expenses. No sooner does he put down the new grade in his notebook than his doctor calls to gently inform Larry that his X-ray results are bad enough to merit an immediate face-to-face conversation; notably, in one of the first scenes of the film, Larry refuses a cigarette offered by the same doctor, who then proceeds to speak through clouds of smoke—in the final analysis, however, it is Larry the schlemiel whose lungs turn out to be diseased. The last, deeply ominous scene depicts an approaching tornado, which the protagonist's son Danny and his *cheder* classmates observe in mute, almost religious awe.



As already stated above, I claim that *A Serious Man* is an unusual contemporary take on the schlemiel figure because it returns this highly familiar, conventionalized element of American mainstream humour to its roots in Jewish culture and religion. Those aspects are considerably more pronounced than the above synopsis may suggest; indeed, they already loom large in the short fable which precedes the narrative proper. The action of this stylistically disparate fragment takes place on a winter night in an unidentified *shtetl*. Spoken entirely in subtitled Yiddish and shot

[3] It is interesting to note that the same parable is similarly parodied in a scene from Martin Scorsese's grossly underappreciated surreal tale, *After Hours* (1985), which also deals with a schlemiel-like character. In it, the main hero needs to enter a nightclub in order to save himself from one of the multitude of predicaments; however, he is stopped by a bouncer, who launches into a Kafkaesque explanation for denying him entry.

predominantly in warm reddish-brown colours (only the exterior is done in cold blue), the section evokes a world conjured in the stories of Sholom Aleichem and I. B. Singer, the canvases of Chagall, or, as Wisse notices in her review of the film, the linocuts of Solomon Yudovin ("Serious Film" 69). In this prelude, a man named Velvel (Allen Lewis Rickman) invites into his house Traitl Groshkover (Fyvush Finkel), a stranger who has helped him on the way; Velvel's wife Dora (Yelena Schmuelenson), however, convinced that the visitor is a demon, a *dybbuk*—to her knowledge, the actual Groshkover died a few years earlier—stabs him. Groshkover stumbles out into the snow, muttering that this is indeed a bizarre way of repaying a *mitzvah* (a good deed), and leaves the couple to argue about whether they have just avoided a curse or incurred one.



In interviews conducted during the production, the Coens claimed that their ambition in the short narrative preceding the main story was merely to suggest a connection with the European past and that, failing to find a readymade tale that would suit their purpose, they invented one. This statement from the cryptic and unresponsive brothers is characteristically unconvincing; if all that was needed was to establish a connection between the New World and the Old, would not the wealth of Yiddish literature have offered a myriad of possibilities? In fact, however, the fable contains distinct and even revelatory ties to the story proper. On the most obvious level, in terms of narrative coherence, the curse supposedly incurred by Dora in the Eastern European *shtetl* may be visited on her American descendant Larry and explain the absurd misfortunes that befall him; this, however, is perhaps the least remarkable aspect, and in any case the Coens omit the couple's surname, which relegates the family connection with Larry Gopnik to the sphere of speculation.

More interestingly, the episode foreshadows some of the larger story's crucial themes. The dominant one is Velvel's fundamental uncertainty about the occurrences: should he remain a "rational man" (*Serious Man*), as Reb Groshkover enjoins him to do, and dismiss his wife's fears as mere superstition, or should he perhaps trust his wife's instinct as far as the supernatural is concerned? The ending of the sequence—Groshkover stumbling out into the snow—is ambiguous, punctuated further by the end credits, in which the character played by Fyvush Finkel is listed as "Dybbuk ?" (*Serious Man*). Thus, the little tale initiates the conflict between the physical and the metaphysical, which is then embodied in the struggle of Larry Gopnik, a professor of physics, who demands answers from a reticent *Hashem*. More specifically, Velvel's hesitation translates in the narrative proper into Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which Larry teaches to his students. The claim, suggesting the inseparability of the act

of perception from that which is perceived, has previously been put to interesting use by the Coens and similarly tied to the notion of culpability, albeit in a legal sense: in *The Man Who Wasn't There* it becomes the object of lengthy speculations by the invincible defence attorney Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) with regard to the protagonist's crime. As for the unresolved question in *A Serious Man*, i.e., whether Groshkover is a dybbuk or not—essentially, whether he is alive or dead when he enters Velvel and Dora's house—it finds its ready counterpart in Schrödinger's Paradox, famously involving a cat that may be alive or dead, and which Larry explains to his uninterested students in the first scene depicting him in the university milieu.



I would argue that one ought also to pay close attention to the opening shot of the preceding fable, and therefore of the entire film: snowdrops falling lazily towards the viewer, against the backdrop of an ink-black sky and Carter Burwell's melancholy yet obsessive music score. Before they are recognized as snowdrops and given further context by the ensuing long shot of a wintry countryside, they resemble a multitude of scattered stars—not unlike those from the opening sequence of any part of the *Star Wars* saga—or perhaps simply a multitude of minute particles. Thus, already the opening image subtly suggests the intertwined ideas of perception, the resulting uncertainty, and the contending physical and metaphysical explanations of worldly phenomena: on the one hand, the totalizing Grand Narrative which governs the life of the *shtetl* and infuses it with moral meaning, on the other the scientific world of random, meaningless atoms.

In her review of the film, Wisse argues that the fable introduces "the gender division between credulous men and sceptical women," which was typical for Eastern European Jewish society and which the Coens subsequently transplant to late 1960s Minnesota ("Serious Film" 69). I find this claim problematic in that it is difficult to ascertain with any finality which of the spouses is to be seen as credulous and which as sceptical: whereas Velvel may be naïve enough not to recognize a *dybbuk*, Dora is possibly even more gullible because she stands firmly by her belief in *dybbuks* and acts upon it, possibly to the point of murder. It is true that Velvel's effusive, kind-hearted personality readily suggests the nature of a dreamer not unlike Tevye the Dairyman or Menachem Mendel, while Dora has all the markings of the practical, down-to-earth wife such as Golde or Sheyne Sheyndl. Nevertheless, I would suggest, contrary to Wisse, that the verdict on credulousness and scepticism is suspended in this section—and thereafter in the entire film—hinging on the underlying ontological structure of the characters' world, which remains as hidden from us as it is from them. Nevertheless, the conversation between the husband and the wife,

prior to Reb Groshkover's appearance, reveals a power dynamic similar to that which obtains in the Gopniks' Minnesota household. Velvel is shown as rather inept, especially in the financial realm (it seems that he has lost more than he has gained on the transaction that he proudly reports to his wife, and Dora readily points this out), and clearly he is reduced to gentle conciliatory gestures and weak smiles, allowing Dora to impose her will on him. Evidently possessing at least some qualities of the schlemiel, Velvel prepares the viewer for the entrance of Larry Gopnik, the decent but weak and easily manipulated male.



Throughout the narrative, Larry is repeatedly contrasted with other men, especially—as already mentioned—his wife's lover Sy Abelman and the next-door neighbour, Mr. Brandt. Before his death, Sy manages to effectively usurp all of Larry's personal life (his wife, children, and house) and attempts to ruin Larry's career (Larry later finds out from Judith that the letters to the committee had been written by Sy). Plainly, he is a ruthless man who uses the veneer of nauseating affability to achieve his goals. Despite being a dishonest schemer and an adulterer who poses as Larry's friend, he is praised by Rabbi Nachtner during the funeral service as the eponymous "serious man! A *tzadik*! Who knows, maybe even a *lamed-vovnik*!" (*Serious Man*). As Jim Emerson observes, "even the title [of the film] doesn't respect [Larry]," in that it ostensibly refers to Sy Abelman (Emerson).

As for the WASP-ish, almost inarticulate Mr. Brandt, he represents certain other qualities traditionally associated with masculinity which Larry definitely lacks. This can be seen most clearly when Larry returns home at the end of the first narrated day and sees his neighbour with his son Mitch in the backyard. Where Larry's suit hides a flat chest and underdeveloped muscles, Mr. Brandt's T-shirt exposes a brawny torso; while Larry spends his time in offices and classrooms, or else checking blue books and pursuing other intellectual activities into the small hours, Mr. Brandt, unmistakably the outdoor type, plays ball with his son in the backyard, leaves the house at five in the morning to take the boy hunting, and returns with a deer strapped to the roof of his car. Furthermore, the neighbour's low, harsh, military voice contrasts sharply with Larry's high-pitched whimper. Since Larry's character evidently corresponds to the stereotypical image of the emasculated Jewish intellectual, Mr. Brandt's visible hostility is—in all probability—part contempt for the weakling and part racism; it seems to diminish only when Brandt believes that Larry is being pestered by Clive's father, a Korean, whose "otherness" supposedly exceeds Larry's, and Brandt is raring to step in: "Is this man bothering you?" (*Serious Man*). Brandt's flagrant xenophobia is responsible for one of the many nightmares that Larry

experiences, in which his brother Arthur (Richard Kind) and himself are hunted as prey by the neighbour and his boy: "There's another Jew, son!" (*Serious Man*). As is often the case with the Coens' work, the differences between the two men are so pronounced that they become cartoonish; nevertheless, Brandt provides an absurd antithesis to what Buchbinder would doubtless identify as "the inadequately or incompetently masculine male" (230).

The philosophical, and specifically Jewish, context of the narrative proper is underscored by a quote attributed to Rashi, the sagacious French medieval rabbi: "[r]eceive with simplicity everything that happens to you"[4] (*Serious Man*). On the one hand, through the choice of the word "receive," the phrase seems to emphasize that all events in one's life are essentially gifts, possessing inherent value, even contrary to appearances; on the other hand, these gifts are not only to be received—i.e., accepted—but also accepted "with simplicity," which may suggest a certain passivity or obedience, also in the sense of not questioning the decisions of the giver, not expecting a different outcome. This is precisely the attitude of Singer's most famous schlemiel, Gimpel the Fool, for the most part of that classic narrative, excepting a momentary temptation by the Spirit of Evil. However, what the villagers in Singer's text assume to be foolishness—an essential quality—is in fact repeatedly demonstrated to be a conscious choice on Gimpel's part: to believe unreservedly what one is told even when it beggars belief, and to refrain from taking revenge for others' misdeeds, however outrageous. The opening sentences—"I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool" (Singer 3)—already emphasize the character's paradoxically mindful appraisal of his own situation. In *A Serious Man*, the notions of "receiving" and "simplicity" resonate, for instance, in the advice offered to Larry Gopnik by Nachtner, one of the three rabbis whom he consults: "Hashem doesn't owe us an answer, Larry. Hashem doesn't owe us anything. The obligation runs the other way" (*Serious Man*). However, whereas Gimpel may be said to "receive with simplicity everything that happens to him" because he is sustained by a belief in forthcoming Messianic justice, Larry Gopnik's situation is markedly different in that his worldview, to begin with, is fundamentally rational, based on the laws of physics. Religion for him is thus clearly a last resort.



[4] According to Jordan Hiller, the brothers, pressed for the exact source, were either unable or unwilling to supply it: "I mentioned to the brothers that while Rashi was a prolific commentator on Talmud and Tanach, he is not exactly a figure oft quoted. They—perhaps knowing their bluff had been called—laughed. I asked where they pulled the line from. 'I honestly don't remember,' Joel curiously admitted" (Hiller). I am indebted to Dr. Nathan Abrams for the suggestion that the quote may be inaccurate or indeed spurious.

However, as the opening ambiguous image of snowdrops-as-particles already suggests, throughout the film the Coens consistently dismantle the opposition between science and religion. In the first scenes of the narrative proper, the two are already juxtaposed in that we are offered alternating shots of Larry lecturing physics to university students, and of his teenage son Danny receiving instruction in Hebrew at the *cheder*; notably, the students in both institutions are equally apathetic. Furthermore, the two aforementioned issues which Larry teaches to his students, the Uncertainty Principle and Schrödinger's Cat Paradox, manifestly emphasize not-knowing rather than knowing. The manner in which Larry describes them, respectively, is telling: "The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can't ever really know what's going on" and "Even I don't understand the dead cat" (*Serious Man*). When he explains to Clive that mathematics, which the student has failed, is essential to physics—"The math is the real thing. The stories I give you in class are just illustrative, like fables, say, to help give you a picture" (*Serious Man*)—the similarity to a rabbi resorting to storytelling to drive a particular point home is unmistakable. Yet another point of connection is the Mentaculus, a mysterious and supposedly monumental work on which Larry's brother Arthur is working, and which the latter describes as "a probability map of the universe" (*Serious Man*). Based on the relationship between the world and numbers, and perhaps functioning (Arthur Gopnik wins a large sum of money gambling in accordance with it), the Mentaculus, when it is finally revealed, contains pages upon pages crowded with arcane symbols and ornate diagrams, resembling a mystical text in the vein of the Zohar more than a scientific work for which the viewer may have initially taken it. The association is deepened further by the dream sequence in which Larry writes the equation for the Uncertainty Principle on a gigantic blackboard, filling all of the available space; when a long shot exposes the incredibly convoluted equation in its entirety, it resembles a page from his brother's Kabbalistic diagrams. Moreover, a close-up of Larry in front of the blackboard reveals, among the mathematical symbols, a string of Hebrew characters.[5] Reminding the students about the fundamental ambiguity which the Principle encodes, Larry states: "So it shouldn't bother you. Not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be *responsible* for this on the *midterm*" (*Serious Man*). As Robert Sklar succinctly puts it, "Larry's life . . . is one continuous midterm exam on the Uncertainty Principle" (59). Thus, the notion of being responsible for something that is fundamentally unfathomable pervades the entire film, defining the sphere of physics as much as that of metaphysics. When Larry

[5] I am very grateful to Professor Jody Myers for pointing this detail out to me.

tells Clive that "[a]ctions have consequences! . . . Not just physics—morally!" (*Serious Man*), he unwittingly enunciates this connection between the two realms, and perhaps also the mechanism of the Coens' brand of cinema.

Thus, I would argue that in *A Serious Man* the "receiving," with simplicity or otherwise, suggested in the Rashi quote, takes the form of attempting to understand, or at least interpret, the surrounding reality. However, the film is also replete with images alluding to various other kinds of "reception." For instance, the narrative proper begins in complete darkness, in the middle of which a bright spot appears—echoing the stars / snowflakes / particles image from the preceding fable—and dilates, soon proving to be the ear canal, defamiliarized into a semblance of a tunnel of light. It soon turns out that, instead of following the lesson in the *cheder*, Larry's son, Danny, is listening on his headphones to Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love" —the film's refrain, with the haunting lines "when the truth is found to be lies / and all the joy within you dies" summarizing his father's plight. At the same time, Larry himself is having his eye examined by his doctor; the two situations are narrated interchangeably. Even as the quiet, sterile, distinctly scientific environment of the doctor's office is being juxtaposed with the comparatively warm, humanized interior of the *cheder*, filled with the amiable drone of the teacher's voice, the emphasis is clearly placed on the two primary senses. It is fitting that a work focused to such a large extent on the paradoxical similarity between scientific (rational) thinking and religious (irrational) belief should begin with an area in which most of the disputes between the two originate, namely the field of sensory experience.



The notion of "receiving" is also playfully suggested through the instances in which Larry is being pestered by his son Danny to fix the aerial because the reception of the latter's favourite program is unsatisfactory: "*F Troop*'s fuzzy!" (*Serious Man*). The scene in which Larry climbs onto the roof to reposition the aerial is realized in a way which suggests (with tongue firmly in cheek) disproportionate profundity. The first shot—framed so that its only elements are the top rung of the ladder and a bright blue sky—inevitably evokes associations with Jacob's dream, in which "there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven" (*Holy Bible, English Standard Version,* Gen. 28.12). Thanks to Roger Deakins's masterfully crisp cinematography and Burwell's haunting music score, a sense of mystery pervades the scene, as we witness Larry's fumbling with the aerial and hear the babble (or perhaps Babel?) of conflicting voices, among which one can also distinguish the lilting tone of a religious hymn. As a result, the scene aggressively demands a metaphorical interpretation,

along the lines of the revelation which follows Jacob's dream: "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it" (*Holy Bible, English Standard Version,* Gen. 28.16).

However, the tone soon changes: from his privileged position on the roof, Larry is also able to see much further into the almost monochromatic, tediously homogeneous suburbia which he inhabits.[6] Thus, he is able to notice for the first time that another neighbour of his, Mrs. Samsky, sunbathes in the nude, which requires Larry to crane his neck so as to get a better look. Curiously, however, this bathetic development fails to entirely undermine the weight of the religious imagery. Soon afterwards, Larry looks into the sun, which momentarily blinds both him and the viewer; the next shot portrays the protagonist with a cold compress held to his forehead. The conclusion seems obvious: the schlemiel that he is, Larry cannot stand on the roof for five minutes without suffering a sunstroke. If, however, one chooses to follow the code of religious images, the sequence may be read as offering a fair warning that "[a]ctions have consequences," indeed—preparatory to the last scene, in which changing Clive's grade seems to "result" in the momentous phone call from the doctor, announcing what must be terminal illness. Thus, by the end of the aerial scene the profundity suggested by its opening shots, seemingly swept aside by a bathetic descent into voyeuristic pursuits, is re-established by means of yet another potent image, leading the viewer to wallow in uncertainty as to whether the sunstroke is to be interpreted as a scientific phenomenon, or else an admonition which needs to be "received with simplicity."



The last aspect of the notion of "receiving" as deployed in *A Serious Man* that I wish to discuss is connected with language, which in the Coens' works is always foregrounded and sometimes thematized. The same words and phrases reappear obsessively in various contexts, travelling from character to character. The language seems to be remarkably (indeed, virally) alive, but at the same time patently artificial in its constructedness, intentionally "cinematic," frequently used as one of the markers of the genre with which the Coens are currently tinkering. Since *A Serious Man* does not lampoon any particular genre—at best, as Lee Weston Sabo argues, it may be seen as "a mockery of the Jewish art film" (Sabo)—the situation is different. Namely, language becomes yet another veil thrown over reality, itself a puzzle, rendering the underlying reality impossible to comprehend.

[6] David Denby dismisses the scenery of *A Serious Man* as "the suburban nightmare that keeps showing up in ambitious American movies as the banality of evil itself" (Denby). An instance that comes to mind is Tim Burton's surreal rendition of Californian suburbs in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), where the nightmarish regularity of the houses is nevertheless undermined by the proximity of a looming Gothic castle.

The most poignant example can be found in the scene where Larry accuses Clive, the Korean student, of bribery. Larry admits that although nobody except Clive knows about the latter's actions, he—Larry—is able to interpret the evidence that he possesses. To this, Clive replies in his heavy accent: "Mere surmise, sir," completely baffling Larry, who repeats uncomprehendingly: "Mere sir, my sir?"; in response, Clive repeats slowly: "Mere—surmise—sir. Very uncertain" (*Serious Man*). Larry's self-proclaimed interpretive skills thus utterly compromised, he admittedly seems an unlikely candidate to puzzle out the mystery of the universe. Ironically, it is Clive's father—as ready to argue that the bribe was a matter of a cultural misunderstanding as he is to sue for defamation if Larry reports it—who claims that Larry ought to stop trying to ascertain the truth and "[a]ccept the mystery" (*Serious Man*), i.e., essentially to live up to the Uncertainty Principle, which he has been teaching but has not embraced as a viable philosophy. The bitter irony also consists in the fact that the wisdom offered by Clive's utterly pragmatic father in effect covers the same ground as Rabbi Nachtner's assertion that "Hashem doesn't owe us the answer" (*Serious Man*).



It has been my ambition to demonstrate that Joel and Ethan Coen reinvest the schlemiel figure with its cultural validity and, in the tradition of Yiddish and Jewish-American fiction, employ it to conduct a philosophical interrogation of the environment in which the schlemiel finds himself. In this case, the environment is no less than the universe; the interrogation, unsurprisingly perhaps, leads to Uncertainty. Nevertheless, I side with Ruth Wisse, who, in her review for *Commentary*, chose to describe the work as "a serious movie in a comic vein, which is good enough to warrant this much attention" ("Serious Film" 70).

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0008

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# Charles Willson Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* and the Great Chain of Being: The Interaction of Religion, Science, and Art in Early-Federal America

## Abstract

Although primarily known as a portrait painter, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) also possessed a profound interest in natural history. Indeed, Peale eventually founded the first natural history museum in the United States, and, during the end of the eighteenth century, he began to overlap his two great interests: art and nature. The event Peale chronicled in his 1804 painting *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* caused an extreme stir within the intellectual and religious circles of its time, and brought about, at the very least, a serious questioning in the deeply held notion of the Great Chain of Being. Although now largely discredited, this religious conviction postulated two concepts that Peale's *Exhumation of the Mastodon* seemingly contradicts. The first was the belief that no animals since creation had suffered the fate of extinction. The second was a lack of belief in geological time. Indeed, one Irish clergyman calculated the actual date of creation to 4004 BCE.

In this paper, I explore Peale's monumental painting, a work that is many things, a self-portrait and history painting among others. Indeed, in this painting, Peale was responding to science, religion, and their shifting positions within early-nineteenth-century America. When viewed together, Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* is not merely a record of an event that occurred in New York during the early nineteenth century, and instead is a document of Peale and the interaction of science and religion in early-Federal America.

> "But the world itself is only a speck of dust. And man is tiny—helpless! How long has he been in existence? For millions of years the earth was uninhabited."
> "Nonsense. The earth is as old as we are, no older. How could it be older? Nothing exists except through human consciousness."
> "But the rocks are full of the bones of extinct animals—mammoths and mastodons and enormous reptiles which lived long before man was ever heard of."
> "Have you ever seen those bones, Winston? Of course not. Nineteenth-century biologists invented them. Before man there was nothing . . ."
> George Orwell, *1984*



Although the name Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) is not one immediately familiar to those outside the circles of American art history, it would be difficult to overstate his prominence during the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, Peale is one of only four artists James Thomas Flexner explored in his seminal 1939 study, *America's Old Masters* (171–246), and Wayne Craven describes Peale as the most "American" of eighteenth-century painters in *Colonial American Portraiture* (383–400). An examination of Peale's *oeuvre* shows that he painted the social, political, and economic elite of his day: scientists, presidents, and prominent merchants among them.

Yet despite this artistic fame in his own time, Peale largely pushed his creative energies during the later part of his career towards the creation of the first natural history museum in the United States, and, some would claim, with significant justification, the world. Although the museum officially opened on 18 July, 1786, Peale began an advertisement blitz that lasted for five months in the *Philadelphia Packet* eleven days prior. The announcement, which also ran in periodicals up and down the eastern seaboard, is worth quoting directly:

> Mr. Peale, ever desirous to please and entertain the Public, will make a part of his House a Repository for Natural Curiosities—the Public he hopes will thereby be gratified in the sight of many of the Wonderful Works of Nature which are now closeted but seldom seen. The several articles will be classed and arranged according to their several species; and for greater ease to the Curious, on each piece will be inscribed the place from whence it came, and the name of the Donor, unless forbid, with such information as may be necessary.
>
> Mr. Peale will most thankfully receive the Communications of Friends who will favour him with their Assistance in this Undertaking. (Sellers 23)

And so, for the remainder of his life and with the able assistance of several of his sons, Charles Willson Peale continued to fill, classify, and

Charles Willson Peale, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, 1806-08, oil on canvas, 49" x 61.5". Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society

organize his museum with animals, plants, and minerals, both large and small.

Although Peale's museum opened in 1786, what was to become the real centrepiece of the institution did not arrive for more than fifteen years. In June of 1801, Peale packed his trunks to visit an unusual biological find on John Masten's farm outside Newburgh, New York. There lay the bones of what Peale (and others) called the Great Incognitum. Peale, ever the cagey businessman, at first only asked to sketch the skeletal remains. Afterwards, he offered Masten $300 for full ownership: $200 for the "much injured" bones already recovered, and an additional $100 for the privilege of further excavation on Masten's estate. To sweeten the deal the following morning, Peale also offered Mr. Masten a double-barrelled shotgun for his eldest son[1] (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 330–31). Peale crated up the bones Masten had already unearthed—an immense femur among them—and began his return to Philadelphia. A buzz of anticipation preceded Peale, as he wrote in his diary on 29 June, 1801, from New York City: "The Vice President of the United States [Aaron Burr] and a considerable number of Ladies and Gentlemen came to see the Bones, the news of them must have flown like wild fire, for upwards [of] 80 persons came to see them that evening" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 334).



Peale was home in Philadelphia no later than the second week of July 1801. On the 17th of that month, Peale exhibited the large-scale drawings he had completed on Masten's farm to seven members of the American Philosophical Society, much to their delight. One week hence, Peale wrote to Robert Patterson, one of the vice presidents of the American Philosophical Society, to inquire about a loan so as to complete the excavations on Masten's estates. That same day, 24 July, Patterson and the twenty-four members present at a special meeting of the APS unanimously voted to grant Peale a $500 advance. Less than a week later, Peale again packed his trunks, and, with his oldest son, Rembrandt, in tow, made the coach passage northwards to Masten's farm. There, over the next six weeks, Peale and his team diligently

[1] Masten first asked Peale for his "double barril Fuzee." The artist explained that the gun in his possession was a gift to a deceased son, Titian Ramsey Peale, from a French nobleman as a token of friendship, and thus carried significant sentimental value. The pair reached a compromise, and Peale wrote to Masten from New York City on 1 July, 1801, to say that he was sending along a quality firearm made by "the most celebrated Gunsmith of London" to Masten's son, John. Peale also sent as gifts some calico for Masten's wife, and a silk handkerchief for his daughter (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 330-31).

worked to unearth another Great Incognitum. They first built a mill-like device that was able to drain the twelve-foot-deep marl pit. This allowed Peale to disinter the remaining mastodon skeleton. According to Peale's diary, the ingenious engineering solution of draining the pit allowed the excavations to proceed rather smoothly. Only one small hiccup threatened. To quote Charles Coleman Sellers,

> With all in order and hopes high, the skies had darkened, lightning flashed, and thunder rolled with all the flamboyant fury of a Catskill Mountain storm. The downpour it threatened would have washed down banks and wheel together, wrecking and flooding all. (137)



The storm thankfully passed, and Peale's men conscientiously continued their work.

Charles Willson and Rembrandt were on their way back to Philadelphia no later than the fourth week of September, and the Peale family must have immediately undertaken the herculean task of assembling a complete mastodon skeleton to exhibit in their space within Philosophical Hall. If it was not complete by the first week of December, it must have been nearing so, for, on 4 December, Peale formally announced the acquisition of the mastodon remains and that he was preparing to display the quadruped's skeleton later that month. On 24 December, Peale placed a special invitation to the American Philosophical Society in the Philadelphia *Aurora*: "Charles Willson Peale's respectful compliments to the Members of the American Philosophical Society, and request the favour of their company, This Day, 24th inst. to view the SKELETON of the MAMMOTH, now erected in a room within their walls" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1: 376–77). The mastodon exhibit opened to the general public on Christmas Day; admission to the museum was twenty-five cents, while viewing the "Skeleton of the Mammoth," as the broadside advertised, was an additional half-dollar. To further aid accessibility to the public, Peale installed lamps so that the mastodon could be viewed six nights a week until 10 o'clock.

Given the novelty of the exhibit, it is no surprise that Peale quickly recovered his expenses and was able to repay the American Philosophical Society, the organization that helped to finance this excavation expedition. Although Peale had completed comparatively few paintings during the previous decade, opting instead to put his energy into work for his museum, it is clear he thought the mastodon, and, more specifically its exhumation, was worthy of returning to his palette and pencil. The first mention of this within Peale's voluminous correspondence occurs in a letter he wrote to

Thomas Jefferson on 19 August, 1804: "I have in view the execution of one large historical picture, which perhaps may be my last work in that line" (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.2*:* 747–48). Yet despite this mid-1804 date, Peale had only completed a small study two years hence, and was set, in September 1806, to finally begin the full-sized composition. Writing to his son Rubens, Peale explained:

> The figures in this piece will be large enough for me to introduce some portraits. . . . This piece will try my talents in a composition of figures, and if I succeed well may enduce [*sic*] me to pursue the art with more diligence than I have heretofore done, or if otherwise, will discourage me & be my last labour with the brush. All I can say at present, is that [I] feel confident, & have a hope of acquiring renown in my latter days as an historical painter. (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.2: 982-83)



Peale worked on this large composition over the next two years, mentioning the painting in subsequent letters to Rubens, John Isaac Hawkins (an English-born inventor living in the United States), and Benjamin West (Peale's artistic mentor while studying in London). The final mention of this painting occurred in a letter Peale wrote on 10 September, 1808, to Rembrandt, the eldest Peale son, who had departed for Paris in April of that year to paint portraits for Peale's museum. Charles Willson's comments indicate that the picture was nearing completion (984, 996, 1010, 1036, 1052, 1136).

The painting, which measures just over 4' x 5', is usually called *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. It remains one of the highlights of Charles Willson Peale's painting *oeuvre*, and is one of his more complicated compositions. The middle third of the painting is dominated by the pyramidal construction that Peale built to drain the marl pit. A sizable, mill-like wheel can be seen above ground and behind this construction. Peale hired young boys to walk on the inside of the wheel to provide the mechanical power that lowered the empty buckets into the morass and then raised the water-filled containers upwards to be emptied[2] (Miller, *Selected Papers* 2.1*:* 357, 359). Thirteen men can be counted at work beneath ground, including one, closest to the bucket contraption, who proudly displays a recently discovered mastodon bone, likely a fibula. John Masten, upon whose farm the excavations occurred, stands on a ladder in the lower-middle part of the composition.

[2] According to Peale's own calculations, this arrangement could empty approximately 1440 gallons per hour.

If the figures below ground seem to be anonymous workers, many of those above ground comprise an anachronistic group portrait, for, as Charles Willson's own diary makes clear, the only member of the Peale family to accompany the patriarch on the excavation was Rembrandt. Nonetheless, the artist chose to include nearly his entire family in this composition, including some who were no longer alive. Charles Willson can be seen on the right side of the painting, with one hand holding a drawing of the mastodon skeleton, and majestically gesturing to the work being done on his behalf with the other. Other members of this group include Peale's second wife, Hannah, Rembrandt, Sybilla, Elizabeth, Rubens, and, finally, Raphaelle, who holds the rolled-up end of the mastodon drawing. Just to the right of the wheel is Peale's deceased wife, Elizabeth DePeyster Peale, who can be seen scolding a young Titian Ramsay II. Finally, the two youngest Peale sons, Franklin and Linnaeus, playfully push a floating log with a lengthy pole just to the right of the mill-like wheel (Richardson, Hindle, and Miller 85).

Peale first arrived at John Masten's estate in June 1801, but he did not complete exhuming the fossilized remains until sometime in early September. Peale could have chosen any number of moments to depict in his painting, or could have taken artistic liberty to create a scene that did not actually occur. Instead, Peale chose to paint the one high-drama event in the entire exhumation process: the moment when dark storm clouds threatened to flood the morass that Peale's workers had so diligently laboured to drain. Indeed, the upper third of the painting is composed of wind-swept trees—note how the branches seem to bend from the viewer's right to left—and the ominous rainclouds that promised to not only halt work, but perhaps to destroy Peale's pit-draining engineering. Yet despite this sublime view of nature, those who work on Peale's behalf are undeterred and remain focused on their work at hand.

Without doubt, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* remains one of the most important American paintings of the early nineteenth century, and it is because of this importance that it has attracted such scholastic attention. In 1981, Lillian B. Miller, editor of the Charles Willson Peale Papers, wrote, "Until recently, the painting has been regarded as either 'an amusing record of the Museum' or an example of 'the amplification of American self-portraiture . . . [merging] with . . . genre painting'" (*History Painter* 47–48). Miller then convincingly examined Peale's work within the context of eighteenth-century historical paintings. Laura Rigal has written a persuasive article that places *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* within the political climate of early-nineteenth-century America (18–38).

More recently, David R. Brigham has explored this work as a biblical metaphor involving the Great Deluge (38–44).

While all of these interpretations add to a more full understanding of Peale's painting and what it meant to an early-nineteenth-century audience, one particular interpretation has been thus far overlooked: that of the interaction of religion and science in early-Federal America. This is not to suggest that previous examinations are any less valid. Instead, this exposition only adds to the panoply of meanings that surround *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Without doubt, given the complicated nature of both the composition and the subject matter, it is likely that this particular painting could have meant many things to many different audiences.



In order to fully explore *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* within the contexts of religion and science, it is important to first establish the prevailing feelings about the interactions between these two disparate fields of knowledge during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. An excellent point of departure would be the intellectual ruminations of James Ussher (1581–1656), Archbishop of Armagh from 1625 until his death exactly thirty-one years later. Ussher was the author of *The Annals of the Old Testament, Deduced from the First Origin of the World*, a treatise first published in two parts in Latin (1650 and 1654), followed by a posthumous English translation in 1658. In his *magnum opus*, Ussher utilized a literal translation of the Book of Genesis to calculate the exact moment of divine creation: the evening before 23 October, 4004 BCE. According to Ussher, Adam and Eve had a remarkably short stay in the Garden of Eden, being expelled their very first day (18). Calculating forward and using the same methodology, Ussher concluded that the waters rescinded from the Great Deluge on 23 October, 2348 BCE, a date that conveniently coincides with the 1,656$^{th}$ anniversary of Creation (21). Ussher's historical account progresses onwards until the birth of Jesus Christ in 4 BCE.

Although several prominent intellectuals attempted to refine Ussher's exact dating in the decades to come—Joseph Justus Scaliger, Johannes Kepler, and Sir Isaac Newton among them—scholars and non-academics alike commonly accepted the view of a 5,700-year-old Earth during the seventeenth century. Moreover, the idea of Young Earth Creationism retained a near monopoly until at least the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, James Hutton's nearly unreadable *Theory of the Earth*, published in 1795, was among the first formal and forceful arguments against the theory of Young Earth Creationism. However, there can be no doubt that the "Young Earth" theory was one that most accepted as

scientific fact, both in the United Kingdom—Hutton was a Scotsman by birth and locale—and in the United States during the time Peale was active exhuming the fossilized remains of a mastodon skeleton in upstate New York. Clearly, the idea of a "Young Earth" seems to clash with the very idea of fossilization. Without doubt, the length of time it takes for organic matter to chemically transform into a fossil far exceeds the amount of time the Young Earth Creationists believed God's entire creation itself had existed.[3]

However, there is another "scientific" principle that was commonly accepted during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that further adds to the understanding of Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, a concept called The Great Chain of Being. Perhaps the most important text on this subject is Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Although initially published in 1936 as a result of a series of lectures the author delivered at Harvard University as part of the William James Lectures on Philosophy and Psychology, *The Great Chain of Being* remains the definitive scholastic source on the topic. In it, Lovejoy chronicles both the birth and the eventual modification of this particular philosophical idea. Given its importance and acceptance during the eighteenth century and the way in which it so prominently contributes to the understanding of *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, a brief discussion of the Great Chain of Being is of the utmost importance.

According to Lovejoy, "It was in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a Chain of Being, and the principles which underlay this conception—plenitude, continuity, gradation—attained their widest diffusion and acceptance" (183). These three concepts deserve a brief explanation. The concept of *plenitude* involved the great variety and abundance of life, and was used as justification for the idea of *continuity*, the notion that every kind of organism ever created by the Divine Maker still exists in an original and unchanged form. *Gradation* was a pre-Darwinian word used to demonstrate the relatedness of the animal kingdom. When put together, plenitude, continuity, and gradation helped explain, for the eighteenth-century mind at least, the natural world in which they lived. One could begin with the simplest organism then known, ascend a single rung of the animal-kingdom ladder to a slightly more complicated organism. This process of ascension could be repeated

[3] To be fair, a visit to the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, will make it clear that twenty-first-century Young Earth Creationists have found clever ways of explaining the fossil record given a 6,000-year-old Earth.

*ad infinitum* until the ladder of animal creation would eventually progress, through small, imperceptible steps, to God's most perfect earthly creation, Man.

Perhaps the most important of these three principles when considering Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* is that of continuity, a concept that conveniently meshed with a 5,800-year-old view of the Earth. Indeed, continuity assumes that all animals that existed at the moment of creation still existed in the eighteenth century in a completely unchanged state. The processes of evolution or adaptation were incompatible with the Great Chain of Being, for it supposes that God had made an imperfect organism, one that required modification after its initial creation. Given this view, the concept of extinction was untenable: God would not create any organism only later to destroy it, for this would indicate a sense of fallibility, an idea far removed from the eighteenth-century theological mindset. Edmund Law, the future Bishop of Carlisle, wrote in 1732 that



> there is no manner of chasm or void, no link deficient in this great chain of beings, and the reason of it, it will appear extremely probable that every distinct order, every class of species of them, is as full as the nature of it would admit, or God saw proper. (qtd. in Lovejoy 185)

It is important to note here that the Great Chain of Being was not solely a Deist mindset, but one prominent theologians across the Atlantic Isles and the Continent fully accepted without reservation. As the example of Bishop Law above makes clear, the Great Chain of Being was one of the prevailing theological and intellectual mindsets of the eighteenth century. Lovejoy's emphasis on this point is so remarkably strident it is worth directly quoting:

> Nevertheless, there has been no period in which writers of all sorts—men of science and philosophers, poets and popular essayists, deists and orthodox divines—talked so much about the Chain of Being, or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas connected with it, or more boldly drew from these their latent implications or apparent implications. Addison, King, Bolingbroke, Pope, Haller, Thomson, Akenside, Buffon, Bonnet, Goldsmith, Diderot, Kant, Lambert, Herder, Schiller—all these and a host of lesser writers not only expatiated upon the theme but drew from it new, or previously evaded, consequences . . . (183–84)

Clearly, the concept of the Great Chain of Being in general, and its main tenet of continuity more specifically, was a deeply held notion during the years immediately preceding Peale painting *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*, and during the decades surrounding the artist's intellectual development.

Even so developed an intellectual as Thomas Jefferson believed in the underlying notions of the Great Chain of Being. In 1781, the then Governor of Virginia wrote the first draft of *Notes on the State of Virginia*; subsequent revisions in 1782–83 and a move to Paris to assume the post of Ambassador to France allowed him to anonymously publish this dissertation in 1784. Jefferson wrote *Notes* as a defence to the questions François Barbé-Marboism and the Comte de Buffon presented about the flora and fauna in the New World. Jefferson wrote, "[T]he opinion advanced by the Count de Buffon, is…[t]hat the animals common to the old and new world, are smaller in the latter" (47). Such a claim so infuriated the future president that he dispatched John Sullivan, a former Major General in the Continental Army, to lead twenty army regulars into the New Hampshire woods to find a suitably majestic North-American mammal to present to the Comte de Buffon. Two weeks later, Sullivan returned with an impressive moose, which sadly lacked an equally impressive set of antlers. Perhaps as a compromise, Sullivan sent along an alternate set of antlers from an elk to attach to the moose's skull (Bryson 80).



For Jefferson, then, the mastodon was, among other things, tangible proof of the vibrancy of North American mammilla. In *Notes*, Jefferson belabours the point, writing, "The skeleton of the mammoth (for so the incognitum has been called) bespeaks an animal of six times the cubic volume of the elephant, as Mons[ieur] de Buffon has admitted" (45). Furthermore, Jefferson contends the United States was so vast and unexplored that herds of the Great Incognitum still roamed North America. His deductive powers placed faith in the Great Chain of Being:

> The white bear of America is as large as that of Europe. The bones of the Mammoth which have been found in America, are as large as those found in the old world. It may be asked, why I insert the Mammoth as if it still existed? I ask in return, why I should omit it, as if it did not exist? Such is the economy of nature, that *no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken.* (53–54, emphasis added)

So convinced was Jefferson of the existence of the mastodon that finding "the remains and accounting of any [species] which may be deemed rare or extinct" was one of the charges given to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark during their 1804–06 exploration of the American west following the Louisiana Purchase (Thomson 40). Following their return, Jefferson again dispatched Clark westward, asking him to excavate at the Big Bone Lick site in what is now modern-day Kentucky (40).

Peale and Jefferson had something else in common aside from their mutual interest in mastodons: they were both committed Deists. For both Jefferson and Peale—and like-minded Enlightenment-era Deists such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Thomas Paine—Deism had several main tenets. The first was a general belief in (to use William Paley's term) a Divine Watchmaker that both created the universe and designed the rules that governed its existence, but did not interfere with the day-to-day lives of his creations. A second principle was the belief in the power of reason over that of faith. A final fundamental truth for the sake of this discussion involves the fact that Deists broadly rejected organized religion and narratives, especially those concerned with the account of Creation in the Book of Genesis.



Few scholars have written on Peale's religious views. David C. Ward, Historian and Deputy Editor of the Peale Family Papers at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., describes Peale as a man "with no religious faith" (81). It is Ward who has written the most succinct account of Peale's Deism. One paragraph in particular is worthy of an extensive quotation:

> Baptized in the Church of England, Peale flirted with membership in several churches, especially Episcopalian and Quaker; attended the services of various denominations; and was married (and, as a widower, remarried) by clergymen of each wife's faith. Peale's participation in religion was limited to intellectual interest and a desire not to disturb the proprieties; rather than list his children in the family Bible, he listed them in Pilkington's *Dictionary of Artists*. Instead of adopting an institutionalized faith, Peale was a Deist of an almost pure variety in that, having posited the existence of a God whose benevolence was manifest in all the works of nature, he saw no need for further intermediaries between man and God. (81)

Given these views, it is not surprising that Peale only occasionally turned his artistic talents towards religious subjects. He painted a small copy of Benjamin West's *Elisha Restoring to Life the Shunammite's Son* (1767) while a student in West's London studio, and later made a copy

of Charles Catton's *Noah and His Ark* in 1819 to display in the Peale Museum. Yet such compositions do not indicate that Peale adhered to any particular dogmatic faith tradition. Several reasons easily explain the few religious works within Peale's *oeuvre*. First, eighteenth-century art students often copied the "Old Masters," and given what we know of Benjamin West, it is not surprising that he had students copy his own compositions. Second, it is likely that Peale somewhat identified with the Old Testament figure of Noah. Like Noah, Charles Willson was the patriarch of a large family, who viewed his legacy as the preservation and organization of the animal kingdom. Finally, despite his apparent lack of faith, religious compositions were particularly important to the artists of the eighteenth century who aspired to paint Grand Manner historical compositions, a genre of art under which large-scale religious art was placed. When referring in his correspondence to *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* between 1806 and 1808, for example, Peale called the work a "historical" picture or painting (Miller, *Selected Papers* 259, 281, 301). All evidence indicates to Peale being a committed Deist. To again quote David C. Ward, "In all of Peale's writings, there is no discussion of any doctrinal questions, and the only mentions of Jesus are art historical" (81).

Although Peale may not have worshipped within a church, his cathedral was that of nature. That single word—Nature—appears again and again within print material advertising his museum. The first tickets for Peale's Museum, printed in 1788, feature an open work with the word "NATURE" printed across the gutter. This book seems to emanate light, almost like that of a halo. Underneath the open book are the words "The Birds & Beasts will teach thee! ADMIT the BEARER to PEALE'S MUSEUM, containing the Wonderfull [*sic*] works of NATURE!" The same open book was featured on the title page of *A Scientific and Descriptive Catalogue of Peale's Museum* from 1796, and a similarly-opened tome, this time with "NATURE and ART" written across the right-hand page, appeared in a "Magic Lanthorn" announcement from *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* on 3 November, 1821.[4]

The concept of nature was clearly on Charles Willson Peale's mind during the majority of his adulthood, and it is under that broad umbrella that *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* must be considered. Peale was clearly a member of the Enlightenment. As a Deist, he consciously

[4] The "Magic Lanthorn" (or Magic Lantern) was a predecessor of the twentieth-century slide projector, and was used to project near-transparent images onto a screen-like surface. Peale and others utilized the magic lantern to both educate and entertain the public.

rejected the Christian doctrines that were prevalent in the United States during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Peale was thus free to reject the ideas regarding the timeline of Creation put forth by Archbishop James Ussher, a chronology established through a careful and literal translation of the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament. As such, Peale could easily conceive the earth's timeline in extending beyond a mere five and a half millennia. This is a crucial point, for as James Hutton (and others) acknowledged, even during the late eighteenth century, the process of fossilization was one that likely took tens of thousands of years, an amount of time incongruent with a "Young Earth" view of the world.



Commentary regarding another important idea lay just beneath the surface of Peale's important painting. The Great Chain of Being was perhaps one of the most widely held philosophical notions during the eighteenth century. As Arthur Lovejoy has remarked, "It was in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a Chain of Being . . . attained [its] widest diffusion and acceptance" (183). The Great Chain of Being had three main tenets: plenitude (the great variety of life), continuity (the idea that all organisms created still exist), and gradation (an explanation of the relatedness of animals to those above and below them on the Great Chain). The mastodon pushed adherents of this theory into a difficult position. For to acknowledge that the mastodon existed at one time—as skeletal remains strongly indicated that it once had—was to assert that mastodons still roamed the plains and woods of North America. As no mastodons had yet been found, they were either exceptionally well hidden (a difficult feat for a beast so large), or the concept of continuity in the Great Chain of Being was an invalid supposition. If the broadside advertising the mastodon exhibit at his museum is any indication, Peale clearly believed that the monstrous quadruped was an extinct creature. An examination of the text shows that when specifically referring to the animal, Peale used the past tense:

> They [the mastodon remains] were dug up in Ulster county, (state of New York) where they must have lain certainly many hundred years ------no other vestige remains of these animals; nothing but a confused tradition among the natives of our country, which states that their existence, *ten thousand Moons ago*; but, whatever might have been the appearance of this ENORMOUS QUADRUPED when clothed with flesh, his massy bones can alone lead us to imagine; already convinced that he *was* the LARGEST of Terrestial [*sic*] Beings.[5] (qtd. in Sellers 122)

[5] Emphasis added on the final "was." Peale italicized "ten thousand Moons

Clearly, Peale's Deism did not necessitate a blind faith in the idea of continuity, for such a belief would suppose God's active involvement in the world. Instead, Peale, and his likeminded Deists, thought only of God as the Creator, not as an omnipotent meddler; for Peale, the extinction of plant and animal life was not a matter of religion, but only a matter of scientific inevitability.

Religion and science are uneasy bedfellows today, and were so during Charles Willson Peale's own lifetime as well. While Peale was a religious man—that is, he believed in a God (the capitalization of the noun is deliberate)—he did not subscribe to the Judeo-Christian version of an Almighty that should be prayed to or that needlessly interfered with people's lives. Because of his lack of faith in organized religion, Peale was free to reject dogmatic texts—the Old and New Testaments among others—and choose instead to exercise his own reason and intellect. It was this sense of reason that allowed Peale to conceive of geological time rather than a "Young Earth" view of creation. It was this sense of intellect that allowed the artist to acknowledge that animals that had once been created could later become extinct.

One can see many things when viewing Charles Willson Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon*. Indeed, it is a complicated image conceived of and painted during complicated times. Among other interpretations, this work is certainly about science and religion, and how those two different fields of knowledge interacted with and informed one another during the early years of the nineteenth century. Peale's painting is not simply about digging a mastodon skeleton out of the ground in upstate New York in 1801. Indeed, the painting speaks to a rejection of an Old Testament view of creation James Ussher professed in the seventeenth century, and is a dismissal of an idea that many Christians (and, to be fair, many Deists such as Thomas Jefferson) held dear: continuity within God's Great Chain of Being.

Lillian B. Miller commented that Peale conceived this painting as a historical composition, and in many regards this is true. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the importance of history paintings resided in the ways in which they had the potential to morally instruct an art-viewing public. These were lessons Peale learned while studying painting with Benjamin West, perhaps the most famous British history

ago" in the original. It is important to note that this phrase, "ten thousand moons ago," does not indicate a lack of belief in geological time. Instead, Peale was quoting a Native American oral tradition that appeared at the top of the broadside: "TEN THOUSAND MOONS AGO, when ought but gloomy forests covered this land of the sleeping sun . . ."

painter during the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this regard, *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* unquestionably is a historical painting. However, the moral message it contains is not one about love of country, sacrifice for the sake of others or following the teachings of Jesus Christ. Instead, in *The Exhumation of the Mastodon,* Charles Willson forcefully and clearly speaks to the elevation of science, intellect, and reason over blind faith.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0009

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# "You Avenge the Others": The Portrait of a Femme Fatale in Gladys Huntington's *Madame Solario*

## ABSTRACT

The article deals with the concept of *femme fatale* as presented in Gladys Huntington's 1956 novel *Madame Solario*. The eponymous protagonist, Natalia Solario, displays several characteristics of this female archetype, omnipresent in literature, culture and visual iconography. As a femme fatale, Natalia is beauty, danger and mystery incarnate. The cause of tragedies, but also a tragic figure herself, Madame Solario is both victim and victimizer. The article explores the interplay between innocence and experience, life and death, the erotic and the thanatic, as well as the motifs of transgression, ambiguity, love, passion, desire, perversion, dominance and control crucial to Huntington's novel. *Madame Solario* reminds us that, paradoxically, the femme fatale usurps certain stereotypically masculine traits. This, in turn, brings us to the novel's feminist dimension: the femme fatale is victimized by men, but she is also the agent of female revenge and, ultimately, liberation, symbolically marking the transition from patriarchy to women's emancipation.

"Damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive."
Josephine Hart, *Damage*

The American novel I am concerned with in the present essay is set six years before the term *femme fatale* was first used, which, according to lexicographers, occurred in 1912 ("Femme fatale," *Merriam*). The literary work in question, Gladys Huntington's *Madame Solario*, was published anonymously in 1956, but its action takes place at the height of the Belle Époque. The very concept of the *femme fatale* has, of course, been known since time immemorial: as Ruth Markus reminds us, it "originated in ancient times and already existed in Jewish-Christian religion," as evidenced in the biblical story of Adam and Eve (188). Dictionary definitions of the originally French term which has infiltrated other languages include "a very attractive woman who causes trouble or unhappiness for the men who become involved with her," "a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations," and "a woman who attracts men by an aura of charm and mystery" ("Femme fatale," *Merriam*). The fatal woman—alias "disastrous woman" ("Femme fatale," *Merriam*) or "deadly woman" ("Femme fatale," *Webster's*)—is thus inextricably linked with beauty, sexual attraction, desire, enigma and fascination, but also with manipulation, peril, misfortune and downfall. A figure at the intersection of two opposing forces, "the link between sex and death, Eros and Thanatos" (Markus 183), she is "the archetypal woman who both threatens and attracts the man, beautiful, erotic and sensual, so attractive and mesmerizing that she weakens the man, causing him to lose his abilities, his talents, his intellectual faculties, even his life" (188). The dualism which marks the *femme fatale* is also what makes her intriguing:

> Ever since then [the Fall] the image of the *femme fatale* has been tied to an ambiguous and ambivalent attitude, with her being the link between sex (fertility) and death. The Christian view that the original sin is the sexual relationship between Adam and Eve contributed to recoil from the sexual and enticing woman as symbolizing sin and even death, but was at the same time an admission of her powerful attraction and her ability to create life. (188)

The aim of the present essay is to look at Huntington's protagonist, Natalia Solario, in terms of how she fits the description of a *femme fatale*, with its numerous nuances and implications.

As Nata Minor observes in *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?*, a micronovel at the core of which is Gladys Huntington's *magnum opus*, "*Madame Solario* is out of stock, few people have read it" (151, translation mine). In the two decades

which have elapsed since Minor's book was published, this state of affairs has changed. While the available copies of Huntington's novel in the original—or, for that matter, of its Polish translation—are still to be found mostly among second-hand books, it is possible to come by a 2008 English edition. Furthermore, a new French edition of *Madame Solario* appeared in 2012, the publisher clearly hoping for the interest in the book—always considerable in France—to be further kindled by a French film adaptation of the same year. It is, however, true that despite the interest being somewhat revived in recent years, Huntington's novel still remains little-known not only to lay readers, but also to specialists in American literature, which, in turn, results in journalistic, let alone critical sources being virtually non-existent. In a prior article on *Madame Solario* (Piechucka 65–67), I have already delved into the unusual circumstances of the novel's publication as well as the discovery of its author's true identity and Gladys Huntington's sad fate. Since the publication in question also sketches out the main strands of the plot, a brief recapitulation of the story told by Huntington should be sufficient for the purpose of the present text. As the novel opens, its eponymous protagonist, Natalia Solario, is a great beauty in her late twenties, estranged, though not divorced from Mr Solario, and trying, without much success, to hide from her one-time lover, the passionate but obsessive Russian aristocrat Misha Kovanski. Natalia's delicate situation is compounded by the unexpected arrival of her brother, Eugene Harden, from whom she was separated twelve years earlier in tragic circumstances. Hostile and distrustful at first, the reunited siblings gradually form an affectionate bond which ultimately turns into an incestuous relationship.



Though Minor's micronovel is a literary work, and not a critical one, and it is possible to classify it as light reading without being accused of not doing the author justice, *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?* does give a few interesting insights into Huntington's novel. It also emphasizes what Minor clearly sees as the key aspect of Natalia Solario's story: words such as *mystery*, *secret* or *enigma* recur throughout Minor's text. Since Minor's protagonist, Arsène, is consumed with a burning desire to identify the writer of *Madame Solario*, the mystery referred to on every other page of the micronovel is connected with the question of authorship. However, the aura of mystery surrounds Huntington's protagonist as well. Natalia's enigma begins with her origins, as the following conversation between her fellow holidaymakers at Cadenabbia, a resort on Lake Como where most of the action is set, demonstrates:

> Bernard had been struck by the entirely foreign name because Madame Solario had spoken as an English-speaking person, not as a foreigner.
> "What nationality is Madame Solario?" he asked Signorina Petri.
> "I think she is by origin English," she answered.

> The others were talking about her, and the young man with the pointed nose—who was called familiarly Pico, short for his nickname of Pinocchio—after twice putting the question to them and getting no answer, said to Signorina Petri, "She is American, isn't she?"
>
> "I think so," she replied.
>
> "But you said she was English!" said Bernard, and she appeared surprised, as though he had been rude, and also uncomprehending, and he realized that there was no difference to her between the one thing and the other.
>
> "Her stepfather was South American," the Marchesa was saying.
>
> "It is therefore probable she is American," said Pico.
>
> "But what kind of American?" asked Bernard, and Signorina Petri again seemed to think he had been rude. "I mean, she doesn't look South American!"
>
> "It might be North American," she said with dignity.
>
> "A very rich South American," the Marchesa was saying to Wilbur, "who lived in Paris. Monsieur de Florez—did you know him? No, the Solario wasn't born de Florez. I don't know what she was. I'm told the Florez had a superb apartment." Her emphatic manner made it truly superb. "Such pictures, furniture, tapestries! But he died some years ago. I met Natalia in Venice last year; she is a friend of great friends of mine, and we lived through a terrible time together when our friend was taken ill. My dear! It was a drama!" (Huntington 28–29)

As the story unfolds, the mystery of Natalia's roots is clarified in the course of a *tête-à-tête* with Bernard Middleton, the young Englishman who is infatuated with her and who, as Minor puts it, is one of "the two authors of *Madame Solario*" (128, translation mine), since his consciousness seems to transpire in much of the novel's third-person narration. The other "author" is Eugene Harden, who, like Bernard, plays a substantial role in, so to speak, presenting Madame Solario, whose reticence and reserve make it difficult for the reader—as well as for those surrounding her—to pierce her enigmatic demeanour. When Natalia and Bernard go boating on the lake, the sight of woods evokes memories of her childhood. Questioned by the young man, Madame Solario replies that the woods of her childhood were situated "[i]n America—in the very north" (Huntington 77), which turns out to be one of the New England states. "Then you are American!" (77), Middleton cannot help interjecting, to which his interlocutor's reply is simply, "No" (77). The moment Bernard resigns himself to obtaining no further information, Natalia unexpectedly adds, "I was born in England. My father was English. But we went to America when I was a child" (77). As the conversation continues, Madame Solario notes that the woods she sees in her dreams are "like the woods [she] knew in Sweden and America" (78). She goes on to explain to Middleton, perplexed by the mention of yet

another geographical location, that "[her] mother was half Swedish" and "took [Natalia and Eugene] to Sweden when [their] father died" (78). The whole conversation leaves Bernard "fascinated by the incongruity of these memories with her name and all that he had seen and heard of her" (80).

Due to her stateless status—actual if not official—the protagonist's persona eludes all classification and defies all comparison, thereby matching her physique, which too is one of a kind, and making her "the beautiful, incomparable Mme Solario" (Minor 114, translation mine). She is at once a *citoyenne du monde* and a *déracinée*, acquainted with international high society and tragically homeless. Elusive and exceptional, evocative of different countries, languages and traditions, and yet belonging to none of them, she seems to incarnate a disquieting question which men try vainly to find an answer to. In terms of her origins and background, Madame Solario is thus a living puzzle, a spellbinding amalgam, an exotic collage or mosaic, which has to be painstakingly reconstructed and in which some pieces always seem missing, despite all the efforts of those trying to unravel her mystery. In fact, it is the inevitable incompleteness, confusion and dissatisfaction that make her intriguing and desirable in a way her beauty alone, striking as it may be, never would. As such, she constitutes an endless challenge and effortlessly holds male attention. Natalia's unwillingness to give information about herself only adds to her tremendous charm, which transfixes almost all the men she meets. If, like all beautiful women, she is unavoidably defined by the male gaze, "com[ing] into existence," as Minor puts it, "through their [men's] desires" and "their eyes" (48, translation mine), she is able to transcend the limitations her physical attractiveness imposes on her by forcing Middleton—and doubtless other men too—to recreate and rewrite her life story. Just as her "incongruous" name represents a linguistic challenge, her background and past represent a textual or literary one. In other words, those interested in her—men, but also, to a certain extent, women, motivated by a social rather than sexual curiosity—and willing to read her like a book, find the book closed and themselves obliged to write the text on their own, with only scraps of—often contradictory—information at their disposal. Ultimately, Madame Solario may thus be the incarnation of what Roland Barthes famously referred to as a writerly text, while all the other women in the novel are readerly ones.

Paraphrasing the statement by Simone de Beauvoir which is arguably the best-known feminist quote, one could claim that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a femme fatale." Whatever Natalia Solario's innate qualities and natural inclinations, it is impossible to ignore the effect her past and the tragic experiences which marked it must have had on her personality. To begin with, what is important is that she *does* have a past,

which differentiates her from the young girls Bernard Middleton mixes with at Cadenabbia. Though pretty and graceful, these *ingénues* from good families gradually lose their charm in Bernard's eyes. Pure and inexperienced, they lack not just the aura of sexual attractiveness and danger only an older woman can possess, but also the kind of life experience which is inextricably linked with suffering. The youthful, girlish holidaymakers are devoid of such a burden, though two of them are beginning to know the price of love and deception: Ilona Zapponyi, the Hungarian aristocrat whom Count Kovanski stopped courting the moment he met Natalia Solario, and Missy Lastacori, the Florentine socialite who has romantic feelings for the fortune-hunting Harden until she discovers the incestuous nature of his relationship with his sister. Nevertheless, despite the unrequited love they both experience, Ilona and Missy—as well as the other girls in the novel—are blank pages compared to Madame Solario, and their stories, while existent and readable, are unchallenging and readerly, and not nearly as interesting as that of the eponymous protagonist. This is what Middleton intuits when he sees Natalia for the first time:

> She was not a girl, not young in his sense, though he knew she could not be more than twenty-seven or -eight, and his eyes stayed on her—not with the interest that a girl might have aroused, only contemplatively, but stayed, because he at once thought her beautiful. (Huntington 27)

In terms of age, a decade or so must thus separate Madame Solario from the young ladies whose company Bernard enjoys at first, but it is obvious they cannot compete with her. Upon catching Kovanski gazing lovingly at Natalia in the hotel dining room, Middleton simultaneously realizes the nature and strength of the Count's feelings for Madame Solario and the fact that Ilona, with whom Bernard sympathizes, stands no chance of winning Kovanski back:

> There was no hope for Ilona. It was all over. . . . And that [Natalia's] musing look, which lent shade and subtlety to her loveliness, was like a *coup de grâce*. There could be no hope for Ilona, no hope if this woman were her rival. (Huntington 36–37)

The use of the word *madame* in the title of Huntington's novel may be more important than it seems at first glance. "Madame Solario" is how Bernard and the other holidaymakers at Cadenabbia usually refer to Natalia. The French title emphasizes her connection with Paris, the city where she lived as an adolescent and where, after many trials and tribulations,

she settles as a mature woman. The fact that she is referred to as "madame" also indicates her marital status. It is, however, precisely this status that is as vague and uncertain as her origins. Until she is joined by her brother, she holidays on Lake Como alone and the fact that she strikes a solitary figure in the hotel dining room becomes the object of Bernard's reflections. Gradually, we learn that Natalia's marriage has broken up and that she is contemplating divorce. The reader is not given much information about her married life: all we know is that Luis Solario, her South American husband, took her to his homeland and that they lived on a ranch there. Huntington fails to pinpoint the causes of the couple's separation. She does, however, give the reader a clue in a series of enigmatic, incomplete statements made by Eugene while talking to his sister in private: "What your life was never to recover from, before ever it was my fault"; "What it was never to recover from, was that the first experience —"; "There couldn't have been a normal marriage afterwards in any case—there may never be, because nothing may ever touch—" (253). "[T]he first experience" hinted at by Eugene is the one which determined his and his sister's fate: at sixteen, Natalia became the mistress of the siblings' stepfather, de Florez. Their relationship, which came to be an open secret in the de Florez household and, as evident from the conversations taking place at the Hotel Bellevue, remains an open secret in the international *beau monde* twelve years later, resulted in Eugene being forced into exile for trying to kill his stepfather and drove Natalia and Eugene's mother to her early death. After reuniting with his sister at Cadenabbia, Eugene sits in judgment on her, and goes from accusing her of betraying her mother and causing her family's misfortune to claiming that she was merely the victim of circumstances and of an unscrupulous older man.



Natalia Solario represents the sexual triumph of experience over innocence, effortlessly luring Bernard, Kovanski and even her own brother away from the attractive but virginal and somewhat banal young girls who surround them. As a married woman, she has an advantage over the latter: while still beautiful and, even by the harsh standards of the time, relatively young, she has a mysterious past they are deprived of. Her lack of innocence is, moreover, due to more than just the sexual experience which could reasonably be expected of an older, married woman. Natalia's innocence was lost when she embarked on a relationship with her stepfather. Her sexual history is thus marked by transgression and perversion, and, ultimately, by the tragedy they led to. This perhaps explains why at Cadenabbia she triumphs not only over the young girls but also over the older, but still desirable, married ladies. It is the peculiar combination of beauty, full-blown sexuality, mystery, drama and evil which makes Madame Solario irresistible in the eyes of men.

The aura of mystery which surrounds Natalia Solario owes a lot to the fact that Huntington does not dot her i's. One case in point would be her treatment of the protagonist's affair with her stepfather. The scene in which Eugene forces his sister to reveal all the graphic details of what he ironically calls "[t]he supreme experience" (Huntington 155)—to himself, but, importantly, not to the reader, who learns that Natalia confesses everything to her brother without being told what *exactly* she confesses—ends in a passage which constitutes a good example of Huntington's evasive, disquieting writing:

> He observed that there was no resentment to his questions. There was something else.
>
> "The supreme experience," he said, comprehending, accepting, jeering, and not judging, "and it was Papa!"
>
> His understanding had brought him an appeasement both physical and moral. He was no longer outraged; he no longer even blamed. What had seemed so unnatural to him was explained as one of those vagaries of the senses that are in nature and for which the human being cannot be held responsible. He observed with a sort of kindliness the symptoms of unrest in her, a disturbance of the usual harmony. When he turned to watch her moving, pausing, moving again, their two shadows on the wall seemed to be executing movements different from their own in the architecture of still lines that divided up the light. He had gained his victory in getting her to speak, and for the first time could study her from a position of vantage, not thwarted and merely watching his chance. A few more questions that he put to her later were left as statements of fact, and he obtained a final confession when they were standing together near the window, in whose light he could see her face well enough. Now he did not jeer, but said with sympathy, "Poor Nelly!" (155–56)

While the passage could hardly be called explicit, the reader is allowed—invited even—to speculate on what happened between teenage Natalia and her stepfather. Nata Minor may in fact be right in arguing that de Florez's seduction of his stepdaughter—an act in itself condemnable—was complicated by the fact that the young girl, immature, disorientated and incapable of moral judgment, may have rejoiced in her newly discovered sexuality. Arsène, the protagonist of *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?*, subscribes to her friend Louise's opinion that the young Eugene missed while trying to shoot de Florez because he had caught the couple *in flagrante delicto* and was shocked to see the delight written on Natalia's face. "[I]he image loomed that said pleasure, and the hand armed with a pistol trembled" (Minor 60, translation mine), Louise imagines, to which Arsène later replies, "You

are certainly right, and I also think that it was a reflection of his sister's pleasure, caught in the mirror, that made Eugene Harden's hand tremble" (151, translation mine). Too subtle a novelist to present the protagonist's drama in black and white terms, Huntington, while by no means justifying a middle-aged man's seduction of his own stepdaughter, does not overlook the possible psychological and sexual complexities of the tragic situation. As a result, Madame Solario emerges once more as a complicated figure, at once innocent and guilty, victimized and disquieting: as Markus reminds us, "the image of *femme fatale* transmits added ambiguity: although she controls, she herself is controlled by her desires" (184). The aura of perversion and sexual impulses which are beyond control makes Huntington's protagonist both frightening and intriguing, contributing to her dark side, which, again, stands in sharp contrast to her blondeness. Our inability to unequivocally judge Madame Solario brings us to the inevitable conclusion that while she is a victim of men—de Florez, who deprived her of her innocence, her brother, whose love for her, though sincere, is an unhealthy, dangerous passion, and even Kovanski, who, though totally devoted to her, terrorizes her with his possessiveness and unstable behaviour—she is perhaps, first and foremost, a victim of her own destiny. Natalia's example shows that a *femme fatale* may, in one sense of the term, be "fatal" because she is the plaything of fate. As Minor's Arsène puts it, Huntington's heroine is a woman "whom an unfortunate affair, hardly more transgressive than another, but doubtless aggravated by the pleasure she took in it, precipitated into one of those dimensions of life where nothing was forbidden any longer" (Minor 103, translation mine).



While we never learn from Natalia herself what it is she exactly thinks about her tragic fate and difficult situation, we are again given some clues. During one of the many conversations the novel's eponymous protagonist has with her brother, Eugene alludes—without ever using the expression—to Madame Solario being a *femme fatale*, simultaneously suggesting that her status may be seen as a form of revenge:

> "I'm sorry for women, I assure you; they can be so much in love. They are victims! Victims of what—of nature? I don't know, but anyhow, yielded up to men. But you," he said, looking her up and down as she stood a little way from him, "*you* don't suffer the common lot. No, never you! You avenge the others." She made the gesture, like a start, of not wanting to listen, but he went on the more rapidly with his strange attack. "You have from the beginning. At dancing-class you avenged the little girls who didn't get partners by making the little boys you didn't dance with so miserable. You've done that always. If it wasn't for you one would have only pity for women!" He got up to make her listen. "Aren't you

> grateful? Because of you and a few others, some men *are* as much in love as women. Even more, to redress the balance a little! It doesn't often happen—aren't you pleased it happens for *you*?" (Huntington 247–48)

In response to Harden's words, his habitually calm and composed sister breaks down and bursts into tears before finally repeating the cruel and offensive words she once heard from a female acquaintance, one clearly familiar with the scandal which had marked Natalia's past: "One drama the more or the less in your life—what is that?" (Huntington 249). This is one of the rare moments in Huntington's novel when Madame Solario, who, without being arrogant, seems to make a point of never complaining and never explaining, reveals herself as a tragic figure, hurt, humiliated and damaged.



Harden's suggestion that his sister may see herself as the woman who "avenge[s] the others" is not, however, entirely unfounded. When towards the end of the novel Bernard helps Madame Solario in her bid to escape from her brother's suffocating influence, the two go to Florence and then to Milan. In Florence, Natalia urges him to accompany her to a solo performance by a once-famous Spanish singer. The fact "that she want[s] to go to a music-hall disconcert[s] [Bernard]" (Huntington 333), but Madame Solario is strangely enthusiastic and excited. The beautiful, ethereal Natalia looks incongruous in "a tawdry provincial theatre, half filled with . . . a mostly common audience" (334), but she is determined to see the performance. The Spanish artist finally appears, "attired as a female matador" (334–35). While her vocal talent is questionable, her acting skills and onstage charisma are not. Bold, expressive and fascinating, the Spanish singer is endowed with "a certain vulgar magnificence" (335) which enthrals not only Madame Solario, but also the men in the audience, despite the fact that her good looks seem to be a thing of the past:

> The Spanish woman was putting on a lion-tamer act—with imaginary lions—cracking her whip and singing a song in French at her audience of men, which turned them into lions she could tame with her whip and her ribald laugh, and they were responding to her. Bernard felt Madame Solario lean forward to look over his shoulder, and, moving his head, he had her face close to his—her face as she looked down at the audience to judge the effect the singer was having upon it. The mental part of the surge of sensation was jealousy. Her expression was one he had seen when she listened to Ercolani whispering in her ear, and what was associated with Ercolani set him on fire. But jealousy had no present embodiment. He had to go back for a figure, back to her recollections—not anyone here, and not *his* proximity, he knew bitterly, had roused in her what was communicated back to him. She was thinking of someone; he knew it. Yet she was resting her arm on the back of his chair, and her face

> was close to his as she looked down, and then again at the stage and the professional animal of a woman she regarded so equivocally.
>
> The velvet curtains dropped, sweeping out dust, and she got up at once. "We've seen enough," she said. "Let's go." (335–36)

The Spanish performer's stage persona strikes the reader as having a lot to do with the image of a *femme fatale*. Her costume inscribes itself into the erotic-thanatic dimension of the phenomenon mentioned at the beginning of the present article. As a female bullfighter, she is disquieting and sexually ambiguous, since the profession is traditionally thought of as male. The choice of costume is, however, logical in view of the fact that the *femme fatale*, predatory and liberated, shares several characteristics which are stereotypically thought of as masculine. Bullfighting itself has inevitable connotations of danger, but also a strong sexual subtext. It evokes fight and fascination, dominance and control. There are similar undertones in lion taming. The fact that the "imaginary lions" tamed by the female artist are to be identified with the male members of the audience is made explicit in Huntington's novel. The meaning of the Spanish singer's act is thus *par excellence* sexual, and the whip in her hand makes it almost sadomasochistic. The somewhat crude aspect of the whole performance, which is, at the same time, emotionally charged, brings to mind the basic instincts underlying sexual urges. The woman's sexuality and the unabashed use she makes of it empower her. Despite the obvious social inequalities which put early-twentieth-century women at a disadvantage, her eroticized persona enables her to control men, overpower them and render them helpless and submissive.



Natalia Solario's keen interest in the Spanish artist's performance must be motivated by her awareness of its metaphorical dimension. The person she is thinking about may be her stepfather or Kovanski, or, for that matter, any other man, as hardly any member of the opposite sex is immune to her charms. While—like Bernard—we cannot be sure who or what exactly she has in mind as she watches the Spanish singer, we can again speculate, suspecting, as does Middleton, that her fascination "ha[s] to do with the dark side" (Huntington 335). In the course of a conversation with the young man, it emerges that Madame Solario had first seen the woman in Paris before her unfortunate affair with her stepfather began. It is possible that the innocent young girl she then was became fascinated with the sexual power she sensed in the Spanish artist's demeanour prior to discovering it in herself when she started an illicit liaison with de Florez. It may also be argued that the tragic, victimized woman Natalia has since become finds bitter, perhaps even perverse consolation in the power she knows herself to be exercising over men. Beauty and sexuality, the

sources of her downfall, are also the only possible sources of victory for her. Moreover, the pleasure she may get out of sex—or merely out of being considered sexually attractive and desired by men—is a substitute for the happiness she has been denied. Madame Solario is involved in the spectacle because she feels that, in a sense, women like the Spanish singer and herself "avenge the others," to borrow Eugene's expression. Intriguingly, the Spanish singer's performance takes place in Florence, which is also the setting of *Venus in Furs*, the 1870 novella by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the man who lent his name to a concept of love and sexuality inextricably linked with cruelty, mistreatment and pain as well as dominance and enslavement.



There is an important factor which differentiates Madame Solario from women such as the singer whose performance captivated her. Unlike the Spanish artist, Natalia is denied the opportunity of artistic expression. While in Florence, she encourages Middleton to visit the Uffizi Gallery. What follows is a conversation in which it transpires that Natalia is an art lover, with a particular penchant for painting and music. Bernard's attempt "to get her to tell him something personal" (Huntington 324) turns out to be successful. Madame Solario admits, "I wanted to study music once," before adding, "I wished to be a pianist" (324). She also reveals that the piano lessons she took were interrupted. Though she makes no other comment on the subject, the reader's guess is that her affair with her stepfather, the scandal it led to and the hasty marriage into which she was precipitated put an end to her musical education. The regret she expresses at having had to renounce playing the piano leads the reader to suspect that her need for self-expression was perhaps deeper than the standards of the time and the vicissitudes of her life would allow. It is undeniable that her beauty and elegance make Madame Solario a living work of art, that in addition to being an object of love and desire, a sexual object in the eyes of men, she is also an *objet d'art* in human form. The exquisite clothes she wears enhance her aesthetic status, but may also be the only form of self-expression left to a woman who is an artist without a medium. The fact that her musical education was cut short in circumstances which had to do with men and sexual transgression may in fact be one more way in which she was victimized by members of the opposite sex.

While it may be far-fetched to see Natalia Solario as a frustrated, unfulfilled artist, it is undeniable that she feels her identity to be fluid and her personality to have been prevented from taking shape. It is in Florence, too, that Bernard clarifies one of the many mysteries surrounding Madame Solario: that of her real first name. Referred to as Natalia by those Cadenabbia holidaymakers she is on intimate terms with, she is called Nelly by her brother. When they escape together, Middleton finally

learns that her real name is Ellen, and that she later changed it to Natalia when she converted to Catholicism as an adult. It also turns out that she shared her original name with her mother. "When that happens one hasn't got a name of one's own, as one can't very well be called by it" (Huntington 329), she remarks. She sums up her complicated anthroponimic status with the following comment: "It has sometimes seemed to me . . . that I haven't got a name" (330). Madame Solario's existence and personality are thus marked by incompleteness, by a painful void which cannot be filled, since fate has begrudged her a blissful family life, happiness in love, opportunities to pursue an artistic vocation, social respectability, and even peace and quiet.



There is an intimate connection between the figure of a *femme fatale* and the notion of love. A *femme fatale* is by definition one who makes men fall in love with her or at least obsessively want her. Natalia Solario's story shows that she has no difficulty achieving that: it happens as if by itself, seemingly without any conscious efforts on her part, almost against her will. The men attracted to her are capable of moral transgressions and ready to risk everything to possess her. The most striking example is perhaps her brother Eugene, who should be "protected" from sexual feelings for her by the blood ties that link them, and who succumbs to Natalia's charms, social and religious taboos notwithstanding. Eugene's passion for his sister is so strong that it eventually takes precedence over his master plan which includes finding rich and prominent spouses for them both, as he realizes he does not want to share his sister with another man. Though it would be far-fetched to consider de Florez a victim, since the highest price is paid by those around him rather than by himself, the fact remains that he ruins the unarguable domestic bliss he and his stepfamily enjoy and jeopardizes his reputation and social status because he is smitten with Natalia.

The next man in the protagonist's life is Luis Solario, who agrees to marry her, despite the scandal. While we hardly know anything about his feelings for his young bride, we are inclined to agree with Eugene, who believes there was more to his willingness to make an honest woman of someone else's mistress than just his friendship with de Florez and the prospect of a generous dowry. Following her separation from Solario, another man comes into Natalia's life: Count Kovanski, who, as Eugene puts it, "loves [her] to madness" (Huntington 178). When they first meet on the Rome-Paris train, the Russian aristocrat instantly falls for the beautiful stranger and spends hours standing in the corridor, waiting for her to come out of her compartment. The two soon become lovers and go back to Italy together. Kovanski, who is an officer in the Russian army, is so

overwhelmed by his feelings for Madame Solario that he is ready to neglect his military duties, and only returns to St Petersburg at Natalia's insistence. Madly, irrevocably and hopelessly in love, the Count is also a difficult and, in the long run, unbearable partner, whose devotion can at times be frightening: he is, for instance, capable of kneeling in front of his mistress for several hours on end. When Natalia breaks up with him, he starts stalking her. At Cadenabbia, his irrational behaviour as a spurned lover, which includes entering Natalia's bedroom through the window after jumping onto the windowsill, leads Bernard and Eugene to regard Kovanski as a physical danger. His is the sort of blind, unconditional passion that nothing can undermine or cure: he is ready to marry Natalia even after he finds out about her incestuous relationship with Eugene. It is only at the end of the novel that we realize how vulnerable the Russian in fact is, as, devastated by Natalia's final rejection of him, he commits suicide.

The list of men infatuated, to a greater or lesser degree, with Madame Solario is longer and includes upper-class male holidaymakers at Cadenabbia. The youngest of them is Bernard Middleton, whose platonic feelings for the mysterious beauty will lead him to help her and try to protect her, first from Kovanski and then from her own brother. Though Bernard does not risk and does not sacrifice as much as the other men who fall for Natalia, he will ultimately lose his illusions and his fascination with Madame Solario will give way to disgust. Before that, however, he has—like most men in Natalia's entourage—moments of madness: at some point, he even contemplates renouncing the brilliant future he has ahead of him as a well-connected Oxford graduate and staying in Italy with Madame Solario, doing menial jobs.

Natalia's power to inspire love and arouse male desire is thus unquestionable. The question which does, however, slide by is, can she love in return? A *femme fatale* is supposed to be cold and cruel, incapable of sincere feelings and true devotion:

> submissive and a captive of her desire, she is nevertheless not weak, since her behavior can be perceived as masculine—she is changing partners, shows no devotion, is unfaithful and does not surrender to love. She may in certain cases surrender to her passion, but not for long. (Markus 183)

While it is possible to speculate, as I have earlier in the present article, about the sexual aspect of Natalia's relationship with de Florez, we know virtually nothing of her feelings for him. This is also the case with her husband. In terms of emotions, her relationship with Kovanski appears to be significant. Chastised by Eugene for becoming the lover of a man she had just

met on a train, Madame Solario tries to justify herself by confessing that, like Kovanski, she initially believed it was love at first sight. However, the past tense she uses seems to indicate that she was merely under an illusion. The novel's finale, set in Milan, confirms that she has no true feelings for her Russian lover, as she lets her brother give Kovanski false hope, only to disappoint him and thus contribute to his suicide. As for the "minor" men in her life, such as Bernard or Ercolani, her Italian *chevalier servant*, one may safely assume that neither of them is the love of her life. To Ercolani she is simply attracted. Her feelings for Bernard could best be described as affectionate gratitude, as evidenced in the kiss she bestows on the young man in the Milanese hotel they are both staying at. The reader is tempted to draw the somewhat terrifying conclusion that Natalia's only satisfying relationship—on both the emotional and sexual levels—is the one with her brother. In some of the novel's scenes, the siblings-turned-lovers appear to be truly happy. Their relationship is, however, socially unacceptable and unhealthy. Dominated and manipulated by her brother, Madame Solario does have an instinct for self-preservation, which drives her to escape from Eugene. Though her flight is ultimately unsuccessful, it shows that her strong attachment to her brother does not blind her to the fact that their relationship is likely to lead to disaster rather than lasting happiness.



At the end of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, the narrator, a prime example of a man overpowered, brutalized and humiliated by his mistress, expresses a belief which explicitly associates true partnership in love with gender equality in legal, political and social terms, thus anticipating a post-feminist future:

> [W]oman, as nature has created her and as man is at present educating her, is his enemy. She can only be his slave or his despot, but *never his companion*. This she can become only when she has the same rights as he, and is his equal in education and work. (Sacher-Masoch)

Sacher-Masoch's division of women into "slaves" and "despots" corresponds roughly to Eugene Harden's distinction between female "victims" and "avengers." The protagonist of Huntington's novel is the one who enslaves men, has power over them and—as evidenced by her conduct *vis-à-vis* Kovanski—is capable of treating them insensitively and cruelly. While she is never men's slave, Madame Solario is definitely men's victim: the victim of abuse, perpetrated by her stepfather, of male obsessions and possessiveness, exemplified by Kovanski's and Harden's behaviour, and male manipulation, of which her brother is the master. It seems that Natalia has never experienced what Sacher-Masoch would call true "companionship," and the

closest she ever came to it was, sadly, in a sexual relationship with her own brother. In an earlier article on Huntington's best-known novel (Piechucka 65–81), I argue that the basis of Natalia and Eugene's incestuous attraction is their conviction that, as siblings, they are the same and thus, in a way, equal. Though the balance of power in their relationship is hard to determine, they develop the kind of emotional unity which would normally be desirable in a non-transgressive relationship between lovers. Madame Solario's love life and sexual history, her sense of not having a stable, clear-cut identity, perhaps even her unfulfilled creative aspirations, prompt a reader and analyst of the novel to see its protagonist and, by extension, all *femmes fatales* as feminist or protofeminist figures. As Ruth Markus observes, "the *femme fatale* image becomes more dominant and menacing in masculine creativity at the turn of the 20th century: since she also represents the process of freeing the woman, she intensifies the men's fears of losing their male hegemony" (179). To illustrate her claim, Markus makes reference to a photographic portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche with a female muse who "is the one holding the whip, as if paraphrasing Nietzsche's famous sentence in *Zarathustra*: 'Thou goest to women? Do not forget the whip'" (179). In Huntington's *Madame Solario*, it is the eponymous protagonist who, metaphorically speaking, brandishes the whip. However, her triumph over men is not complete, since it is at the same time the source of her tragedy. The time of the novel's action coincides with the first wave of feminism; the novel itself was published some ten years before its second wave exploded. *Madame Solario* and Madame Solario are thus as if caught in-between. If "the *femme fatale* at the turn of the 20th century served as alternative to the four traditional female stereotypes as determined by the male discourse: virgin, wife, mother and whore" (179), Huntington's protagonist fits the definition on nearly all of the above-mentioned counts: she lost her virginity in scandal-provoking circumstances; her marriage was a failure; she is childless and, given that she is involved with her brother, her chances of starting a family seem slight; finally, her first sexual affair was also an extramarital one and her incestuous liaison with Eugene is likely to cause more damage to her already tarnished reputation than any other adulterous relationship ever would. The enigmatic, multifaceted Natalia Solario embodies—half-consciously perhaps—the paradigm of female victimization and female revenge, which sowed the seeds of future female revolt. It must be remembered that the *femme fatale*, whose "image was particularly prominent in the 19th century and at the turn of the 20th" (Markus 187), constitutes something of a missing link between the unemancipated woman and the liberated one:

> She provided almost the sole outlet for women who were not prepared to submit to the role assigned to them by men. But by taking their fate into their own hands they were forced to utilize their power of attraction in order to control the men, ultimately suffering from the ambivalent attitude shown them not only by men but by women as well: women who submitted to the male directives viewed them to be wayward, while those who protested the male directives viewed them as women abusing their sex and sexuality, and in so doing, perpetuating the defamation of women. The solution was therefore to create an independent woman whose image strikes a balance between the feminine and the masculine, androgynous of sorts, reflected indeed in the "new woman" that emerged in the second decade of the 20th century. (179)



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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0010

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# The Double Man: W. H. Auden's Transatlantic Transformation

## ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to consider the problem of W. H. Auden's political engagement in the 1930s in the context of his (in)famous decision to leave England and settle down in the USA. The transatlantic journey of the eponymous member of so-called "Auden generation" prompted certain critics (notably Randall Jarrell) to set up a distinct caesura between the "English" and the "American" Auden, giving primacy to the accomplishments of the former and downplaying the works of the latter. As it is argued, America was not the place of the poet's radical volte-face, but only a certain important, logical stage (and not a final one) in his personal and poetic evolution. His entanglements with politics were often mythologized, and occasional public and semi-political verse he "committed" often tended to subvert any attempts to pigeonhole the author in terms of his ideological stance.

When in January 1939 W. H. Auden arrived in the USA to settle down there, he faced the uphill task of launching a virtually new literary career. As his biographer Edward Mendelson points out, the expatriate poet "began to explore once again the same thematic and formal territory he covered in his English years, but with a maturer vision, and no longer distracted by the claims of a public" (Preface xiv). Auden's concern with a variety of old and new problems following his move across the Atlantic and return to the Anglican Church was notably reflected in four longer "American" poems: "New Year Letter," "The Sea and the Mirror," "For the Time Being," and *The Age of Anxiety*.[1] His poetry composed in a new homeland[2] defied a rigid, definite national or cultural classification; instead, it proposed "the new kind of hybrid 'mid-Atlantic' style . . . an in-between of voices and forms" (Jenkins 43). In the midst of a global conflict, Auden's American adventure began with fundamental and, given the circumstances, surprising questions on the relation between art and life, the real and the represented. The marine symbolism that surfaced in his poetic and academic discourse at the time was, as it seems now, of utmost importance: both in his *oeuvre* and his life. In one of the lectures delivered at the University of Virginia he said:



> The sea or the great waters . . . are the symbols for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance which became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it. The sea, in fact, is the state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse. (*Enchafèd* 6)

The seemingly trifling recognition that art, while holding up a mirror to nature, imposes a certain—distorting, yet necessary—order on this "flux" is the springboard for one of the most extraordinary poems of the previous century, "The Sea and the Mirror. A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (1944), American Auden's *Ars Poetica* as well as an "absurd" project that by means of elaborate, often unrivalled artistic forms consistently showed the limitations, if not futility, of art. By revaluing art, it revalued the artist and, most meaningfully, the author himself. Assuming the context of

[1] "The New Year Letter" constituted the main part of the volume *New Year Letter* (London: Faber, 1941), published in the USA as *The Double Man* (New York: Random House, 1941). "The Sea and the Mirror" and "For the Time Being" originally formed the two parts of *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (New York: Random House, 1944; London: Faber, 1945). *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, Auden's last book-length poem, first appeared in 1947 (New York: Random House).

[2] In 1946 Auden became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

the poet's transatlantic journey as one of the most decisive moments in his career, the present paper examines the validity of the division into the so-called English and American Auden, paying special attention to his alleged, and often mythologized, political engagements in the late 1930s.

Considered as a whole, Auden's literary career provides an apt illustration of two ways of thinking about the nature and obligations of poetry. As he claimed in his late essay "Robert Frost," poetry is a constant battleground for the contention between Prospero and Ariel—i.e., every poet is to decide whether his or her writing should consist in providing the reader with significant messages, thus being predominantly aimed at moral or intellectual instruction, or in grouping words in such a way that they constitute an incantation, which necessitates ceaseless experimentation with language and is, in fact, an aesthetic game (*The Dyer's* 337–38). On a deeper level, this binary division exemplifies two human desires: for truth and for beauty. Poetry is expected to disintoxicate us from delusions and deceptions so as to increase our understanding of what life is *really* like, but it is also the domain of aesthetics, which offers an often-required escapist counterpoint to the shoddy, painful, quotidian existence. The recognition of the two different obligations of poetry is strongly connected with yet another problem—its communicability. While Prospero-dominated verse is always "reader-oriented" and achieves its purpose only as long as it can be instrumental in establishing a rapport of mutual understanding between the one who writes and the one who reads, an Ariel-dominated poem—being, in its extreme form, purely self-referential—ostensibly defies such a requirement. It can be argued that while making the above distinctions Auden was not writing only about Frost but also about himself. His whole *oeuvre* is an evidence of the tension between Prospero and Ariel.



Unquestionably, the publication of his first volume of verse, *Poetry*, in 1930, and *The Orators*, two years later, pushed the young Auden to the vanguard of poetic revolution in Great Britain in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. His quirkiness of manner, precociousness, and exceptional idiom signaled what was later to become the most pervasive poetic influence of the decade:

> [H]e caught native English poetry by the scruff of the neck, pushed its nose sharply into modernity, made it judder and frolic from the shock over the course of a decade, and then allowed it to resume a more amiable relation with its comfortably domestic inheritance. His opus represents in the end what his insights insisted upon in the beginning: the necessity of a break, of an escape from habit, an escape from the given;

> and he insists upon the necessity of these acts of self-liberation only to expose their ultimately illusory promise. (Heaney 110)

The rejection of "the given" is only natural for any avant-garde artist—it clears the path for an unrestrained growth of fresh ideas. Auden's early poetry is very radical in its determination to find an adequate expression to the sense of an ultimate change that informed the time after the Great War. This obsession with newness and anxiety, yet to be precisely named, drove the young poet's language to the point of "defamiliarizing abruptness" (Heaney 117). In fact, oftentimes his early poems are jumbles of muddled lines, too fractured and too abrupt to form a cohesive and coherent whole. They are both inklings of a certain new dimension of reality and recognitions of some flaws inherent in the times Auden lived in. From the reader's point of view, however, their willful obscurity may possibly be tamed if we decide to approach them on their own terms. Then the semantic *glitch* they contain will become a message in itself—a sign of the poet's stubbornly held conviction that there is a fundamental, unbridgeable gap between art and life.



Yet Auden's perception of a border that existed between literature and the world it aspired to represent was subject to evolution, which is observable in the mid-1930s. The obvious example of such an aesthetic shift is the poem "A Summer Night" (June 1933):

> Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
> Vega conspicuous overhead
> In the windless nights of June,
> As congregated leaves complete
> Their day's activity; my feet
> Point to the rising moon. (*English* 136)

Documenting an allegedly authentic vision of *agape*, the verse testifies to the poet's significant change of voice and his attitude to the circumstances of his life. This "placatory and palliative" poem "functions to produce a sensation of at-homeness and trust in the world" (Heaney 121–22). It is the poetry that does not unfold against the expectations of the reader; on the contrary—here, a smooth melody of words alleviates the feeling of estrangement so characteristic of Auden's writing before.

At the end of the previous century, Czesław Miłosz famously criticized the poetry that is marked by excessive escapism and far too much bent on formal experimentation, implying that there is a point on a scale of tolerance behind which the aura of uncanniness turns into a simple, primitive contempt towards the reader (99). But does poetry really have to be

*understandable*? Does it have to be *meaningful*? Understanding and meaning are important questions in the world of philosophical speculation in the twentieth century. Adjacent to these philosophical debates, modern poetry has put the notion of understanding to an ultimate test; it has, in other words, revised our understanding of understanding.

In the mid-1930s, and especially after the relocation to New York, Auden's poetry made a concession to traditional forms and strove for greater communicability. And not always has it been perceived as change for the better. For Seamus Heaney, for instance, such a decision deprived Auden's verse of its power to galvanize the public, offering a sense of doubtful consolation instead:



> To avoid the consensus and settlement of a meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket, to be antic, mettlesome, contrary, to retain the right to impudence, to raise hackles, to harry the audience into wakefulness—to do all this may not only be permissible but necessary if poetry is to keep on coming into a fuller life. (122–23)

Heaney's voice in praise of supposedly unintelligible or, better still, cryptic poetry is interesting in itself. We can ask whether the problem of "intelligibility" is really so central and fundamental in the context of poetry. And the answer is far from obvious. While the postulate of "antic" and "mettlesome" verse would certainly outrage a poet such as, say, Miłosz, Heaney sees a great value in it. For him, poems may possibly be treated as testing grounds for the potentialities of language.

Favoured by early Auden, approved of by Heaney, but deplored by Miłosz, cryptic poetry appears to act *against* language, i.e., it works to prevent language from fossilization, from its catching a groove of predictability, from a deadly routine of clichés. Cryptic poetry, then, does not have to be detrimental to language; on the contrary—it can, to paraphrase the famous Poundian exhortation, "make" language "new." Probing and sounding language by cryptic poetry effects a destruction of a certain myth: namely, that "meanings" of words are stable. And arguably, the refusal to state the obvious has always been the driving force of good literature.

According to Edward Mendelson, a synthetic view of Auden's poetry oscillates between yet another dichotomy of theoretical proposals. He identifies two distinct "kinds of poetry," or "ideas of the poet's task," or better still "poetic traditions" that Auden was tempted by at the beginning of his career (*Early* xv-xix). The outcome of a contention between these two traditions informs the direction that the poet eventually took in the early 1930s.

The so-called "civil" and "vatic" traditions date back to the very dawn of European literature—their symbolic illustration being taken from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In Homer's epics, stories—metonymically understood by Mendelson as verse—are told for two main purposes. In *The Odyssey*, the poets, or rather professional singers, Phemius and Demodocus (Books 1 and 8) make their best to always cater to the public taste, to always act with the view to satisfying the listeners' needs. By the same token, Odysseus, when he finds himself in a desperate need of assistance from the Phaeacians, spins a yarn, carefully selecting words and images to provide his audience with a slightly exaggerated narrative of man-eating whirlpools and one-eyed giants so as to achieve his goal (Books 11 and 12). His is the art of manipulation. And yet, there is another Homeric model for a poet, or storyteller—Achilles singing his heroic songs in a tent, while awaiting the battle (Book 9 of *The Iliad*). This song differs greatly from the ones by Phemius, Demodocus or Odysseus—it is sung for oneself, and the singer is not only oblivious of, but virtually not interested in getting any attention from an audience. The three characters from *The Odyssey* epitomize poets who act first and foremost as citizens, being focused not as much on giving entertainment as on instruction; they are, in other words, dedicated to social issues and eagerly react to what is happening *hic et nunc*. Achilles singing for himself is, in turn, a forefather of all poets-seers, occupants of ivory towers, mental exiles, "at home only in their art" (Mendelson, *Early* xv-xvi).

The gradual shift from the vatic model of nearly autistic and rather cryptic verse to the civil model of public-oriented, communicable writing was the most decisive occurrence in Auden's literary life, his real watershed. In such poems as "Spain," Auden's art did not declare emancipation from the dynamics of the present moment, but willingly embraced its elected civil obligations. In "A Summer Night," he did not create a verbal autonomous object, unburdened by any moral standards, but passionately yearned for a community that is governed by *agape*, however small this community should be. Putting aside typically modernist free verse, which originates from the romantic instruction to work out a unique architecture for each poem, Auden in "A Summer Night" picked repetitive stanzaic "bricks," fashioned after the poetry of Robert Burns, to build on so as to strengthen the poem's communal dimension.

Ideological stance of the so-called Auden generation is by no means easy to define in distinct terms as the writers classified under such a rubric did not constitute a movement or a group *sensu stricto*, nor did they cherish identical political, social, or aesthetic beliefs. Nevertheless, most of them had to, in one way or another, come to grips with the dilemmas

of self-identification in the time of a serious crisis, "when public and private lives, the world of action and the world of imagination" could not be treated separately due to their constant interpenetration (Hynes 9). The dynamic circumstances of the 1930s implicated literature in politics; particularly, the process affected those young writers who at the beginning of the decade had just come of age and were virtually on the threshold of their artistic careers. The pressure of immediate history left its imprint on the pages of their works.

To see young Auden's poetry and prose in a *significant* context means to have to juxtapose his "English" works with the landmarks of English literature published by the representatives of the generation *entre deux guerres*. It was in direct confrontation and dialogue with his contemporaries that Auden would hammer out his unique literary idiom. At the same time, however, the question remains whether it is justified, or even fair enough, to qualify him as truly representative of the generation. He was its eponymous member, that is true, but to what extent does this classification allow us to label him as the generation's main ideologue?



In 1931 Michael Roberts and John Lehman struck upon an idea of preparing an anthology of recent English poetry. The volume under the title *New Signatures*, edited by Roberts and released in 1932, gathered, among others, the verse of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, William Empson, and John Lehman. Not only was it the first attempt to self-define the emerging generation of new writers, but (later on) it also came to be perceived as their multi-vocal, collective manifesto.[3] Samuel Hynes, however, is rather scornful about the value of this volume as a generational document:

> It was a small and circumscribed group—not so much a generation as a circle of friends. But the poems that they contributed to the anthology do not suggest a school or a movement: they are too dissimilar—some public, some private, some traditional, some modern, some difficult, some transparently clear. There is nothing surprising in this, it must be true of any modern anthology, but the point is worth making because of the subsequent reputation of the book as a manifesto of the generation. It wasn't, and couldn't be; it was too various. (79)

Political commitment of the fledgling writers, especially their sympathy for communism, was in each case different and subject to constant fluctuations of intensity—ebbs and flows of their conviction that literature could

[3] At least such was the opinion expressed by its publisher Leonard Woolf (174).

possibly be an agent in history were strongly correlated with the present political and social situation. Having no ready solutions to most imminent and acute predicaments of the decade, they simply did their best to keep up with the times. Consequently, what they wrote then was later, with the wisdom of hindsight, viewed as *pro tempore*, mistaken, flawed or simply naïve. This is what Stephen Spender said about the decade:

> In the 1920s there had been a generation of American writers—Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, and some others—whom Gertrude Stein had called the Lost Generation. We anti-Fascist writers of what has been called the Pink Decade were not, in any obvious sense, a lost generation. But we were divided between our literary vocation and an urge to save the world from Fascism. We were the Divided Generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right. (202)



Auden's political sides on the spectrum from liberalism to communism cannot be drawn in black-and-white terms.[4] His *The Orators: An English Study*, published in 1932, was an indirect response to what he perceived as an ultimate crisis of democratic rule in Europe: the crystallization of National Socialism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, and Soviet Communism in Russia. As utterly new proposals, these authoritarian systems seemed to be much more effective than the traditional British one, which—in the eyes of the post-World War I generation—did not work well. England was economically and morally sick: the industry was crippled, unemployment was on the rise, the middle class was conservative and unwilling to renounce the *status quo*. No wonder then that the indispensability of a gifted leader for imposing order on the society is an important, if not major, theme in *The Orators*. Auden's fascination with psychology and psychoanalysis led him to the recognition that people are constitutionally inclined to exist in a relation of power: either by obeying or commanding obedience. However, while divining the nature of the English disease, his book was too obscure to offer a definite political course.

By 1935, quite a few key young writers of the decade had made a decisive move in the direction of manifestly political literature and political literary criticism. Social preoccupations prevailed in Spender's *The Destruc-*

[4] Auden's "dutiful proto-communism" (Sharpe 13) emerged as early as in the 1932 poem "A Communist to Others." As Osborne states, around 1934 his infatuation with communism was rather serious and "remained undiminished for some years to come" (103). There is evidence in a form of letter (whether it was actually sent or not remains unclear) that he even considered applying for a teaching post in the Soviet Russia (having no command of Russian).

*tive Element*, C. Day Lewis's *Revolution in Writing*, or William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, the last title being somewhat misleading because the author's partisan comments on the works by Shakespeare, Marvell, Milton, or Lewis Carroll, were preceded by a remark that the purpose of the study is to "deal with the popular, vague but somehow obvious, idea of proletarian literature" (Empson 17). And it was in the same year that Auden, collaborating with his old school friend John Garrett, compiled an anthology of poetry, *The Poet's Tongue*, in the introduction to which he was most skeptical about the possibility of assigning a serious political function to "Poetry" (the term, of course, being a synecdoche for literature *per se*):



> The propagandist, whether moral or political, complains that the writer should use his powers over words to persuade people to a particular course of action, instead of fiddling while Rome burns. But Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. (*English* 329)

The above fragment—in itself an "index" of a fluid, hard-to-nail-down ideological position—inadvertently but prophetically named a trap that Cecil Day Lewis fell into when he composed and published, in 1936, his *Noah and the Waters*. Drawing on the long tradition of parabolic morality plays, his poem reconsidered the well-known biblical story by locating its elements within a matrix of contemporary class struggle: here Noah, an intellectual of bourgeois background, is at great pains to decide whether to join the all-encompassing Flood, i.e., the revolution. Day Lewis's all-too-eager commitment to communism (signaled by the epigraph from *The Communist Manifesto*) turned out a commercial and—more importantly—critical failure, and it demonstrated how detrimental an ideological agenda may be to the integrity of a literary work and its author. Not only did the idea of fusing Old Testament symbolism with Marxist intuitions produce a jarring note, but Noah's dilemma itself proved to be an empty one: after all, how can you choose, or not choose, to yield to the forces of a natural disaster?

By the middle of the decade, Auden was sensitive enough to spot the looming of an impending catastrophe of a different kind: war. And the time of crisis called for ways of responding to it. In 1935, the year when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and Nazi Germany legalized anti-Semitism, he wrote in an untitled poem beginning with the line "August for the people" and dedicated to Christopher Isherwood:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
What better than our strict and adult pen
Can warn us from the colours and consolations,
The showy arid works, reveal
The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
Make action urgent and its nature clear?
Who gave us nearer insight to resist
The expanding fear, the savaging disaster? (*English* 157)

In his commentary to the above quoted fragment, Samuel Hynes finds in it "a new and different conception of literary act," encapsulating the idea that literature is directly related to action, or that writing is the correlative of making things happen in the public world (13). But when Hynes asserts that it is "different," we should ask *what* exactly it is different from. The self-assured, strongly articulated conviction that the artist—the one whose mind is not confused by the "colours and consolations"—*can* come up with a curative formula against "crisis and dismay" and *can* push others in the right direction makes Auden a different modernist from the earlier literary generation: from Ezra Pound, whose *Canto I* persona, Odysseus, sails (with morbid fascination) to the land of the dead; from T. S. Eliot, who was immersed in history and literary history structured like an ideal order; and from Joyce, who preferred his mythically reconstructed Dublin to the real place.



In 1937, Auden had a stint as an ambulance driver in Spain during the Civil War, as he wanted to make plain his support for the anti-Franco forces. The experience went into the famous, or maybe infamous poem "Spain," which later on the author resented so much that he excluded it from all his subsequent volumes of collected verse. The criticism it provoked is as fascinating as the poem itself.

In his seminal, and overtly partisan essay "Inside the Whale," George Orwell identified a group of those writers that after the Great War came to represent what he calls "pessimism of outlook": Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley and Lytton Strachey. Irrespective of all the obvious differences among their literary preoccupations, Orwell perceived them as displaying, or at least implying, their contempt for the idea of progress: "it is felt that progress not only doesn't happen, but *ought not* to happen" (507). Eliot, for instance, came in for most acute criticism as an individual taking perverse pleasure in despairing over the fall of the Western world and as one who achieved something absolutely unique: he almost convinced his readers that modern life was much worse than they had thought. Orwell did not go as far as to treat the first generation of modernists as authors of cheap, conservative propaganda, or as skillful

dabblers in sophisticated language games, but the fact of the matter is that generally they did not seem to be immersed in immediate problems: "Our eyes are directed to Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the subconscious, to the solar plexus—to everywhere except the places where things are actually happening" (508).

The next decade brought yet another tendency in literature and yet another "group" that Orwell identified. Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis, MacNeice were, for him, eager-minded individuals who had gone into politics and had leant towards communism. While the previous generation was informed by the tragic sense of life, these young writers saw literature as an instrument or tool of radical change. Emphasizing the fact that "Spain" is "one of few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war" (565), Orwell famously criticized Auden for just two words that the poet used in the following stanza:



> To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
> The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
> Today the expending of powers
> On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting. (*English* 54)

In his criticism Orwell treats Auden as an inexperienced individual whose understanding of murder is purely theoretical—to talk of murder as part of the schedule in the life of a party man is something to be avoided. "Murder" is not merely a vocabulary item that fits in the given line of a verse. Any mature intellectual writing in the late 1930s should have been familiar with the facts of notorious political purges organized by Hitler and Stalin, and even the dictators did their best substituting the straightforward word with some neutralizing equivalents: "elimination" or "liquidation." The writer's control over language should be better, i.e., more nuanced than the machinations of tyrants: "Mr Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled" (516). This critique *was* a lesson for Auden. The one he was to remember very well. And although generally he did not write about his experience of the Spanish Civil war in a way that would be subservient to the Party's ideological line, the "blunder" and the response to it demonstrated that the best way for a writer was to keep out of politics.

Much later the redefinition of the most desired relation of the artist to the historical time he lives in led to Auden's revaluation of his whole *oeuvre*—the poet purified his private canon of shameful, as he saw them, blotches such as "A Communist to Others," "Spain," and "September 1, 1939," i.e., he condemned to oblivion the verse in which he aspired to

announcing a socio-political diagnosis. The poems are conspicuously absent from the first posthumous edition of *Collected Poems* (1976), which, as its editor Edward Mendelson notes, "includes all the poems that W. H. Auden wished to preserve" (11).

In his foreword to the first edition of his *Collected Poetry* (1945), Auden divided his (or *any* poet's) verse into four classes: the "pure rubbish," the "fatally injured," the poems "he has nothing against," and—virtual rarities—the poems "for which he is honestly grateful." Twenty-one years later, in another foreword, he admitted to having discarded some of the poems as "they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring" (*Collected* 1976, 15).[5] And, interestingly, he gave an example of poetic trash—a notorious line from "Spain": "History to the defeated / May say alas but cannot help nor pardon." The fault of the lines was double: not only did they equate "goodness with success" (15) but had been written for their mere rhetorical effectiveness. This, for old Auden, was "quite inexcusable" (16).



Interestingly, and contrary to what critics often tend to underscore, the old Auden (in 1965) did not perceive all these authorial alterations and exclusions in his canon as "ideologically significant" (16), but simply as a result of his negative assessment given to the language which the faulty poems employed. And their language testified (especially in the poetry written in the thirties) to the author's "very slovenly verbal habits" (16). Granted, there is a long tradition, from Horace to Valéry to Cavafy, of treating every newly written poem as temporarily abandoned, but by no means finished. And Auden *is* part of this tradition. But something else needs to be seen in his self-censorship: old Auden blurred the distinction between the ethics of thinking and the style of thinking. In retrospect, his ideological naïveté assumed the appearance of language errors.

Auden's emigration to America was a "voluntary exile" (Wright 127), a conscious, deliberate move that accompanied the changes in the poet's views on poetry and society. All the outrage that erupted in England in 1940, accusing the poet of desertion, fundamentally missed the point as in fact he had settled down on the new continent a year earlier, when England was "optimistically convinced that there would be no war" (Osborne 185). Auden must have had a different rationale for this major step—apparently it was the need to walk out of the role that was imposed on him by the

[5] During his lifetime Auden wrote two forewords to two editions of his collected verse: *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1945) and *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (1966). The texts of these authorial remarks are dated 1944 and 1965, respectively, and are reprinted verbatim in the posthumous volume *Collected Poems* (1976) from which I quote in the sentences that follow.

English literary scene. He was escaping not from war but from politics. And that made all the difference.

He was by no means the only target of such slashing attacks at the time: Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard did not remain unsoiled by words of patriotic contempt. The whole group (not a formal one, of course) was deplored for retiring "within the ivory tower" of the American haven.[6] Auden was not very outspoken about his motives for emigration, and he behaved as if he did not care much about being understood. An insight into the whole affair can be found (where else?) in his writings at the time. At the beginning of his stay in New York he was busy preparing a draft of a kind of philosophical autobiography, "The Prolific and the Devourer," fashioned in its aphoristic form after William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," where he makes it clear that for him art and politics do not get along any more: "To be forced to be political is to be forced to lead a dual life," and "If the criterion of art were its power to incite to action, Goebbels would be one of the greatest artists of all time" (*English* 400, 406). Witnessing the crisis of democracy, disillusioned with communist pseudo-solutions and dismayed by fascist drivel, Auden turned his back on the world of politics—not in the gesture of disgust but in the gesture of recognition and understanding that as an artist he stood no chances of effecting any tangible changes in the real world.

It may not be out of place to recall the circumstances surrounding the composition of Auden's first American poem. On 26 January, 1939, he arrived in New York City and soon learned that General Franco had taken Barcelona and thus sealed his victory in the Civil War. On 28 January, 1939, William Butler Yeats died in France. These events demanded an immediate reaction. And Auden's growing struggle with himself about his obligations as an artist in the age of anxiety assumed the form of an address to the distinguished old master: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and a mock trial account "The Public v. The Late Mr W. B. Yeats."

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is not a sudden, unexpected caesura in his views on political commitment in verse, but rather a significant milestone on the path the poet had consistently been taking for years. In the final stanza of the elegy Auden gives an important footnote to his judgment that "poetry makes nothing happen":

> With the farming of the verse
> Make a vineyard of the curse,

[6] See what Harold Nicolson wrote on 19 April 1940 (qtd. in Osborne 187).

> Sing of human unsuccess
> In a rupture of distress;
>
> In the desert of the heart
> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise. (*English* 243)

Putting aside poetry's engagement with praxis as morally doubtful, silly, or perhaps virtually impossible, the stanzas, nevertheless, pointed to its beneficial property of enlivening and enriching our imagination—and only thus being able to broaden our freedom and our capacity to "praise" in the face of adversity. In other words, the lines implied that poetry teaches hope. Restricted didacticism does not have to be perceived as tantamount to political ambitions:



> It should be kept in mind . . . that Auden's target is directly political poetry and that he is *not* denying *any* social function to poetry. Indeed, he continued to think of it as having an educative function, albeit in the negative sense of something which can disintoxicate and disenchant. (Perrie 59)

That is, poetry *does* make something happen, but only in the negative sense: it sharpens our ethical sensitivity; it resets our critical aptitudes of the mind.

In early 1939 Auden's misgivings about concessions he occasionally made to political causes were still interspersed with the moments when he felt he had to signal his lack of indifference to the world of great political upheavals. In a letter to Dodds, in March 1939, he wrote:

> The real decision came after making a speech at a dinner in New York to get money for Spanish Refugees when I suddenly found I could do it. That I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring. I felt just covered with dirt afterwards. . . . Never, *never* again will I speak at a political meeting. (qtd. in Carpenter 256)

The very term "political poetry" ought to be understood in its double sense: as "party-political" poetry and poetry dedicated to a vision of *polis* (Perrie 63). When it comes to the first understanding of the term, not only can we say that after 1940 Auden was not a political poet but that he never had been one—he never joined the Communist Party, after all, and never in his life did he contribute to drawing any political manifestos. The second, much broader view of politics opens up a new perspective on Auden's late

poetry: if *polis* connotes a community and human endeavors to preserve it, then, paradoxically, late Auden emerges as "the most deeply political of English poets of the twentieth century" (Perrie 63).

The choice of Shakespeare as a patron for what appears, and is more often than not considered as Auden's greatest poetic achievement in America, was by no means accidental. This poetic meditation on art and mimesis is a virtual offshoot of Shakespeare's farewell drama, and the Shakespearean story—as intertext—strengthens Auden's point. Conclusions that can be drawn from "The Sea and the Mirror" go far beyond the slightly simplifying dichotomies of the vatic versus the civil, the defamiliarization versus the at-homeness, or the Ariel-controlled versus the Prospero-controlled. What can be read from the poem, however, is as revelatory as puzzling and paradoxical. How does this poem problematize the all-too-appealing binary divisions? It illustrates a third mode of poetry: let's call it the "disenchanted" civil one. Shakespeare provides an excellent model for assuming a new attitude to one's own art:



> There's something a little irritating in the determination of the very greatest artists, like Dante, Joyce, Milton, to create masterpieces and to think themselves important. To be able to devote one's life to art without forgetting that art is frivolous is a tremendous achievement of personal character. Shakespeare never takes himself too seriously. When art takes itself too seriously, it tries to do more than it can. (Auden, *Lectures* 319)

The opening of this "Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" contains fragments virtually stolen from the Bard's two famous tragedies:

> All the rest is silence
> On the other side of the wall;
> And the silence is ripeness,
> And the ripeness all. (*The Sea* 4)

Thus, the stage manager, addressing the "critics," describes the effects of the play that has just finished. Beyond the boundaries of the fictional world of *The Tempest*, there is silence. The smooth quatrain comprises, of course, the words uttered by the fatally wounded Hamlet and the learning gathered from painful experience by Edgar in *King Lear*. On one level, it is "a conjugation and commendation of the virtue of silence," on the other, deeper and more significant, "a critique of any claim that poetry . . . might make about its ability to transform the actual" (Corcoran 160).

In Shakespeare's play the transformative and redemptive potential of Prospero's magic is seriously limited—in the end, the two rascals, Antonio and Sebastian, still appear unregenerate. They are *silent*, i.e., immune to the spell that has reformed their companions. They are not forgiven their sins; they are not even asking for it—and Prospero behaves in an ambiguous way as he merely stifles his urge to take revenge on them. He himself, in his capacity as magician-artist, openly corroborates his fiasco in the famous "Epilogue" to the play.

"The Sea and the Mirror" is "bookended by death" (Corcoran 163), and again its thanatology takes numerous forms: death that at last is conceivable by the disillusioned Prospero; symbolic death as a prerequisite for Christian re-birth; death as the fact of the war that is just raging on. Considering this last manifestation of death in the poem that seemingly lacks clear reference to the historical context of its composition, it is needed to highlight a sense of survivor guilt that permeates some passages delivered by Caliban in the third part of the poem. Auden, of course, was spared the danger that paralyzed Europe in the early 1940s and must have felt rather uncomfortable about it (not to mention his withstanding the accusations of desertion and cowardice that were put against him in his native country). His Prospero elects to "go knowing and incompetent into . . . [his] grave" (*The Sea* 9). We need to remember Auden's success upon the publication of "Spain" and George Orwell's slashing condemnation of the infamous line containing the phrase "necessary murder." Both occurrences were meaningful, and both sinisterly signaled a danger. It was as early as in the 1930s that Auden must have become skeptical about the dangers hidden in the catching rhetoric of socially and politically engaged poetry. His "break with England was also therefore his opportunity to fracture the mould in which his earlier poetry was, or appeared to be, set" (Corcoran 167).



The great and illustrative paradox of the poem is that it affirms the limits of art while displaying a captivating virtuoso of technical *tour-de-force*. The used forms include: syllabic verse, terza rima, ballade, sonnet, sestina, villanelle, and a pastiche of the highly mannered late style of Henry James. The formal perfection demonstrates a yawning gap existing between the playful realm of aesthetics and the exigencies of ethics, which of course corresponds to the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, in whose works Auden was immersed at the time of composing "The Sea and the Mirror."[7]

[7] In the 1940s Auden openly manifested his fascination with the threefold division into distinct and conflicting modes of living (or existential determinants of human character): the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, which the Danish philosopher first

The mirror that, as Hamlet asserted, art holds up to the real gives a picture that is distorted, i.e., it shows the world where, for example, pain and death are merely abstract notions. That is probably why in Auden's poem Prospero's books are thrown away to the sea, which in his monologue stands for "what is inimical to human values" (Sharpe 97).

Neil Corcoran sees "The Sea and the Mirror" as a "paradoxical object" (178): a text that, on the one hand, heavily draws on a certain literary tradition, paying homage to it and appropriating it for its own purposes, and, on the other hand, a superb verse that expresses the conviction that all poetry is ultimately futile. And while the author of the poem is an exceptional expert in the whole spectrum of poetic idioms, the poem's two major personae, Prospero and Caliban, leave the reader under no illusion as to the true value of poetry's magic tricks.

In Anglo-American modernism, the act of crossing the sea (or the ocean)—a crucial element of both Shakespeare's drama and Auden's sequel to it—is important on two levels: literal and symbolic. Auden deplored tendencies to construe art as a sanctified ritual and pieces of art as semi-sacred objects as it was the case with, let's say, W. B. Yeats (in "Sailing to Byzantium"). Both Yeats and Auden embarked on a sailing voyage: the former, only vicariously, estranged from the "dying animal" of his physicality, travelled across imaginary seas yearning for the "artifice of eternity" in mythical Byzantium. The latter moved across the Atlantic to effect a "change of heart" and further purify his mind of illusions, or—more precisely—delusions of grandeur. For Yeats, with his Manichean streak, the flesh was fatal, for disillusioned Auden—notably after his re-conversion to Christianity—it was "the means of sacramental transformation" (Corcoran 176). The older poet was captivated by the mirror of art, the younger—virtually obsessed with the sea of forever ungraspable life. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" gives voice to Auden's ambiguity and ambivalence about the Irish modernist. Strangely enough, Yeats is honored and called "silly," but the allegedly offensive character of this epithet vanishes if we remember that the line actually says: "You were silly like us." Nobody is exempt from error. Not even the great ones.

The political edge of Auden's poetry in the 1930s was undoubtedly the result of the current tensions on the international scene; yet it also stemmed from his consistently cherished conviction of the necessity to embrace in his writing the experience of two spheres of life: the private and the public. And as he delighted in interspersing psychoanalytical diagnoses with

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outlined in *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Repetition*, and then fully expressed in *Stages on Life's Way*.

Marxist prophesies, his poems (and plays and essays) would reach far beyond the horizon of subjective, biased observation in order to depict human beings as simultaneously makers and victims of history. In other words, the archeological examination of social maladies always pointed in the direction of individual psychopathology as their source. Rather than being a sign of despair and withdrawal of the poet from the public world, the claim that poetry is basically futile hinted at the recognition—strengthened by Auden's return to the Anglican Church—that evil of this world is constitutional and thus impossible to eradicate. As such poems of the next decades as "New Year Letter," "The Shield of Achilles," or "August 1968" make it clear, the political agendas in his verse did not disappear entirely—but Auden *definitely* renounced his old, naïve ambition to influence the course of history.



In a sense, W. H. Auden *was* a double man, but the perception of his 1939 move to the USA as a fundamental caesura in the quality of his *oeuvre* has to be treated with a degree of caution. His doubleness hid elsewhere and had numerous variations. The distinction between the "English" and the "American" Auden is often extrapolated from a radical valuation, whereupon the former is pigeonholed as the poet dedicated to political diagnoses and ideological causes and the latter as the man who kept himself aloof from any social engagement and was seriously devoted to more abstract, often religious issues. Such reasoning takes it for granted that there can be observed no trace of consistency or continuity in his writing (and thinking) before and after 1939. In general, however, the label "poet-orator" was *never* an adequate term that could be applied to him. Every poet living in times of great upheavals may feel tempted to saturate his work with ideas that are in direct relation to what is happening in the sphere of public life. But it is also a sign of true greatness to be able to retain a staple dose of sobriety and remember that the poet who assumes the role of a political *spieler* takes a precarious step towards compromising the very essence of his vocation. The prerequisite for successful propaganda is to detect the most obvious communal emotions and then shrewdly appeal to them to win plaudits. Propaganda feeds on simplifications and generalizations—its language needs to be easily digestible, straightforward and unequivocal. As for poetry, it is the domain of exceptions and uncertainties; here words are intended to reveal their inherent ambiguities, and the reader, instead of consoling answers, is offered myriad question marks.

It is by all means far-fetched to assert that Auden's renunciation of Marxism and left-wing sympathies after his arrival in America was an act of *apostasy* that in consequence led to a significant deterioration of his verse, if not to its inauthenticity. Equating political ideas that permeate a given

poem with the personal beliefs of its author is, to say the least, rather risky. In the early 1930s, Auden, then an inexperienced young writer, started his literary career in an atmosphere of political and cultural unrest: the economic crisis, scarcity of jobs and indignation of the labor force would all strengthen the already common conviction that a Marxist world revolution was a serious possibility; the expectation of a radical social change was accompanied by the rapid rise of fascism; a new war was already looming on the horizon. No wonder then that English intellectuals and artists were seriously preoccupied with politics, and some of them eagerly sought effective panacea for the malady. That was the context within which Auden was developing his mature identity and his literary style—between the exigencies of the current political ferment, the avant-garde idiom of late modernism, and the desire to find his own, unique, independent voice. Deeply rooted in English and continental literary tradition (Dryden, Pope, Blake, Goethe, Hardy, Eliot), but never willing to eschew his incurably parodist inclinations, he often seemed to draw on received ideas and forms so as to subvert their seriousness and authority, and both his early attempts at an almost *autistic* poetry and his later hortatory experiments are marked by a unique combination of formal virtuosity and intellectual bravura. More importantly, however, the decade of the 1930s, when he would occasionally yield to the temptation of producing some public or semi-political verse, coincided with the time when he developed an ability to maintain detachment from the image of himself as a public persona(lity). Thus, the art of poetry became intertwined with the art of estrangement. America was not the place of Auden's radical volte-face, but only a certain important, logical stage, and not a final one, in his personal and poetic evolution. There, as a consciously double man, Auden—this time fully aware how deceptive and detrimental flirtations with politics can be for the artist—was at last ready to divest himself of undeserved political labels.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0011

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# From Physical to Spiritual Errand: The Immigrant Experience in John Winthrop, William Bradford, and Samuel Danforth

## Abstract

The paper analyzes early colonial representations of the New World, connected with immigration of the first- and second-generation religious dissenters in what was to become America. Taking into account the well-documented influence of Puritans on American identity (often noticed by scholars since Tocqueville), the paper elaborates on the Puritans' and Pilgrims' mindsets as they arrived in the New World, connected not only with their religious beliefs but most of all with a practical need to organize themselves effectively. Be it in John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity," William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" or Samuel Danforth's "New England's Errand into the Wilderness," the authors of these works clearly show how the Pilgrims and Puritans had to confront the experience of emigration/immigration and construct not only new ways of social organization but also new identity. The paper focuses on the immigrants' perception of the New World, their own role and challenges they were faced with, and their thinking about the society they came from and were about to construct. It deals with their process of adjusting to the surroundings and discussing values they decided to promote for the sake of communal survival in the adverse conditions of the New World.

## The Puritan Influence

Immigrant heritage is among the most important aspects defining American identity. Those who were to become first Americans (as opposed to Native tribes, who were not part of the imaginary concept of "America") were themselves immigrants. Yet one way to argue with this viewpoint would be that presented in Huntington's *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. For Huntington, those who arrived in America first were not "immigrants" but "settlers"—not adapting to an existing new society but creating a colony to which they transferred their former culture (39–41). However, this argument is rightfully refuted by Rogers M. Smith, who believes that "the distinction between settlers and immigrants is necessarily one of degree," since both groups bring their identity to a new place and both are forced to adapt to new conditions, creating a new culture (24–25). Thus, American society has been established through migration, not only of minorities, but, actually, also of the white majority.



It is intriguing to ponder the mentality of the first immigrants and their own conceptualization of their condition. This essay focuses on the most well-known writings of Puritans and Pilgrims who came to the New World in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Puritan influence upon American identity has been widely described by sociologists, critics and historians: since Alexis de Tocqueville, the Puritan spirit has been equated with liberty, and since Max Weber, with capitalism. Tocqueville believed that Puritans were unique in combining the Old Testament's legalistic "spirit of religion" and the New Testament's "spirit of freedom," which gradually became detached from "its religious framework and link[ed] to the doctrine of 'self-interest properly understood'" (Kessler 790). Whether this division into Old Testament and New Testament qualities is accurate falls outside the scope of this discussion. What is important here is that even the very association of Puritanism with freedom has been questioned. Milan Zafirovski's essay "The Most Cherished Myth: Puritanism and Liberty Reconsidered and Revised" is a blunt testimony to such objections; for him (as well as for many sociologists and historians whom he quotes) this pairing is simply a naïve myth, disregarding historic reality (27). He rightfully stresses the qualities of Puritanism quite incompatible with freedom: "coercion, intolerance, exclusion and monism or anti-pluralism" (32). However, he disregards the divisions within Puritanism itself: the movement separated into Presbyterians and the more liberal Independents, which makes it difficult to consider it a monolith in terms of granting its members personal freedom (Miller 16). Also, Zafirovski clearly exaggerates, claiming that "this authoritarian or totalitarian rule whenever and wherever in power is what precisely makes Puritanism

prefigure or converge with, if not inspire, fascism and other totalitarianism (plus fundamentalist Islam)" (35)—the comparison is quite far-fetched, and the suggested inspiration impossible to prove. For Zafirovski, the only instances of Puritan tolerance were those needed "in order to simply survive in and eventually destroy à la Machiavelli a non-Puritan political-cultural environment" (38). Despite promoting this conspiracy theory, which positions the Puritans as the source of all evil in human history, Zafirovski does voice a valid concern about interpreting the Puritan influence as that of liberty.



This problem might be partially resolved by redefining the key influence in American history. Alongside numerous books describing the Puritans as the source of American mentality, there exist attempts at presenting an alternative. Marxist critic V. F. Calverton's 1932 book *The Liberation of American Literature* offers an interesting interpretation of the nation's history. According to Calverton, what we have learned to identify with Puritan influence is in fact the bourgeois spirit, not shared by English upper-middle-class Puritans. For instance, he compares American theocracy with that championed by the Puritans in England, and demonstrates that the latter were far less strict or hostile towards art. Thus, he concludes that what became the dominant feature of American mentality was

> petty bourgeois individualism of the frontier which provided the basic psychological determinant in our [i.e., American—J.F.] national ideology. It was the influence of that individualism which accomplished our release from European culture, undermined the force of the colonial complex, and laid the foundation for an indigenous American culture. (Calverton 244)

This bourgeois individualism in America turned into "a mass phenomenon instead of a class one. It was not confined to one class . . . but extended through and included all classes. Or, to be more precise, it made all of America into one class in its ideology—middle class" (266). The spirit of equality meant that all were to imitate one model and uphold one aspiration:

> The only class divisions that arose, were within that middle class, divisions between the rich bourgeoisie and the poor bourgeoisie. The workers as well as the farmers developed an individualistic outlook, and adopted an unconcealed, petty bourgeois psychology. The whole country became afflicted with the psychology of the entrepreneur. (Calverton 266)

Calverton's interpretation of the source of American individualism is perhaps justified, especially since the Puritans were quite communally minded. Within the religious context, however, the emphasis upon individual freedom arose in the United States as late as during the Second Great Awakening, in the 1820s; it had not been a dominant feature of early Puritan writing. Calverton represents the voice of a minority, and such works as Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* confirm a significant role that Puritanism played in shaping American mentality, not only in the sphere of individualism.

## The Immigrant Experience in Puritan and Pilgrim Writings



Colonial writing in what was to become America reveals that first- and second-generation religious dissenters had to confront the experience of emigration / immigration and construct not only new ways of social organization but also a new identity. John Winthrop's 1630 speech on board the *Arbella*, "A Modell of Christian Charity," is more than just a source of the famous "city upon a hill" passage, which established the Puritan community as an example for the Christian world and initiated the history of American exceptionalism. The whole text delineates the shape of the future community, preparing those travelling with Winthrop for a completely new life.

Firstly, what is striking in Winthrop's thesis is how much stress he puts upon hierarchy. Compared to the aforementioned conjunction between Puritan heritage and liberty, promoted by Tocqueville, Winthrop's writing clearly shows that this first-generation group of immigrants did not have liberal or democratic ideas in mind. Quite the contrary, Winthrop's ideology consists in strongly naturalizing and sanctifying social hierarchy. This is especially visible in the opening lines: "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence, hath soe disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others mean and in submission" (33). It is very much an Old-World frame of mind, this insistence upon the rightfulness of the division into the rich and the poor. The governor lists three reasons for this state of affairs. Firstly, the differentiation of mankind into various social classes ensures an abundance of ways in which God is to be praised; secondly, God may incline the rich towards kindness and the poor towards obedience; and finally, such an arrangement builds a chain of dependence between the members of a community, thus turning them into a society.

It seems that, realizing the Puritans would face new adverse conditions—both wild nature and possibly hostile natives—Winthrop uses Biblical authority for the world view he promotes in order to create a society that can function

in the new surroundings. He looks for ways to bind the community together, eradicating all individualistic urgings that may arise from an opportunity to build a new life. Such group-oriented thinking is not only ideological from the religious point of view, but most of all pragmatic from the perspective of simple survival. Especially that, according to David D. Hall, "[Winthrop] knew that other such ventures, but especially the Virginia Company of London's efforts in the Chesapeake, had foundered on conflicts among the colonists and a disastrous erosion of common goals" (164).[1] Thus, Winthrop proposes a whole system of legal behaviours (e.g., money-lending based on Biblical law), highlighting two things. Firstly, that extraordinary times require extraordinary measures ("community of perills calls for extraordinary liberality" [35]), so the members of the community are expected to help each other more than usually; secondly, that, religious as they may be, the members of his congregation should rely upon themselves and not on Divine intervention ("whereby our christian brother may be relieved in his distress, we must help him beyond our ability rather than tempt God in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary meanes" [35]). Both these provisions, their moral or ethical dimension aside, seem to be very sensible remarks about life in the severe conditions of the New World, which required tight cooperation. The settlers are encouraged to think more of their poor brethren than their posterity; to help financially those who are in need at present, and only in "ordinary" times to allow themselves the egoistic privilege of building their own heritage. The survival of the present community is Winthrop's primary goal since, rightfully, it constitutes a necessary condition for any future plans regarding individuals.

The almost organic unity expected from the Puritan settlers is described through the common metaphor of Christ's body:

> There is noe body but consists of partes and that which knitts these partes together, giues the body its perfection, because it makes eache parte soe contiguous to others as thereby they doe mutually participate with each other, both in strengthe and infirmity, in pleasure and paine. To instance in the most perfect of all bodies; Christ and his Church make one body . . . true Christians are of one body in Christ. (39–40)

The consequences of this vision of the community members as one body—and, moreover, as the body of Christ—are twofold, and they stem from the

[1] Exactly how demanding the New World conditions were can be illustrated by the following data: "The mortality rate of the Virginia colony had been horrifying—between 1619 and 1625 over two-thirds of the English colonists had perished from disease, Indian attack, or starvation" (Bremer 1).

assertion that "[i]f one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoyce with it" (40). First, all people may count on one another, never being left alone in their problems or joys, since each experience affects the whole Puritan Christ-body. This is the effect stressed by Winthrop, who believes it to be a vital strength of the envisaged society. However, he does not mention the possibility of a negative interpretation of such a metaphor: if the society is treated organically, this leaves little room for individual error. A sick part infects the entire body, requiring immediate amputation; the subsequent impossibility of dissent is easy to foresee, and is confirmed by the history of Puritan intolerance.

Scott Michaelsen points to the fact that Winthrop speaks of the Puritan journey as of a "covenant" or "commission" between God and Puritans, but initiated, curiously, by the latter:



> There also are practical reasons why Winthrop described his version of the federal covenant as an offer to God, for his acceptance. He was, after all, merely transposing into covenant theology the actual history, legal status and terms of the charter issued to the Puritans in 1629, including its provisions allowing the Company to hold Court and establish laws in the plantation. (Michaelsen 88)

In Winthrop's text, secular and religious orders merge, giving rise not only to a theocratic utopia but also to a society governed by the practical needs of establishing a colony in the New World.

Unlike Winthrop's Puritans, the Pilgrims who arrived with William Bradford were not religious reformers, but separatists. Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* tells the story of their journey to the New World, starting with the reasons for leaving England, and subsequently Holland. Their identity is constructed in opposition to the corrupt Church of England; curiously, in Bradford's account the Pilgrims are martyrs, willing to suffer for their faith and ready to abandon the "goodly and pleasant city" of Leyden (47) in order to spread true faith; yet at the same time they seem to have a very pragmatic reason for their departure to America, namely escaping poverty as well as the "great labour and hard fare" of Holland (23).

Even though Bradford's text is a historical account, detailing the events that took place during the Pilgrim immigration to the New World, his choice of facts to be described is also motivated ideologically. Thus for example in Chapter IX he recounts the death of a "very profane young man" (58), a sailor who disrespected the Pilgrims and who was struck with disease as a punishment from God. The passage is designed as proof of the

Pilgrims' righteousness and of God's approval for their actions. This is the angle Bradford uses in the remainder of the text, attributing to God's help all the victories of his group, including the Mystic massacre during the Pequot War. It is a Biblical view of history as revealing divine interventions in support of the chosen people; in fact, religious commentary on history rather than a simple historical account.

Interestingly, Bradford's ideas share certain affinities with Winthrop's speech; however, what Winthrop prescribes for the new community of Puritans, Bradford describes as actually happening. Like "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Of Plymouth Plantation* features similar emphasis upon mutual help among the settlers. Whereas Winthrop advises his followers to be like the members of Christ's body and share both joys and pains, Bradford describes the first winter, during which half of the Pilgrims die, and those who do not fall ill with scurvy and other diseases tend to the sick, disregarding their own health. This is contrasted with the behaviour of the sailors remaining on the *Mayflower*, who avoid their sick fellows for fear of contagion; the ship's ill are also helped only by the Pilgrims. Likewise, there is strict cooperation and division of roles when it comes to fortifying the Pilgrims' settlements and defending themselves against Indians.

Yet at the same time Bradford strikes a new note, in a passage where he clearly insists on private property. He explains that at first the settlers were supposed to share "the common course and condition" (120), owning everything as a community and working for the common good, dividing the fruit of their labour evenly. However, the Pilgrims' situation is so difficult that in 1623 the Governor "assign[s] to every family a parcel of land" (120) and decides each should work for his own needs, which results in much better crops. Bradford criticizes the initial egalitarian economic arrangement, viewing it as unjust, since young men had to work for others' wives and children, and the strong for the weak. It seems unfair to him that "the aged and graver men [were] ranked and equalized in labours and victuals, clothes, etc., with the meaner" (121). Thus, similarly to Winthrop, Bradford believes that hierarchy is wholesome and natural, and that the situation in which people think "one as good as another" leads to ruin and social decomposition (121).

If Winthrop and Bradford are both representatives of the generation coming from the Old World to the New, Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*—a 1670 example of the American Jeremiad—already represents the second generation of immigrants. According to Perry Miller, "[s]ome historians suggest that the second and third generations suffered a failure of nerve; they weren't

the men their fathers had been, and they knew it" (4). They experienced an identity crisis; no longer able to see themselves as the heroes who crossed the Atlantic, they had difficulty finding another discourse that would accommodate their experience; the American Jeremiad is, for Miller, its expression. Some of the Puritans believed that if they performed well their task of instituting God's kingdom on earth, God would bring them back to England (Miller 14); by the time of the second generation it was becoming clear England had not mended its ways following the example of the Puritan theocracy. Also, the idea of the "city upon a hill" suggested that the success of their enterprise depended on the attention the Puritans were able to attract:



> If the rest of the world, or at least of Protestantism, looked elsewhere, or turned to another model, or simply got distracted and forgot about New England, if the new land was left with a polity nobody wanted—then every success in fulfilling the terms of the covenant would become a diabolical measure of failure. (Miller 15)

For the second generation, it seemed clear that "[h]aving failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill, they were left alone with America" (19).

The Jeremiad's model construction is composed of three set stages: first, the author depicts an ideal time, often Biblical; then, a departure from that ideal; finally, a possible shift of the community towards better times. Whereas this structure is seen by Bercovitch as almost the Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, embodying the spiritual progress of the community (Bercovitch 91), Miller reads Danforth's Jeremiad as a move of a different sort. He elaborates on the two possible meanings of the word "errand," one being connected to working for someone else (as in the "errand-boy"), the other to performing one's own business (as in "the wife running her own errands" [4]). Danforth's sermon supposedly embodies the shift from the former meaning to the latter, i.e., from the Puritans' being sent by God on an errand to running their own errands. This newly found independence, according to Miller, was the beginning of the process of Americanization (11). In Bercovitch's view, however, this process "began in Massachusetts not with the decline of Puritanism but with the Great Migration, and . . . the concept of errand, accordingly, as a prime expression of the Puritan venture, played a significant role in the development of what was to become modern middle-class American culture" (92). For Bercovitch, the importance of the errand is connected to his understanding of the Jeremiad as an expression of progress leading to

synthesis. Namely, he claims that the American Jeremiad, unlike its European counterpart, was a "mode of celebration," attempting to "transform threat into promise"—a promise of continuing to the third, positive stage of better times (94–95). Both critics seem to agree, however, that it was the abstraction of Puritan ideas from religion that created, or influenced, the American spirit.

## Conclusion



As evident in the two discussed texts, both Winthrop and Bradford promote the vision of a strong, organic community, where the mutual dependence of its members cements the group and allows it to face adversities. At the same time, this interdependence does not mean real equality. Far from it; in fact, both authors depict a strongly hierarchical model of society. According to Smith, all stories of peoplehood include three constitutive elements: "promises of economic well-being; promises of political power sufficient to ensure personal security and a measure of political influence; and what I have termed the 'ethically constitutive' themes, accounts depicting membership in a people as having intrinsic normative worth" (23). The ideal of a tight-knit community, advanced by Winthrop and Bradford, is an equivalent of the second of Smith's conditions. The first one is implied in Bradford's depictions of the economic hardship suffered by the Pilgrims in Holland—the reader may guess that their journey to the New World is supposed to free them from poverty. Finally, the ethically constitutive motive is the one prevalent among all religious dissenters: of establishing God's kingdom on earth, or providing a righteous example for the rest of the world.

This community of migrants created a society based on intolerance, which was supposed to cement its foundations:

> What a due form of civil government meant, therefore, became crystal clear: a political regime, possessing power, which would consider its main function to be the setting up, the protecting and preserving of this form of polity. This due form would have, at the very beginning of its list of responsibilities, the duty of suppressing heresy, of subduing or somehow getting rid of dissenters—of being, in short, deliberately, vigorously, and consistently intolerant. (Miller 7)

In this respect, we return to Zafirovski's reservations concerning the intellectual habit of equating Puritanism with freedom. At the same time, many authors agree that during the "Puritan experiment" the line

dividing the secular and the sacred became blurred (Michaelsen 88), which eventually resulted in the Puritan creed evolving into the American creed:

> In that fact, I would suggest, lies the major irony of colonial history. Insisting that the errand was the one sure way to success, the ministers drained it of its discrete theological and institutional content. Intent on preserving the past, they transformed it, as legend, into a malleable guide to the future. Seeking to defend the theocracy, they abstracted from its antiquated social forms the larger, vaguer, and more flexible forms of metaphor and myth (New Israel, wilderness, promised land, destined progress), and facilitated the movement from the New England to the American Way, and from errand to manifest destiny, American mission and the dream. (Bercovitch 97)



Thus, Danforth's use of the concept of errand shows the exceptionalist mission to be embraced later by all of America. The errand of Puritans and Pilgrims, however, was not only a spiritual one, but most of all a physical one, demanding an adjustment to the conditions on the part of small middle-class communities coping with the New World wilderness.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0012

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# Change and the Poetics of Plenitude in Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery

## Abstract

The essay attends to a paradox found in some crucial poetic efforts by Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. In some of their most important poetic works Stevens and Ashbery take on the task of positioning the poem toward the plurality of reality, the plurality that is concentrated in the phenomenon of change. As they do so, they invariably encounter a tension within the poem itself: as the poem merges with the flow of changes in the external world—the physical changes in time and space—it also calls up permanent forms of imaginative purposive capability of attending to change, envisioning it, or, indeed, of installing it. These forms must be more permanent than it is postulated by some theories of the poetics of transitiveness, which are polemically discussed in the text. The tension between the element of change and permanence is what allows the poems of Stevens and Ashbery—each poet finding his own aesthetic and epistemic strategy—to put the poem forward not as an external "representation" of change, but as the very source of the abundant possibilities of producing world descriptions in which the notion of change may be meaningful. Such positioning of the poem is what I am calling "the poetics of plenitude." This poetic strategy makes the poem an aesthetic counterpart to the epistemic action of developing an inquiry, and I am building a definition of this term by reference to the classical pragmatist theory of inquiry. This move is related to my treating Stevens and Ashbery as the poets belonging to the Emersonian-pragmatist intellectual and aesthetic tradition. The paradoxes of change and permanence discussed in the text are treated as inherent in this tradition.

The pragmatist Emersonian poetics is vitally related to and intertwined with the concept of change. Change is an idea, a trope, and an objective that lies at the heart of Emerson's mysterious notion of *self-reliance*, and the influence which his formulation of this key concept has radiated on thinkers and poets to come after him has much to do with change as a certain epistemological conundrum. When Emerson speaks of *self-reliance*, he is in fact meditating on the vexed relation between change and stasis, and in this meditation change is considered as a transformative state within the subject.

Emerson recognizes that the proper meaning of the concept of "change" reaches beyond a mere statement of the factual shift occurring within the bare material reality. Change in Emerson is something more than the purely mechanical, clockwork relocation occurring in the Newtonian universe; the proper sense of change as a conceptual process is related to the question of the human registering and participating in it. This registering is a peculiar kind of the loss of the self, a paradoxical process of self-obliteration in the service of self-reintegration. In the key moments of the Emersonian text—the key fragments of such essays as "Nature," "Self-Reliance," and "Experience"—the self is theorized as a dynamic entity which does not so much participate in change by adjusting to it, but is in fact a source of change.[1]



[1] I am referring to a pattern that is characteristic of Emerson's philosophy of the subject found in agency. It is a rhythm whose successive stages are self-abandonment for the sake of the consecutive affirmative re-finding of the self on a different level of integrity, coherence, and self-sustaining power found through action. This rhythm is defining for Emerson's textuality, his essays frequently proceeding from the tropes of loss to the renewed gesture of self-making. An outline of this rhythm is found in the "transparent eyeball" vision at the opening of "Nature." First, the passage describes the loss of the personal at the moment of the visionary entry into the communion with the neo-Platonic *pleroma*: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (6). Immediately, the loss is compensated for by a promise of participation in a power that, although it is divine, is always eventually located by Emerson in the human: "I am part or parcel of God. . . . in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (6). This aesthetic perception is only an introduction to the vision of merging with the neo-Platonically conceptualized creative power at the end of the essay, when Emerson's effort is to reverse the repressed memory of the soul's location at the center of creation, in a retelling of the neo-Platonic story of creation, backed by the Kantian transcendental philosophy of the mind: "Man is the dwarf of himself. . . .The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions externized themselves into day and night. . . . But, having made for himself this huge shelf, his waters retired" (37). The return of this repressed memory of having been the center of creation again leads to a merger of loss of the self and its reintegration on a different level, which we observe at the close of this passage: "if his word is sterling yet in nature, it is not conscious power, it is . . . superior to his will. It is instinct" (37). "Self-Reliance" continues the same discourse of re-integration through merger with a higher power. The key passage of this essay defines self-reliance as

But such positioning of the self toward the concept of change brings with it a number of complexities and tensions. These tensions are characteristic of a specific kind of poetics, common to some poets of the Emersonian aesthetic and conceptual heritage. It is a tension-ridden, dynamic poetics which I am calling the poetics of plenitude. In this essay, I am going to discuss the problems and paradoxes attendant on the concept of change in the work of two poets who belong to the paradoxical Emersonian tradition I have outlined above: Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. By tracing the conceptual difficulties discovered by both of these poets, as they make the concept of change their main topic, I will illustrate how these difficulties are in fact a defining feature of the very poetics these poems propose—the poetics of plenitude.



Stevens and Ashbery's belonging to the Emersonian poetic tradition is a well-established critical fact.[2] They have also been discussed before as a pair of poets related by a strong poetic kinship founded on the concept of poetic influence. This critical narrative has been formulated, both famously and notoriously, by Harold Bloom, who has seen Ashbery's poetry as an almost exemplary case of the "anxiety of influence" in relation to the poems of his poetic father, Stevens (143–46). While this way of approaching Ashbery and Stevens has provided a definite model for bringing the two poets together, I am not going to use Bloom's concept of "influence" in my discussion of the similarities and differences between them. Instead, in my narrower approach, I am going to focus on a certain regularity in both poets' treatment of the concept of change, a concept that, as I am going to argue, is found right at the center of their poetics. Stevens and Ashbery's Emersonian heritage makes these poets attend instinctively to the paradoxical dynamics of change, and their effort consists in containing the

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an ability to join the powers of agency, in fact to become these powers, through instinctual action: "Life only avails, not the having-lived. Power . . . resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state" (144). Again, one sheds the personal, to join a more abstract, more powerful agency. In "Experience," Emerson reiterates his belief in reintegrative and self-creative power of action against the necessary skeptical limitations. Although our condition is a sort of cognitive "poverty," "yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. . . . We must hold to this poverty . . . and by more vigorous self-recoveries . . . possess our axis more firmly" (324). A nice encapsulation of this pattern is found in "Circles": "it is the power of divine moments that they abolish our contritions" (260). Richard Shusterman, a pragmatist philosopher who has commented on Emerson's ambiguous discourse of self-creation, concludes: "Spontaneous nature and intentional striving may seem inconsistent, but when coordinated . . . they yield the most powerful results" (216).

[2] For Stevens's relation to the Emersonian pragmatist tradition see especially Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* 21–22 and 179–231; Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism* 124–25 and 166–67; for Ashbery's place in this tradition see Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies* 3–25.

tensions of change within the very principle of the poetic tissue of their text. In what follows I will discuss the similarities and differences between both poets' treatment of the topic of change. This comparative outline will later enable me to propose a definition of the poetics of plenitude which I identify as the primary poetic aesthetics of both poets.

## 1 Problems with Change



Stevens and Ashbery attend to change in a large number of their poems. Their treatment of change ranges from the basic meaning of the term to its deepest philosophical and psychological complications. There is a traditional lyrical layer in both poets, in which they attend to the change generating passage of time observable in the simplest natural phenomena. Stevens constructed a virtual figurative universe out of his oscillations between the tropes of winter and summer, while Ashbery has been a faithful follower of the lyrical tradition which finds its central topic in the season of spring. Both poets have frequently attended to the theme of the change effected by the sheer temporality of human existence, with a rich spectrum of its psychological and philosophical ramifications. Stevens has made change in time the central topic of the important long poems of his later phase, notably "The Auroras of Autumn" and "The Rock," while Ashbery has identified the struggle against the passage of time as the major characteristic of Parmigianino's painterly aesthetic, an aesthetic a duel with which is Ashbery's main topic in his critically acclaimed "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." The opposition between the tendency of aesthetic artifacts, both poems and paintings, to stall the temporal flow, and Ashbery's effort to burst or dissolve this aesthetics by opening it up onto accident and change, recur frequently in his work, long after the achievement of "Self-Portrait." Here I will limit my attention to a much closer set of poems for both Ashbery and Stevens. First, I will show the problem encountered by Stevens as he elaborates on the topic of change in the central section of his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," a long poem that is Stevens's most complete attempt at theorizing his poetics in the form of a poem. Next, I will trace the similar difficulties encountered by Ashbery, as he traces the challenge of rendering the processes of change in the very fabric of his poetic prose in *Three Poems*.

Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is a central poem of his middle poetic period, and it is often listed by critics as one of his most successful long poems (Vendler 168–69). The poem's importance is underscored by the fact that it is clearly a fruit of the poet's intense work on theorizing his own poetics, the work that Stevens undertook both in

his poems and his essays throughout the 1940s. The first, limited, edition of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" was brought out in 1942, while the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the first of the essay pieces later to be collected under the title of *The Necessary Angel,* which takes up a cluster of issues related to those found in the poem, was originally delivered as a public lecture at Princeton in 1942. In the essay Stevens makes the effort to explicate his complex notion of the relation between reality and imagination, in which "the imagination," far from being a flight from reality, in fact is found within the very grain of the real, as its inseparable layer, a poetic principle that helps humans to be actively responsive to reality, without getting crushed under its sometime mounting pressures. Thus, by identifying the relation between the reality and the imagination as an inseparability of constant mutual opposition, Stevens nominates the poet as a participant in the potent imaginative agency, through which, he or she "gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [the world]" (662), as Stevens puts it, clearly anticipating the title of his long poem, which was to see print a year after the lecture was delivered.



"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is a long meditative, philosophical-poetic sequence, which consists of three sections, with the title of each of them formulated in the form of a preliminary instruction: "It must be abstract," "It must change," "It Must Give Pleasure." Despite their terse formulation, the titles might be ambiguous. Does the "it" always stand for the "supreme fiction"? Could the pronoun stand for the work of any hypothetical poem? In the section on change—what exactly is it that *must* change? Is the "supreme fiction" itself a body of imaginings that need to keep changing? How does one go on spinning the supreme fiction, on what principle, on what base? These questions are complicated further in the text of the poem.

The "It must change" section opens on a rich aesthetic register of perceptions, Stevens's imagery involving creatures of ethereal substance, gaudy colors, and sophisticated lexical provenance, suggestive of the lightness and subtlety of the evoked images. The landscape is airy, fragrant, busy with the lightsome activity of various color- and odor-imparting spirits or beings. But how dynamic, how changeable is this landscape really? It seems that, although full of movement, the scene also contains an element of resistance to change. Yes, the scene fluctuates and shimmers with freshly described objects whose very appearance is pleasurable, but the shimmering itself displays a tendency to linger on and keep returning. The language Stevens finds to reflect the scene immediately registers this tension: "The bees came booming as if they had never gone, / as if hyacinths had never

gone. We say / This changes and that changes" (337). The last sentence betrays a note of skepticism regarding change, the reality of which evades the speaker, and the speaker immediately tries to quell this doubt by assuring the reader that "the constant // Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths / Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause / In a universe of inconstancy" (337). Again, however, the very next lines contain suspicion of these trivia, whose busy circuits begin to smack of mere repetitiveness: "It remains, / It is a repetition. The bees come booming / As if—" (337), and Stevens's speaker does not complete the clause, breaking off at this realization of repetitiveness.



Other cantos of this section also abound in the complex intertwining of the tropes of change with those of permanence. In section IV, for instance, we learn that "the partaker partakes of that which changes him" (339). The paradox-ridden tautology points to the core of the problem: does the "partaker" change, or does he enter a stasis of a higher degree, becoming one with that which produces the change itself? Throughout the section Stevens is looking for a truer explanation of change, beyond the merely external theater of the senses.

An ongoing mixture of the tropes for change and those for permanence is also characteristic of Ashbery's most audacious exercise in the form of poetic prose, "The System," a long and copious central piece of his poetic prose collection *Three Poems,* published in 1970. Among its many sources, models and points of reference, "The System" seems to take its main cue from a long tradition of the philosophical treatise on the problem of religious or epistemological skepticism. David Herd, in a splendid reading of the poem, cites a rich list of predecessor texts: Pascal's *Pensées*, Emerson's "Experience," and Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror" (124–42). Pascal's philosophical prose sets the theme: the possibility of refuting religious skepticism in a world suffused with uncertainty, chaos, and contingency. While Pascal's objective was to find justification for religious faith amidst contingent temporality, Emerson, Auden, and Ashbery all try to refute skepticism by remaining faithful to contingency itself—the accident-ridden medium of human changeability.

In Ashbery's case this attempt proceeds in the disguise of a prolonged lecture on the varieties of happiness. Whatever the topic, however, and whatever the outcome of the treatise, we will again encounter the same mixture that occurred earlier in Stevens. The mixture, both figurative and conceptual, binds together in ambiguous knots the ideas of change and static permanence.

Before the theme of the kinds of happiness is established in "The System," the text develops a meditation on temporal change, its apparent, if

paradoxical ease, as the mere physical procession of the months envelopes everyone, and as everyone will sooner or later adjust to this flow:

> One is plucked from one month to the next; the year is like a fast moving Ferris wheel; tomorrow all the riders will be under the sign of February. . . . Just to live this way is impossibly difficult, but the strange thing is that no one seems to notice it; people sail along quite comfortably. (65)

This ease of adjustment, its imperceptibility and its pervasiveness, is one of the major concerns of the poem. It seems that the text aligns itself with the progression of moments which is as pervasive and relentless as it is smooth. The poem enters the very banality of the mechanical progression of moments and strives to capture the change worked by them on the self. Frequently, the text searches out the moments when the change is registered suddenly, emerging almost out of nothing, as if it was the sheer accumulation of the temporal flow that produced it, and Ashbery notes all sorts of "the forms of your inattention," varieties of distraction, submitted by the poem's unruly zooming device, as it goes in and out of focus. It is this capacity of living in distraction that is the gate through which change proliferates into the self: "and the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it . . . [yet] it is certain that you will rise from the bench a new person" (80).



The effort undertaken by the text to register the banality of the temporal flow establishes a clear rhythm in which the discourse is caught in the regular shifts between clarity and distraction, a rhythm which in itself achieves a sort of permanence—the rhythm itself becomes installed. Thus, again, as in Stevens, changeability is closely accompanied by tropes of permanence. At some moment we learn: "Apparently then happiness was to be a fixed state, but then you perceived that it was both fixed and mobile at the same time" (83).

## 2 Theories of Pure Transitiveness

Clearly, both Stevens and Ashbery encounter difficulties when bringing their texts to approach and explain the processes of change. Paradoxically, the tendency of both texts is to find change intermeshed with stasis or permanence. Before I try to account for this intertwining of change and permanence in both Ashbery and Stevens, I need first to relate my argument to an important critical perspective on the poetics of changeability inherent in the Emersonian tradition. A number of critics have pointed out how the Emersonian pragmatist tradition requires the thought of the transformability

of the speaking subject, its ability to shed and overcome all earlier assumed formulas and shapes. Jonathan Levin has identified this necessity and capability for change as the major ingredient and feature of a poetics he has called "the poetics of transition." Investigating the pragmatist indebtedness in Emerson, Levin demonstrates how pragmatism "rejects all supernatural trappings," while continuing to cultivate the idea of a descriptive and interpretive malleability of both the self and the world, in which "coming only is sacred" (5). As James and Dewey valorize the possibility of approaching problems from ever new angles, proposing new tools and instruments to obstacles, we obtain an instructive text, according to Levin, on the necessity of treating the subject as a fluid, unstable, dynamic entity, always on the move in the search for new shapes. In Emerson the self is a volatile concept, subject to dissolution in the very text it produces: "the self vanishes in the wake of Emerson's very act of writing" (28). It is this realization of the fluidity of the process of writing, of any creative construction in writing, that leads Levin to formulate, as he attends to the pragmatism common for Emerson and both of the James brothers, his theory of "transitional dynamic" (9). This dynamic governs the flows of the texts of this tradition, and bespeaks the need and the reality of constant changeability, movement, transformation. In this procession, movements of the self are destructive of it: formulas and shapes the self abides by must be discarded. The transitiveness that Levin describes emphasizes the ongoing mechanism of transformation which is dispersive of the self. The self vanishes, dissolves, finds itself ingested by radically higher powers. Levin comments: "The power of genius does not ultimately belong to a stable, coherent, rational agent, but rather derives from other powers that precede and subsume that agent and its agency" (28).

This reading and formulation of the Emersonian pragmatist aesthetics leads Levin to perceive Stevens as a poet of the pragmatist impulse to seek always new possibilities of description and redescription (181–82). Even though working with apparently fixed concepts of reality and imagination, Stevens in his essays avoids any definitive formulations of these terms, while his poems look for the ongoing freshness of redescription, the ongoing destruction of the existing forms of imagination (182). Examining his longer poems, Levin notes states of achieved linguistic indeterminacy, which are Stevens's strategy of achieving genuine breaks from repetitiveness (184). Levin correctly identifies the Stevens poem itself as the proper locus of the process of pushing forward, beyond the literalized "fictions," toward the necessarily new positions of the imagination-reality tension (183). It is a process of writing "from the leading edge of unfolding transitions . . . [where] dis-imagination of things is inseparable from their

re-imagination" (187). And yet, while it is definitely true that Stevens's poem is the locus of the process of change, Levin's approach says little of the source of the poem's own capability of keeping the process alive. The process in question is one of the ever renewed ability of departing from, or "evading," the achieved stage of reality descriptions, an ability that Stevens will call "our freshness" toward the end of the "It Must Change" section of "The Notes." The point is that the narrative of "transitiveness" taken as itself—as unceasing changeability—is not enough to account for such sustenance. The "freshness" needs a belonging.

A similar reading, emphasizing the instabilities of the self resulting from the conceptual patterns of Emersonian pragmatism, is proposed by Andrew Epstein, as he attains to the patterns and tropes of friendship found in the poetry of John Ashbery. Just as Stevens, Ashbery, as an Emersonian poet, will be interested in the dissolutions of the self, the self's transitional and transformative energies, always redefining and departing from the obtained shapes. Epstein's focus is a "theory of friendship" that emerges out of the Emersonian discourse. This friendship will appear as fraught with tensions, movements, push and pull relations, burdened with the Emersonian self's injunction to maintain the processes of transformation in motion. The transitional self will obviously have problems maintaining stable relations with other selves, as it is constantly on the move. Epstein echoes Levin in finding the Emersonian-pragmatist aesthetic in the instruction for and wish for "one's incessant transformations" (71).



This view leads Epstein to reading "The System" as a hymn to sheer changeability and appreciation of the contingency and accident-ridden character of existence. "The System" is a poem about the depth and degree to which the post-religious commentator of human existence, such as Ashbery appears to be, must face up to "the notion that experience is marked only by mutability and indeterminacy" (139). For Epstein this approach aligns perfectly well with William James's description of the pluralistically mutable universe, in which the human subject can never rest content at any achieved level or stage of description, and Epstein quotes James's characterization of pragmatism as "a certain willingness to live without assurances and guarantees" (139).

Both Levin and Epstein, although largely correct about the philosophical import of Stevens's and Ashbery's texts, may not be paying enough attention to certain phenomena and tensions of the poetic processes themselves. There is no denying that Stevens and Ashbery, locating the conceptual side of their art in the broad pragmatist tradition, seek a process-based poetics, which, operating beyond all metaphysical assurance, is one with the process of change. It seems, however, that the reading of Emersonian

pragmatism of Emerson and James, offered by Levin and Epstein, does not account for a certain peculiarity within the discourse of changeability and malleability. There is another side to the pragmatist discourse which Levin and Epstein have a problem dealing with. Levin comes close to this other side, when he notes how, within the Emersonian discourse, the self does not vanish but is redescribed as a certain *selecting principle* (33). This is problematic for Levin, since such idea of the self does require a theory of agency, which, in turn, would require us to move beyond the thought of sheer changeability and transitiveness. A principle of selection suggests a point of view, a focus, and integration. No form of agency can survive in the medium of sheer mutability; sheer mutability is no selection and is a scattering of all agency. As a result, Levin offers an inconclusive approach: "Emerson at once retains and undermines the self's agency by splitting a man's genius off from his actively thinking, willing self" (33).

It is beyond the scope of this article to enter a debate on the forms of agency worked out within the pragmatist tradition. It would require, for example, a thorough insight into the immensely complex theory of agency found in Nietzsche,[3] an idea that is a fuller realization of what Emerson had been projecting. However, I do want to claim that the transitiveness found in Stevens and Ashbery by, respectively, Levin and Epstein is an incomplete characteristic of these poets' aesthetics, as it cannot explain the very propensity of their texts to affirm their own poetic power of attaining to change, becoming one with it, and, ultimately, becoming a source of change, a propensity or peculiarity which requires a view of agency that, without being inimical to change, is not scattered by it. Besides the complexities of philosophically described agency, there are agencies emerging in Stevens and Ashbery, agencies very much to be identified with the action of the poetic texts, with the process of the poem. These agencies care for the survival of their own ongoing capacity to govern the processes of change that they are also trying to capture, and as such they are a permanent element of the flow they govern.

## 3 Change and Permanence

In order to characterize these agencies in more detail, I am now going to return to the paradoxes that I earlier noted in Stevens's and Ashbery's poetic discourses on change. As we saw earlier, Stevens's meditation on change in the central section of "Notes" tends toward circularity, stasis, and

[3] Two sources shed light on the problem: Alexander Nehamas's *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* 170–99 and Robert B. Pippin's *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* 67–79.

permanence. Change as mechanical procession of sensual data is clearly not what interests Stevens. For this reason, he will look for tropes which get the subject to an active position, in which the subject ceases to be a passive receiver of the theater of stimuli. Stevens's subject becomes a "partaker," and Stevens is looking for modes of unity between the "partaker" and the physical layers of the world: "The captain and his men // Are one and the sailor and the sea are one." This trope introduces a Whitmanian invocation of the unity between various layers of the poetic self into Stevens: "O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight" (339). The effort of the poem to locate a subjectivity close at the source of the changes is parallel to Stevens's effort to unify the self, his reworking of the Whitmanian transcendental ego into its modernist version: an abstract mind, which, although it exceeds the boundaries of the individual, does propose a form of agency (Altieri 25–37). Whatever changes in Stevens's poem, the process of change affecting the physicality of the world must pass through this abstract self. At times this abstract self obtains a more definite contour of a romantic subject as lover, who participates in the physical changes by desiring them: "The lover sighs as for accessible bliss, / Which he can take within him on his breath, / Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known" (341). The strangely formed phrase that concludes this passage points in the direction of the trope of "nothingness" or emptiness, or the evasion of certainty, which in Stevens signals the more abstract self or mind—the mind as agent in the world of changes. Thus, at a slightly later passage in the poem, Stevens elaborates his abstractions by thinking of a "poem that never reaches words // And one that chaffers the time away" (343). And he muses of it: "Is the poem both peculiar and general"? This, in turn, becomes a prelude to a complex thought of "evasion": "There is a meditation there, in which there seems // To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended." And later: "Does the poet // evade us, as in a senseless element?" (343).



What exactly is the "evasion" that is introduced in these lines? What does it consist of, what kind of action is it, and who performs it? Before answering this question, let us note at this point that the thought of evasion precedes the final, tenth, canto of this section of "Notes," which is strangely static for a poem on change. The entire canto concentrates on a complex image in which a static mind—the mind of Stevens's observer of changes, an abstract individual seated in the park—seems to hypnotize the surrounding world with his "will to change" (344). The entire discourse on change, or the entire theater of changes, is now revealed to be located within a stationary mind of an observer, a mind, we sense, that is responsible

for the change, and which transgresses beyond the binary opposition of change and stasis.

The discourse on change leads Stevens to projecting a peculiar state of mind, a state which triggers and participates in the procession of changes. This state is achieved in Stevens through a capability that Stevens comes close to revealing when he speaks of the poet's "evasions." It is this capability that exists within, participates in, but does not get dispersed in the elements of change. The capability of "evading" is a permanence that the poem maintains as a paragon of change. Stevens elaborates on the capability of evasion in canto IX, where he identifies it with the synthesizing activity of the imagination. The poetic mind "tries by a peculiar speech to speak // The peculiar potency of the general, / To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (343). Change, in Stevens, depends on the capacity of the poem to produce and maintain the state of evasive capability that Stevens is trying to evoke in these lines.



Similarly, Ashbery's poem will present tropes of permanence amidst its own imitation and participation in the element of change. But here we enter the area of a vital difference between the two poets. Stevens's formula for the capability of sustaining change is clearly derived from the Romantic idea of the imagination—a faculty that appears on stage with Coleridge's reworking of German idealism, which, as M. H. Abrams demonstrated amply, comes to supplant the more mechanically oriented "fancy" (167–77). Thus Stevens's "evasions"—the moves of the mind responsible for sustaining change—will belong to the mind as a unified and concentrated faculty—the mind as locus and enactor of the work of the synthesizing imagination. Although this mind is an abstract rather than a personal entity in Stevens, it is characterized by almost absolute self-knowledge and self-awareness: Stevens's poems seek moments in which this mind affirms its self-sustaining presence and activity. Ashbery, meanwhile, explores the area of distraction and dispersion of the centrally posed agency found in Stevens.

Where Stevens's poem of change tends to culminate in intense moments of crystallizing self-knowledge, in which, as in the very last lines of the "It Must Change" section of "Notes," change is seen to emanate from "the freshness of ourselves" (344), Ashbery's poetics proposes a different variety of agency. In "The System," as we already noted, the capacity of living in and through change is equaled to a specific formula of absorbing the very casual, distracted, haphazard character of the oncoming events. "The System" is an attempt to work out a formula in which distraction and inattention appear to be efficient means of preparation to shifts in self-knowledge. Distraction, imperceptible loss of the track of thought, which

is then seen to find itself at a different time and place, gradual modulations and shifts of topics, the comings and goings of motifs, the zooming in and out of focus—these aesthetic strategies constitute the very fabric of Ashbery's long poetic prose. Through them, Ashbery is weaving his version of the continuity of consciousness in time: the moments of both clarity and distraction, of sudden influx of self-awareness and forgetting, are revealed as mutually related, brought together as inseparable ingredients of one medium.

It is this medium—the capacious flow of the poetic prose itself—that is temporality fleshed out in language. The prolonged discourse on the ease of gliding through time is not just an imitation of temporality: within the logic of the poem it is the temporal flow itself. The medium houses and enables the development of themes and motifs that accompany the temporal flow: varieties of happiness, forms of self-knowledge and distraction, learning and unlearning. We observe how Ashbery's moments of learning or absorbing forms of happiness are also forms of change, involving the necessity of forgetting and distraction. Unlike in Stevens, however, it is not the crystalline moments of self-knowledge, but, on the contrary, states of distraction, "forms of inattention," that enable an acceptance and symbiosis with change: "this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention . . . [and] you will feel that a change has begun to operate in you, within your very fibers and sinews" (80).



"This knowledge" is an ironic trope that reverses Stevens's increased moments of self-recognition. Ashbery's protagonist is an unstable, local subjectivity which proceeds and learns through opening up to the pervasive otherness brought to bear by the profusions of the text—the profusions whose flow insists on the loss of focus and attention. The text takes precedence over any locally posited human subjectivity embedded in it. In place of Stevens's centralized and abstracted mind, we have the procession of the textuality of the poem itself. The moments of intense revelation are also moments of self-dissolution:

> all traces of doubt will have been pulverized by the influx of light slowly mounting to bury those crass seamarks of egocentricity and warped self-esteem . . . which you no longer need now that the rudder has been swept out of your own hands. (Ashbery 80)

However, it must now be observed that the text itself does reveal, build, or posit a variety of subjectivity: the flow itself is clearly hypothesized as a form of capacious consciousness capable of reflecting on itself. It structures

its own formula of memory and continuity within which local instances of distraction and forgetting are fed into "the system"—the "fibers and sinews" of the textual flow—and are stored in it. The flow of the poetic prose becomes a formula of knowledge, memory, a reservoir of possible local subjectivities. It has a capability of obliterating attention for the sake of storing memory, organizing it, and activating it at other moments. The continuity of this text as medium, its procession—with its oscillations of focus and attention—is precisely what must be maintained as a new variety of permanence. Stevens's trope of evasions is not entirely dropped: it evolves from being a trope for a capably centralized mind—a mind which can always produce a new description of material reality—toward signaling the action of the poem itself.



While Ashbery's local selves, the selves that are embedded in the blocks of prose and which are seen to come in and out of focus, are not permanent, "The System" proposes a different formula for a more permanent agency. The distractions of the text are dialogic—they represent the pervasive otherness of language itself, but the text is a continuous medium capable of maintaining this otherness in a prolonged state of conversational productiveness, which, as some critics have pointed out, is reminiscent of the activity of the analysand in therapy. According to Andrew DuBois, the permanence of this activity is precisely what is at stake, Ashbery's references to the weather in the poem signaling "an ongoing process, a 'continuity' . . . [and] this process is crucially connected to remembering and forgetting, perhaps chiefly in a therapeutic relation" (69). The critic also identifies a tendency of the text to project an overarching, comprehensive atmosphere which he calls "a telling coalescence of those notions of process-without-necessary-progress" (70).

At one of the climactic moments of the poem the discoursing self, now tasked with facing the strong change brought about by falling in love, is able to compose and align itself with the onrush of strong feeling by relying on a mysterious "word," which, although undisclosed, is believed to be buried in the past of the poem itself:

> those eyes . . . are full of apprehension, waiting for this word that must come from you and that you have not in you. . . . Suddenly you become aware that you have been talking for a long time without listening to yourself; you must have said it a long way back without knowing it, for everything in the room has fallen back into its familiar place . . . *the word* that everything hinged on is buried back there. (95, emphasis added)

The fragment clearly turns our attention to the very aesthetic texture and fabric of the poem itself. It brings the activity of "so much talking"

(95)—the activity that is the very substance of the text—to the fore. The fragment delegates the power of organizing knowledge, self-knowledge and understanding, to the larger consciousness of the text, the text that is now evoked as a storage of activated, or, on other occasions, deactivated memory. The achieved organization of the moment is only possible through a "word" that belongs to the past of the text. Ashbery's own forms of "evasion"—his fruitful rhythm of forgetting and remembering—are not an automatic gain: they are a product and achievement of the technique of the poem itself, which is pointed to in this fragment. While Stevens's central consciousness is dispersed in Ashbery's poem, its energies are overtaken by a self-affirming and self-sustaining textuality of the poetic prose. In Stevens, the temporal change is enabled by the faculty of an abstract mind and its imaginative capacity, which Stevens identifies in "Notes" as "our freshness." In Ashbery, the freshness is decisively the poem's: it is the capacious linguistic excess and profusion of "The System" that constitutes a permanent—unchanging—medium within which the concept of change is possible and meaningful. The textual medium takes over the function formerly reserved—in Stevens's poetics—for quasi-Kantian faculties of an abstract mind projected by the poem.



## 4 Conclusions: The Poetics of Plenitude

In both Stevens and Ashbery the poetic discourse on change keeps reverting to and finding itself related to the conceptual framework of permanence. In Stevens, quite revealingly, the discourse on change in the central section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is disclosed at the end as a theatrical display sustained by the mind of an immobile observer. It is the mind's faculty of the synthesizing imagination that sorts out the sensual cornucopia into "change," thus making change a product of a faculty that is both mental and poetic. Thus Stevens's title of "It Must Change" is an instruction: change will not occur of itself—it depends on the poetic effort of the abstract central mind that Stevens keeps projecting in many of his poems. We might point at this moment that it is this effort—the capacity to maintain this mind's productivity—that is the chief concern of Stevens's poetics. The poem's subject—or the poem as subject—rallies the will to maintain such capacity. Stevens's poetics is ultimately one of the constancy of a "will"; again, predictably, the volitional is revealed together with the trope of the mind as the theater of changes toward the end of the "It Must Change" section: "There was a will to change . . . / . . . / . . . too constant to be denied . . ." (344).

This poetic vehicle—the poetic will that also bespeaks "our freshness" in the fragment just quoted—seems, in Stevens, to belong to an abstract subject, a poetic-mental substance, that governs the circulations of the theater of change. In Ashbery, as I have tried to demonstrate, such poetic centralized mental substance is diffused and distributed over and amidst the excess of the poetic prose itself. The prose becomes a medium that takes over the synthesizing functions of Stevens's abstracted central mind. The medium installs a rhythm of forms of knowledge and memory—in which learning and remembering are seen to be vitally connected to unlearning and forgetting—thanks to which these forms are allowed to progress and variously culminate toward forms of personal life: moments in which self-understanding occurs and is upheld amidst change.

We should be able, by now, to articulate the paradoxical positioning of the poetic texts in both poets toward the phenomena they purport to capture. Rather than this being a position of "description," the relation of the text to the phenomenon is more that of the enabling medium. The poetic text not only occupies an epistemic outpost from which the phenomenon may be registered or recognized; it also seems to contain and enable the movement of the phenomenon itself, by showing how the phenomenon, or fact, cannot be separated from the methods of its registering and describing. The poetic text is a mother lode of various possibilities of describing reality: no matter if reality changes or not, if it is of monistic or pluralistic nature, if it is material or spiritual—the ascertaining of these "facts" will depend on interpretive/descriptive techniques and the poetic text presents itself as the prime engine from which the activity ensues.

Pragmatism is a method of coming to terms with such abundance. William James understood that the traditional dilemmas of philosophy are less important than the flexibility of the philosopher as he or she moves between the various possible descriptions of reality. He urged to pay attention to the movement itself—and called this epistemic stance "pragmatism." It is my claim that the Emersonian pragmatist poetics found in Stevens and Ashbery is an aesthetic/poetic echo or reverberation of the abundance of interpretive possibility that attends the pragmatist inquirers as they apply themselves to the inquiry. As they do so, they find themselves amidst an abundant interpretive environment, and it is James's main claim that we should care for this abundance itself.

The abundance, which keeps pushing the inquiring subject onto ever renewed paths of description, is discovered, slightly paradoxically, by James in his idea of "radical empiricism" which was to soon evolve into his "pragmatism": "To the very last, there are the various 'points of view' . . . and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the

other" (135). The finding is paradoxical: where the given fact of the matter was hoped to be found, the pragmatist inquirer encounters only a beginning of the further streaks of interpretive proceedings, whose strains are many. Here is how Charles E. Mitchell, writing about James's indebtedness to Emerson, comments on the paradox:

> The foregrounding of uncertainty and change is a key element of radical empiricism. The perceived construction of the world at any given moment is subject to revision . . . the way must be left open for successive "facts" and experiences to be brought into the frame. (91)



It is the frame that lays ground for the future "facts." Much as this is a clearly epistemological stance, in the pragmatist Emersonian poetics it is hard to distinguish this attitude from aesthetics. The poems of this tradition are aesthetic objects which reverberate with an echo of abundant interpretive productivity: the productivity of constructing a description and the simultaneous awareness of the possibility of its modification. This leads to seeing how the frames of inquiry lay ground for the epistemic finding, and how the frames themselves may change. Pragmatism is an ongoing thought on the flexible capability of modulating the frame, a capability which, by constantly reconfiguring the movement of interpretation, produces an inescapable aesthetic reverberation. Stevens's and Ashbery's poems are interceptions of this very reverberation.

Theirs, then, is a poetics of plenitude in which the poem itself becomes a springboard for various future descriptions of the world. Change or stasis—these, amidst others, will be temporary names for the stages of the achieved body of descriptions. What the poem is concerned with most of all is its own role of maintaining the productivity of any epistemic activity. Where Stevens's and Ashbery's texts purport to deal with change, they do so successfully, but only at the price of identifying an element of permanence within themselves. This element is the richness and abundance of the interpretive capability put into motion by the work of the poem itself.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0013

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# "An Inner Comprehension of the Pueblo Indian's Point of View": Carl Gustav Jung's 1925 Visit to Taos, New Mexico

## Abstract

Carl Jung paid a short visit to Taos, New Mexico, in January 1925. A brief account of his stay at the Pueblo appeared in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, edited by Aniela Jaffe in 1963. Remembering his conversations with Mountain Lake (Antonio Mirabal), Jung wrote of the confrontation between the "European consciousness," or the "European thought," with the Indian "unconscious." My article provides a reading of Jung's text as a meeting ground of the aesthetic, emotional, visionary and of the analytical, rational, explanatory. Like many other European and Anglo-American visitors to Taos Pueblo, Jung rediscovers its capacity to mirror the inner needs of the visitor; he examines the significance of the encounter with the Southwestern landscape and with the Pueblo Indians' religious views in terms of self-reflection and of the return to the mythical. As Carl Jung's "inner comprehension" of the Pueblo Indian's philosophy is mediated through language, aware both of its desire and its inability to become liberated from the European perspectives, Mountain Lake's attitude towards his visitor from Switzerland remains ultimately unknown; Mountain Lake does, however, communicate his readiness to assume the archetypal role of a teacher and a spiritual guide whose insights reach beyond the confines and mystifications of language. According to Jung's account, during this brief encounter of the two cultures, he and his Indian host experienced a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, the sources of which, as they both understood them in their own individual ways, resided in the comprehension of universal sharing.

> Knowledge does not enrich us; it removes us more and more from the mythic world in which we were once at home by right of birth.
> C. G. Jung: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*



In Helen Elna Hokinson's 1938 cartoon for *The New Yorker*, two middle-class, middle-aged women whose fancy hats, long coats, high-heeled shoes, plump faces and stooping postures mirror each other, visit Taos, New Mexico. Known as the "Hokinson ladies," these two clone-like women in city clothes approach a figure of a man wrapped in an Indian blanket, with a Mexican hat on his head, squatting by an adobe wall next to an assortment of wicker baskets and pieces of pottery offered for sale. Behind is a multi-storey, flat-roofed Pueblo village; ladders connect receding terraces and the highest level is drawn against a range of undulating mountains. One of the women says to the other: "Just a minute. I'm going to ask him a question or two about Mrs. Luhan."[1] Like the best of *The New Yorker*'s cartoons, Hokinson's depends for the comic effect on the viewer's/reader's recognition of its aptitude to make the image/caption integrated situation of apparently marginal, incidental character provide a carefully calculated, ironic commentary on the phenomena representative of their time. In Hokinson's Taos cartoon, irony operates on many levels. The women whose semblance seems to correspond to the Pueblo's repeated architectural patterns are there obviously out of place, and at the same time, very much "at home," as though they had just happened to step out into the street in a familiar shopping area. Their ignorance is a kind of innocence, reflecting because, rather than in spite of, their being unaware of it, upon a certain truth about the conditions which made their appearance and the words they speak possible and meaningful. Inseparable from the humorous aspect is a touch of cruelty to the scene; the women are both its target, as we cannot help judging their looks ridiculous in the Pueblo village, and agents, as they cannot help viewing the Indian with complete disregard for the very purpose of his being there: he is interested in selling his goods and not in answering questions about Mrs. Luhan who lives in Taos in a world that is much closer to the visitors' than to his. Would the Indian's answering the questions amount to more than selling his goods? And would these women have come to the Taos Pueblo village as potential buyers had their interest not been stirred by the gossipy information about Mrs. Luhan they could get in the city they came from? It

[1] Hokinson's cartoon was included in *The Complete Cartoons of* The New Yorker, edited by Robert Mankoff (on one of the CDs, together with "all 68,647 cartoons ever published in the magazine"). The cartoon also appears in Lois Palken Rudnick's *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (15).

is ironical that the Indian should be asked a question or two about Mrs. Luhan rather than about himself. It is even more ironical that, were the Indian willing to answer any questions, he would probably feel more comfortable telling these women about Mrs. Luhan than about himself.

Hokinson's cartoon humorously documents the Anglo-American changing perception of Taos and the Southwest from the social, economic and cultural perspective of the post-Depression period, a significant aspect of that perception being also that it is the middle-class women who travel to Taos where a female celebrity of the time chose to have her home. There is no sense of romance, exoticism and authenticity projected onto the Taos Pueblo. The Indian is not stylishly, silently and powerfully posed against the massive, picturesque, ancient dwelling in contrast to the strangers' energetic intrusion fueled by fashion, desire and lack of much time. He himself, no less than the tourists and the wares he offers, is a product of commodification and consumerism. It is the depiction of the land of disenchantment that we find in the cartoon amusingly attractive.[2] As in the early years of *The New Yorker*'s history, it was not uncommon for its staff to decide collectively on the most appropriate caption for a drawing, so one may be tempted to provide alternative texts for that appearing under Hokinson's: "Here of course it's very different—not the U.S.A. at all"; "I am of course a great stranger here"; "And the Indian with his long hair and his bits of pottery and blankets and clumsy home-made trinkets . . . more fun than keeping rabbits and just as harmless"; "The Indian, yes: if one is sure that they are not jeering at you"; "They are all sad. After all, they are true to what is"; "I tell you leave the Indians to their own dark destiny." All of the above quotations come from D. H. Lawrence's letters written in or about Taos, the last one addressed to Mabel Dodge Luhan on whose property he came to live in 1922 in answer to her invitation and their shared vision of redeeming powers of New Mexico's landscape, climate and native inhabitants (717, 761, 804, 814, 847). Developing simultaneously, both influencing and influenced by his relationship with Mabel Dodge Luhan, Lawrence's fascination and disillusionment with the reality of the American Southwest have become part of the region's well-documented history and mythology.

Considering how brief it was, Carl Jung's visit to Taos in 1925 seems more like the Hokinson women's than Lawrence's. Everything else about that visit was so obviously different from the one depicted in the cartoon that, were it to be captured in another drawing/caption visualization for *The New Yorker*, readers seeing the two would no doubt appreciate the



[2] "Land of Enchantments" is the state of New Mexico's official nickname.

emblematic setting's capacity to provide suitable background for strikingly contrastive scenes. There was, to be sure, an anecdotal aspect to Jung's brief visit in Taos, with the figure of Mabel Dodge Luhan playing a part in it. When Jung came there, Mrs. Luhan was away in New York City. She did, however, receive a report from Jung's visit in a letter from Jaime de Angulo, a cowboy, a writer, a linguist, a student of medicine and anthropology, who, himself much "at home" among the Pueblo Indians, invited Jung to Taos. Angulo wrote to Luhan:

> I made up my mind that I would kidnap him if necessary and take him to Taos. It was quite a fight because his time was so limited, but I finally carried it. . . . It was a revelation to him, the whole thing. Of course I had prepared Mountain Lake. He and Jung made contact immediately and had a long talk on religion. (qtd. in Rudnick 97–98)

We may raise our brows at the hasty transition from Angulo observing that "the whole thing" provided Jung with a "revelation" to Angulo acknowledging his own role in staging it. Why did Angulo think Mountain Lake, the Indian name of Antonio Mirabal, needed to be "prepared"? Why "of course"? Did Angulo need to tell Mirabal how famous the visitor was in his own native land? What did Angulo tell Mirabal that Jung might be interested to know? Did Mountain Lake "prepare" himself for the "talk"? To ask more general questions: Why is it that in the relationship of representatives of two cultures the anxiety of difference is a precondition of, necessary preparation for, the satisfaction of contact? And why is it that that contact should be judged in terms of immediacy? These are the questions we might be interested in addressing to Jung himself who begins the description of his visit to Taos by asking: "How, for example, can we become conscious of national peculiarities if we have never had the opportunity to regard our own nation from outside?" (*Memories* 246)

Unfinished and unpublished in his lifetime, the short text "America: The Pueblo Indians" can be found in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* where it appears, following the chronological order, together with the psychologist's other accounts of travel, to North Africa, Kenya, Uganda, India and Italy. To all these places Jung came prepared. The preparations consisted in the assumption of the mediating and essentially falsifying nature of preparations, understood as preconceptions which "suppress" the actual experience, or, using Jung's reference to military psychiatry during the First World War, "psychic defenses against the impressions from outside" (273). Chief among them was persistent return to the notion of difference itself. Jung's texts of travel seem to draw their energy

from acknowledging that energy's source in the confrontation between "European consciousness" or "European thought" and what it recognizes, to the traveler's not entirely unexpected surprise, to be manifestations of the European unconsciousness rather than of African, American, or Indian consciousness. "I had not known in advance what Africa would give me," Jung wrote. But he had known that it would give him something "secret," "invisible," "incapable of being formulated," that in not knowing what Africa would bring him "lay the satisfying answer, the fulfilling experience" (274). "I was not prepared for the existence of unconscious forces within myself which would take the part in these strangers with such intensity" (272), Jung confessed. He was, however, willing and ready to make contact with these strangers, representatives of the "foreign collective psyche" (246), as a means of gaining insight into the reality different from that of "speeds and explosive accelerations," of "steamships, railroads, airplanes . . . rockets" and pocket watches, symbols of European expansion which, of course, allowed Jung, whose time was limited, to get to all places of his interest. "Just a minute" from the caption of Hokinson's cartoon may come to mind. On his trip to India, an "intermezzo" in his intensive work on alchemical philosophy, Jung took with him a volume of *Theatrum Chemicum*, Gerardus Dorneus's work from 1602. For a traveler from Zurich immersed in his speculative studies "like a homunculus in a retort," perceptions of Indian spiritual life and culture "constantly counterpointed" revelations of the unconscious in the book "belonging to the fundamental strata of European thought" (275), and in the contents of a dream about the Holy Grail which he dreamt in Calcutta, "this essentially European dream emerging when I had barely worked my way out of the overwhelming mass of Indian impressions" (282).



The patterns of the textual organization in Jung's account of the Taos experience show traits of his preoccupation with the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Jung talked to Ochwiay Biano (Mountain Lake, Antonio Mirabal) on the roof of the fifth storey of the main building with "characteristic ladders" reaching up towards successive levels ("anticipating" skyscrapers in an American city, as Jung notices), the blazing sun, a subject of their conversation, "rising higher and higher." The dynamics of elevation responds to rather than abolishes the contradiction in Jung's growing "desire" to "[descend] to a still lower cultural level" than that "caught up and imprisoned in the cultural consciousness of the white man" by continuing "to carry the historical comparison still further" (247). What the psychologist from Zurich discovers about himself and about his cultural background on the top roof of the Taos Pueblo, which he discovers also in other destinations, is that his consciousness of being European, that is

of being different, distant, rational and "superior" (245), is for the deeper stages in the process of self-discovery an obstacle, a hindrance, a falsification, by means of such destinations, made more easily definable. In Jung's formulation, his New Mexican message of particular appeal to us today: "I understand Europe, our greatest problem, only when I see where I as a European do not fit into the world" (247).

Jung did come to Taos prepared to ask questions not knowing what questions he could get answers to. Not receiving the answers to questions he asked directly and learning not to ask them were, in effect, the answers he sought and then commented on in his analytical text. Thus, in some of the more characteristic beginnings of paragraphs we read:



> I asked him whether he did not think the sun might be a fiery ball shaped by an invisible god. My question did not even arouse astonishment, let alone anger. (250)
> Unfortunately, the conversation was soon interrupted and I did not succeed in attaining any deeper insight into the symbolism of water and mountain. (251)
> I observed that the Pueblo Indians, reluctant as they were to speak about anything concerning their religion, talked with great readiness and intensity about their relations with the Americans. (251)
> I could observe from his excitement that he was alluding to some extremely important element of his religion. (252)
> I then realized on what the "dignity," the tranquil composure of the individual Indian was founded. (252)

Focused on observation and inquiry, the text of Jung's preliminary Taos Indian case study collects hints, allusive and elusive psychological material which holds the promise of some revelation while holding the mirror to itself. Mountain Lake is prepared to "draw" for Jung a picture of "the real white man," in which, not entirely to his surprise, Jung cannot fail recognizing features of his own countenance and of the very method that the "I" standing so prominent in the fragments quoted above represents: "Their [the white men's] lips are thin, their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression, they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want?" (248). Having for the first time "a good fortune to talk to a non-European, that is a non-white" (247), Jung, a European, a white, is determined not to surrender easily. There is something about him and about his words (and, in his efforts to make the account less "incomplete, "something" is the word he himself finds as useful as the equally vague word "atmosphere") which

allows the very rationale of the encounter, the distinction between "we" and "they" reaches towards some deeper level of significance, to the growing satisfaction of both. The two, Jung and Ochwiay Biano make contact, as Angulo, who may have been observing from a distance, wrote Luhan. When "direct questioning" about religious matters, "something essential," fails, since the betrayal of the secret knowledge or desecration would endanger the Pueblo Indian identity, Jung resolves to making "tentative remarks" and observing "[his] interlocutor's expression for those affective movements which are so very familiar to [him]." Jung's "staring expression" meets the Indian's, evasive and "in the grip of a surprising emotion which he cannot conceal" (250). That emotionalism, which Jung had "a good fortune" to observe also in contacts with native inhabitants of other parts of the world he visited, stands in complementary opposition to the very way of his judging its importance for himself: tears filling Ochwiay Biano's eyes are "a fact which greatly helped to satisfy my curiosity" (250).[3] Were the Indian's tears genuine? Did Mountain Lake want Jung to see them knowing/feeling what they would mean/do to him? Did Jung see tears in Mountain Lake's eyes because he wanted to see them (like in Ravenna where in the mild blue light of the tomb of Galla Placidia he saw the mosaic frescoes "of incredible beauty" which he thought he had forgotten since his earlier visit but which he later learned never, in fact, existed [284–88])? We have reasons to ask such questions because in two longer fragments of his text Jung emphasizes the visionary quality of his perceptions; their function is then similar to that of the dream or *sentiment de déjà vu* accounts often appearing in his other travel narratives.



[3] Brian Yazzie Burkhart's essay on the differences in the approaches to questions and question-formation as represented by American Indian philosophy and traditional Western philosophy could be viewed as a useful commentary on Jung's understanding of Mountain Lake's tendency to ignore his direct inquiry. In "What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology," Burkhart observes that for Native Americans questions are often "a sign of confusion and misunderstanding" because "[t]he answer to a question often lies in the question itself rather than in some solution outside of the question." Making a reservation that his argumentation applies mostly to "popular" modern Anglo-American philosophy, Burkhart sees it as "propositional," not so much "conducive" to some human ends but rather an end in itself, and dependent on "question-asking" and "hypothesis-testing." In contrast, American Indian philosophy tends to be less dogmatic since it is always shaped by human activities and experiences, the "lived knowledge" which "cannot be directly spoken or written about." The Native wisdom, Burkhart writes, is "a wisdom that is carried in one's heart," follows the principle of relatedness and "the limits of questioning principle," both essentially alien to Western philosophy due to its "incapacity to grasp the idea that certain things *should not* be known" (*American Indian Thought* 15–26).

The first of the two follows Ochwiay's telling Jung of the sources of the white people's cruelty and madness: they think with their heads and not with their hearts, as the Indians do. Significantly, Jung's "meditation" on the meaning of Biano's words and gestures leads him to the experience combining the sensual, expressive and the spiritual, the concealed—his readiness to follow the Indian way. "I *felt* rising within me like a shapeless mist something unknown and yet deeply familiar" (248, emphasis added), he wrote, never tired of evoking the spirits of the past. These spirits both prevent him from and help him in reaching the goal—they need to be summoned, given shape and done away with. It seems as though in his vision Jung were opening a book on the history of the so-called progress of the white civilization, the pages filled with names emblematic of evil doing and oppression. The mist condenses into scenes of smashing, pillaging, murdering, the images of the Roman eagle and the tips of the Roman lances, the "keenly incised features" of Julius Caesar, Scipio Africanus, Pompey, the figures of Charlemagne, St. Augustine, Columbus, Cortez. Jung sees the processions of conquerors, warriors, crusaders, conquistadores, missionaries, bringing destruction to the indigenous people with sword, fire, torture, firewater, syphilis, scarlet fever. Even the sounds of some of their names, like the sounds of the words "Crusading armies" ["*Kreuzfahrerheere*"] or "Christian creed" ["*das christliche Credo*"], seem to carry with them notes of aggressiveness. In a still further symbolic condensation of the drive to colonize, suppress, eliminate, Carl Jung sees "the face of a bird of prey seeking with cruel intentness for distant quarry" which he then associates with "predatory creatures" adorning "our coats of arms" (248–49). The text invites us, as it were, to see a direct line of relatedness between Jung's recognition of the white man's "cruel intentness" and his own "curiosity" and methods of "questioning," between "a distant quarry" and "something essential" Jung can occasionally "hit on."

Another "visionary" fragment follows Ochwiay Biano's words: "The sun is God. Everyone can see that" (251). It is written as an account of what actually happened rather than as a description of a mental image. Jung remembers standing alone by the river looking at a distant mountain rising high above the plateau. He then "suddenly" hears "a deep voice, vibrant with suppressed emotion" speaking right behind his left ear: "Do you not think that all life comes from the mountain?" An elderly Indian who has approached him inaudibly asks Jung a direct question of the kind that Jung would be more likely to ask himself, which, however, is directed to his left ear, the one on the side of the heart. The "swelling emotion" which he "feels" in the way the Indian utters the word "mountain" responds to Jung's own immersion in the New Mexican landscape and brings about an

immediate recognition of the obvious truth of there being life where there is water. Jung's emphasis on the word "obvious" (he uses it twice) is again that of one who "feels" what he says rather than who intends to state a fact, just as in the earlier account of the white man's violence the intensity of the vision becomes much more important than the listing of exemplary instances of historical infamy. As Jung reminds us at the beginning of his memories from Taos, it lies in the very nature of the psychological material that it should make the scientific mind "much more subjectively involved." While the Indian asks him a Jungian question, his own answer follows the Indian way mirroring Mountain Lake's manner of speech: "Everyone can see that you speak the truth" (251). Seeing, speaking, knowing form a single continuous line introduced, unlike in the sequence of passages quoted earlier, by the word "everyone", not "I." This formulation is perhaps as far as Jung's text about his Taos experience can encapsulate the sense of completion it seeks. The condensation it offers, not so much an illustration of the *déjà entendu* principle as a matter of conscious choice, may be taken to be Jung's symbolic act of rejecting the "coat of arms" burdened inheritance protecting him from a deeper insight into the truth of the "European" psyche. Jamie de Angulo was right when he wrote Luhan that "the whole thing" was for Jung a "revelation"; he was right in the sense that a "revelation" for Jung was contact with "the whole thing:" the totality of psychic experience.



The last paragraphs of Jung's text center on the idea of wholeness as (momentary) liberation from "European rationalism" and the possibility of gaining a broader and deeper perspective, fitting into the world, by embracing "the Pueblo Indian's point of view" (252). The religion of the Pueblo Indians, Mountain Lake tells Jung, helps Father sun in his daily journey across the sky; benefiting from the rites are, therefore, not only those practicing them but "the whole world." Entering the mythic world from which our drive for knowledge has distanced us, Jung explains, makes life both "cosmologically meaningful" and home-like; immune to the inhibiting sense of naïveté or irresponsibility, an individual feels then elevated to the position of "a metaphysical factor," both conditioned by and conditioning the actions of the divine. The conjunction of the innermost and of the broadest outside (an "immeasurable" horizon as seen from the Taos Pueblo highest roof) finds its final representation in Jung's formula "God and us," where "and" is not a sign of opposition but of equation. For the broadest, one could say monumental, development of that idea, not entirely free from the growing realization of difficulties and responsibility when undertaken in the German language, the world would have to wait until the publication of successive volumes of Thomas Mann's tetralogy

*Joseph and His Brothers*. Aware of the sources of pleasure in seeking correspondences and establishing cultural affinities, Jung himself puts his New Mexican experience of "the mountain, which has no name" in the context of the revelation of Yahweh on Sinai and Nietzsche's inspirations in the Engandine.

Readers of Jung's manuscript on Taos will probably find it impossible to free themselves from the impression that the "individual Indian" of whom Jung writes may owe some of his "dignity," "tranquil composure" and "enviable serenity" to the company of visitors such as Jung and the readers themselves when sensitive to and appreciative of what he, the Indian, "means" to them. In the last sentence of the text, Jung evokes the image of the Indian he believes "everybody" desires to be: "Such a man is in the fullest sense of the word in his proper place" (253).

It would be too cruel to have the Hokinson women say this to each other when they approach the Indian selling his goods by the entrance to the ground floor of the Taos Pueblo. A more appropriate drawing for the text would show the two, Mountain Lake and Carl Jung, sitting on the highest storey of the Pueblo, Mountain Lake wrapped in a woolen blanket, Carl Jung wearing his European clothes that may appear too tight for him, both looking at a distant horizon with a river and a mountain basking in the rising or setting sun. Something about the play of light and shadow in Mountain Lake's countenance should remind us of the flowing, smooth, adobe-like features of Tony Luhan, Mabel Dodge's Indian husband as famously photographed by Ansel Adams, while the play of light and shadow on the face of Carl Jung, sharper, more furrowed, already prognostic of the photograph from the cover of the 1963 edition of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, should encourage one to seek links between the two portraits. Perhaps an even more challenging and imaginative caption for the drawing will still then be the sentence from the beginning of Jung's manuscript which reads: "At the same time, one never knows which is more enjoyable: catching sight of new shores, or discovering new approaches to age-old knowledge that has been almost forgotten" (247). In agreement with D. H. Lawrence's ironic perception of the white man's response the Pueblo Indian culture, "enjoyable" ["*entzückender*"] could perhaps be underlined.

The language of Jung's "America: The Pueblo Indians" attempts to find aesthetic means to describe a highly emotional, hardly communicable response to the experience of Taos. It is designed to provide him with the "vessel" to float "on deep, alien seas" (247). Searching for possible formulations of some truth about his encounter with the Indian culture, Jung makes reference to and actual use of pictorial elements. The "picture" of the "real" white people which Ochwiay Biano allows him to see for the

first time in his life is contrasted with the ways he remembers them depicted in "sentimental, prettified color prints" (248). But the way he himself paints the picture of Taos—its square reddish adobe structures, clear skies, a clear stream, a gently rolling plateau, conical peaks, an isolated mountain wrapped in clouds, isolated figures of Indians wrapped in their blankets—Jung celebrates rather than seeks escape from sentimentalizing and prettifying patterns. Despite his propensity to see clearly through the missionary practices of spiritual and cultural colonization, the kind of picture Jung draws of the Taos Pueblo and its inhabitants belongs to the same gallery of imaginative representations of the American Southwest as the one painted by Willa Cather in 1927 in the opening chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; there Father Latour's vision of the "cruciform tree" taking shape among the conical monotony of the desert evolves into a well-balanced composition of a pastoral miniaturist assembling such familiar romanticized elements of the New Mexican landscapes as adobe houses, streams, clover fields, and figures of Mexican girls and boys harmoniously completing the scene of tranquility. With its dependence on the need for order, Jung's account of his aesthetic appreciation of Taos (like Cather's literary account of her aesthetic appreciation of a New Mexican village) is a compromise between a European (or urban American) consciousness and what it recognizes as alien.



Jung's "America: The Pueblo Indians" adds to a composite picture of Taos which has been constructed by its short and long-term visitors since the second half of the nineteenth century and which demonstrates the place's capacity to respond to the need for what in *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* Lois Palken Rudnick calls "the preservation of the world's relatively pristine natural environment and the native peoples who inhabited them as necessary to the well-being of modern society" (8). In the introduction to the book, Rudnick includes a quotation from Susan Sontag's essay "The Anthropologist as Hero" on the condition of the "felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change" (4). That condition, defining the existential situation of people in the twentieth century in terms of homelessness and homesickness, creates the desire for the "self" to seek itself in the "other." The "other," Sontag writes, "is experienced as a harsh purification of 'self,'" while simultaneously the "'self' is busily colonizing all strange domains of experience." When Sontag writes that "Europe seek itself . . . among preliterate peoples, in a mythic America" (qtd. in Rudnick 4), she is actually summarizing Jung's account of his Taos Pueblo experience as a kind of self-reflection, an Indian psychological detour which is ultimately meant

to bring him, like so many other representatives of the "foreign collective psyche" journeying to the mythic American Southwest, back to the "proper place," back home.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0014

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# In Praise of Slacking: Richard Linklater's *Slacker* and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* as Hallmarks of 1990s American Independent Cinema Counterculture

## ABSTRACT

Some people live to work, others work to live, while still others prefer to live lives of leisure. Since the Puritans, American culture and literature have been dominated by individuals who have valued hard work. However, shortly after its founding, America managed to produce the leisurely Rip Van Winkle, who, over time, has been followed by kindred spirits such as, for instance, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Twain's Huck Finn, Melville's Bartleby, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, the Hippies, and Christopher McCandless. With the rise of the Indie Film movement of the 1990s, so came the rise of the slacker film. Films such as *Slacker* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Wayne's World* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), *Mallrats* (1995), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *Office Space* (1999) filled theatres over the decade with characters who take an unorthodox view of work and stress the importance of leisure in life. This essay discusses two slacker films, Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), which defined the slacker phenomenon in the 1990s and constituted two important landmarks in American independent film. While many of us may find the slacker pathetic and annoying, this essay argues that there is much value to be found in this healthy counterculture. By offering their perspectives on issues such as the Puritan work ethic, work-incited self-importance, leisure versus idleness and human relationships, Linklater and Smith join the preceding generations of slackers, providing a much needed balance to the American obsession with work and success.

Ronald Reagan once joked: "It's true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance?" (Berecz 136). Enjoyable as the quip is, its opening premise could not be more wrong. A rather drastic example of how deadly work can be is the number of post office massacres in America in the 1980s and 1990s, the most tragic of which in Edmond, Oklahoma, in 1986 took place during Reagan's presidency. As Mark Ames observes, these killing sprees, as well as the majority of the 1990s office shootings, cannot be blamed on the mentally fragile perpetrators, lax gun control laws, and violent culture alone—"something deeper and unexplored in the culture was causing these murders to take place" (85, 84). Ames argues that most of the massacres can be linked, directly or indirectly, to the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 signed by Nixon as well as to Reaganomics, the economic tactics of the Reagan administration privileging the rich, creating an even bigger wage disparity, and enhancing new work regulations, some of which increased the already stressful atmosphere and "institutionalized top-down harassment" at the workplace (Ames 68, 71, 73–75, 77). "[A] recurring theme in rage massacres" which comes up during the interviews with people who knew the individuals responsible for the killings is: "He was stressed, yet he didn't talk about it" (Ames 86). "Even when the stress is too much," Ames adds, "the sufferer doesn't want to talk about it, since even admitting one's unhappiness or inability to deal with the stress is to be a loser" (86), and even more so in modern America. Of course, the killing rampages are not the only side effects of longer work hours and unfavourable working conditions. Americans generally seem not to know how to relax. "The United States, unlike a mere 137 other countries, has no annual leave statute on the books" (Robinson), and, consequently, Americans remain one of the most vacation-deprived nations in the world, which is directly linked to, among other ailments, a higher risk of heart attack and, unsurprisingly, death (Gini 5). The advance in technology has not solved the problem either, and Nixon's 1956 prophecy about a four-day workweek for Americans "in the not so distant future" never materialized (Honoré 188), as with the advent of the World Wide Web Revolution in the 1990s, which was supposed to create more free time, people actually started working more than before. "Anyone who has worked in the 1980s and 1990s," Ames observes, "knows that technology—through cell-phones, pagers, Blackberries, the Internet, and so on—has blurred the line between work hours and off hours" (95). Today, Americans deprive themselves not only of off hours and vacation time but also of "free time within the office: the traditional one-hour lunch break has fallen now to an average of twenty nine minutes" (95).

Luckily, the 1990s did not go down in American history only as the period of work-related mass murders, low-paying jobs, the doubling of required overtime work, and the Internet craze which failed to "free up the American worker to spend more time . . . with his or her family, at home or on vacation, reaping greater benefits for less and less work" (Ames 77, 95). To paraphrase Newton's third law, for every action there is bound to be an opposite reaction. The Transcendentalists in the 1830s, the Beats in the 1950s, and the Hippies in the 1960s are probably the three most widely known American movements which in their respective times rejected various social norms, most of all materialism, the traditional work ethic, and a stressful lifestyle. In the 1990s, American movie theatres were flooded with so-called slacker films. Such culturally significant works as *Slacker* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Wayne's World* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), *Mallrats* (1995), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *Office Space* (1999) all feature characters whose relation to work is rather unconventional. Although all of these titles deserve much more than a brief introductory mention, two of them have become unquestionable hallmarks of the decade's counterculture. Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994) defined the slacker phenomenon in the 1990s, primarily by taking as their "informing ethos the idea that work was worthless, depressing, and unredemptive" (Lutz 8), and created two important landmarks in American independent film due to their uncommon themes and exceptional budget limitations. As 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the release of *Clerks* and 2015 the 25th anniversary of the completion and first public screening of *Slacker*, it is a good time to look back at these two indie cult productions and remind ourselves what singles them out among other films of that period and how their perspectives on issues such as the traditional, Puritan work ethic, work-incited self-importance, leisure versus idleness, human relationships, and creativity continue to provide a much needed balance to the American obsession with work, career, and success.

## Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991)

Set in Austin, Texas, *Slacker* has no plot, no particular character focus and, seemingly, no distinct lessons or constructive conclusions to offer. Using "the fluid camera and a kind of 'baton-passing' among the characters as they [run] into one another" (Macor 96), Linklater follows a motley of rather eccentric individuals, most of them under 30, who amble around Austin without any purpose, identifying themselves by what they say and in what situation the viewer meets them. The audience has little chance to bond

with any of the characters as the story, or rather lack of it, stays with each for only a few minutes and then moves onto the next, more or less engaging, conversation. After one of the first screenings in Austin, a dissatisfied filmgoer, probably a hard-working member of the community, expressed his opinion about Linklater's loafers in rather unambiguous terms: "Why are the lives of these unproductive, pretentious, and boring people documented on film? What have they done to make the world or even the city of Austin a better place?" (Macor 105). This sentiment must have been shared by many more viewers, including various potential investors and film festival organizers, who were initially reluctant or bluntly refused to screen *Slacker* when Linklater tried to promote some of the film's footage to gather funds for its completion (Macor 106).

Linklater's production struggled much more than many other independent cult films to receive its deserved recognition, partially due to the reasons expressed by the disgruntled Austin viewer, who was not alone in his observations. As many reviewers point out, Linklater's characters do not do much in the sense of being socially productive: "They sleep late, go out for coffee and a newspaper, hang around in bookstores, watch movies, lie around in bed arguing, practice the art of the guest list pickup" (Walters). The characters' names, featured in the end credits as a collection of descriptive identification labels, also speak volumes about their daily schedules and approach to the traditional work ethic. The list includes over one hundred individuals among whom the following few seem representative of the community portrayed by Linklater: Should Have Stayed at Bus Station (played by the director), a broke individual who rides on a bus into Austin one morning and, after getting into a taxi, talks for three full minutes about different separate realities that might be existing in different thoughts we have and choices we consider but do not decide to follow; Street Musician, a relatively self-explanatory name; Dostoyevsky Wannabe, a coffee shop customer whose line "Who's ever written a great work about the immense effort required in order not to create?" (*Slacker*) has become one of the film's trademarks; Been on the Moon Since the 50s, an aging, slightly paranoid beatnik walking around with a glass of coffee in hand and offering random passersby a monologue on conspiracy theories involving alien abductions, the greenhouse effect, and secret government interventions such as, for instance, "antigravity technology" Americans supposedly "stole from the Nazis after the end of World War II" (*Slacker*); Pap Smear Pusher, a female hustler trying to scam Ultimate Loser and Stephanie from Dallas, two of the film's other loafers, by selling them what she says is Madonna's pap smear; Recluse in Bathrobe, a random apartment dweller who goes out to get his pre-noon coffee and newspaper in a robe and loafers only to return to his apartment and get back

in bed; and, last but not least, Hitchhiker Awaiting "True Call," who, asked by Video Interviewer if he voted in the most recent election, quips, "Hell, no. I've got less important things to do" (*Slacker*), and then, asked about what he does for a living, retorts:

> You mean "work"? To hell with the kind of work you have to do to earn a living. All it does is fill the bellies of the pigs who exploit us. Hey, look at me. I am making it. I may live badly, but at least I don't have to "work" to do it. . . . I'll get a job when I hear the true call. (*Slacker*)

Similar attitudes underlie the daily activities of all the film's characters. They are all busy but not with what is traditionally considered "work," and all of them seem to live if not badly then at least very modestly.



Social critic Bertrand Russell claimed that "[c]onsistent purpose is not enough to make life happy, but is almost an indispensable condition of a happy life" (218). Since work is the most common means of providing such "consistent purpose," one may assume that work is a necessary ingredient of happiness. Those who "wander," Russell states, "are less likely to achieve satisfaction" (218). Looking at Linklater's characters, however, one does not get the feeling that they are particularly unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives. To an outsider with a steady job and daily duties, they may seem pathetic, useless, depressing, and annoying in their loitering, but to themselves and those who come in contact with them within the baton-passing narrative, they are just everyday people going about their more or less exciting business, some even with a true calling, like Video Interviewer. Still, as the work ethic is an inherent part of most economically developed Western cultures, all this ambling, philosophizing, and apparent inaction made *Slacker* travel an exceptionally bumpy and unsure road before the film gained wider public recognition, most probably because having to witness for almost 100 minutes a strolling parade of characters who have no cause or purpose may eventually become tiring. After the film's premiere, one of the critics observed:

> Mr. Linklater apparently sees his characters . . . as somehow representative of our time. . . . Their charm and humor, however, are not inexhaustible. After a while, a certain monotony sets in, as well as desperation. It isn't easy being eccentric, and it's even more difficult to remain eccentric in the company of other eccentrics. A terrible transformation occurs: the unusual begins to look numbingly normal. (Canby C8)

In other words, like too much work, too much slacking can also be dull. *Slacker*, it seems, could have antagonized some potential film investors not

only because the film has no story or plot and, according to one producer, suffers from an "absence of compelling dialogue" (Macor 102), but also because the traditional work ethic is not represented in the film at all, leaving many slacker-hating viewers only with what they already feel towards non-productive individuals in their everyday reality without the necessity of paying for a movie ticket.

Paradoxically then, Linklater's portrayal of peaceful, toil-free existence, which most overworked people should theoretically relate to, had to work hard to be noticed and appreciated on more than the local and campus levels. Yet, its apparent drawback, the total rejection of such an integral part of life as work, is what, in fact, made *Slacker* the most unique film of the 1990s slacker era. The director defends his characters by claiming that this seemingly unproductive kind of lifestyle can still be appealing, especially when compared to what one observes today in most public places where people do not talk to each other any more but stare at their laptops and phones (Savlov, "Slack"). The community presented in *Slacker* embodies on a local scale what Marx might have had in mind when he wished the working class would develop a class consciousness that would help them unite and prevail over the capitalist class promoting various forms of divide. Linklater's protagonists unite by unanimously doing nothing, refusing to adopt a consumerist approach to life, and not letting anyone trick them into believing that a laidback lifestyle is socially unconstructive. According to the director, this attitude of communal slacking has managed to empower more lives than expected:

> I was always kind of pleased when I had people come up to me and [say] something like, "Hey, you know, seeing that film, it really kind of validated my life." Because it was, really, how a lot of us were living. You didn't have a lot to show for yourself, but you weren't an uninterested, unintelligent person, either. It sort of documented . . . a lifestyle that wasn't unique in itself but had had a long continuum from the Beats and beyond. That kind of got lost in the go-go Eighties and the materialistic culture that sprang from out of that. You may have worked a busboy job but really you were in a band, you were a writer, you were an artist. That's how you defined yourself. And that sort of culture should always be that way, and to a large degree, it probably still is. (Linklater qtd. in Savlov, "Slack")

Linklater's characters, and the culture they sustain, position work as an additional element to life, as something that everyone should, but does not have to, do, as a construct that exists and can be attended to, but should not interfere with thoughts, ideas, unrushed conversations, and joyous artistic experimentation. Such relaxed activities, unlike most standard labour,

belong truly to their creators, who, poor, pretentious, idle, and unnerving as they may seem to others, know how to relate to each other without resentment and aggression. They may not always be entirely engrossed in one another's philosophizing, but they do not discourage or mock it. In his 2004 review, celebrating the DVD Criterion Collection edition of *Slacker*, Marc Savlov points out that, in spite of its general pejorative meaning, back in the early 1990s, "the term 'slacker' was a badge of honor."

After the Sundance and Berlin festivals rejected *Slacker* in 1990, Linklater decided "to show the film in the open market section of the Berlin Film Festival" (Macor 102). When only two people showed up to the first public screening, "a miserable Linklater wandered around the city and tried to consider other career alternatives" (Macor 102). Fortunately, like his characters, he patiently trudged on, refusing to believe his film had "no theme" (Macor 102). Finally, *Slacker* found a wider and more enthusiastic audience at the Seattle Film Festival (Macor 103) and gradually gathered more attention and positive critical comments from audiences and film professionals nationwide. It turns out promoting laziness as an alternative lifestyle is as hard as being able to slack in real life with everyone around working and looking down on the unoccupied, yet Linklater managed to make his unorthodox vision about a bunch of slackers succeed, providing American culture with yet another rags-to-riches story. While a hard and accomplished worker himself, around the time *Slacker* came to life, Linklater proved he could live very cheaply (Macor 90), not to say "badly," and succeed on his own terms, relying mostly "'on community and help and favors'" (Macor 92) and completing his project for the notable amount of $23,000, which remains one of the lowest film budgets to date. This spirit of human cooperation, reciprocity, and thriftiness is what Linklater's characters, as well as most slackers, base their life philosophy on. In 2012, *Slacker* was selected by the National Film Preservation Board to join the National Film Registry as a culturally significant film and is preserved as national heritage in the Library of Congress. Linklater's low-budget enterprise continues to encourage its old and new viewers to re-consider life less in terms of work and consumerism and more in terms of human relationships and exchange of ideas. It is true that the two sometimes go hand in hand, yet, generally, work tends to predominate, often reducing life to a monotonous race.



## Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994)

*Slacker* was launched nationwide by Orion Classics on July 5, 1991. In her interview with Linklater, celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Slacker*'s release,

Marjorie Baumgarten points out that since 1991, Linklater's nontraditional narrative "has been frequently cited by writers and other filmmakers as an inspirational forebear of the low-budget American indie film movement (perhaps stated most famously by Kevin Smith in his credits for *Clerks*)." Over the years, in different interviews, Kevin Smith often admitted how, after having seen *Slacker*, he thought that if people went to see Linklater's eccentric film, which Smith considered very funny, he could make a similar low-budget film and present it, as Linklater did, at the Independent Feature Film Market in New York, where potential producers and distributors would take interest in it, and the rest would be just another success story, enabling Smith to make a real film for real money. While the first screening of *Clerks* was rather unpromising, the rest was indeed a success story. Made for $27,575, *Clerks* was nominated for numerous film festival awards, won several of them, and grossed over $3 million nationwide in its theatrical run. Little did Smith know that his first film, which was only to open the door to his future, glamorous career, would in fact become what is possibly his best work to date and one of the top American cult classics. *Clerks* follows a workday of two 22-year old underachievers: Dante Hicks, a convenience store employee, and Randal Graves, a clerk at a video rental store. Most of the time, instead of doing their jobs, they just talk to each other about subjects as various as *Star Wars*, annoying customers, career choices, and hermaphroditic porn. In contrast to Linklater's film, *Clerks* is set in a workplace environment and is much more focused on the frustrations of daily work. Roger Ebert observes that "one of the many charms of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* is that it clocks a full day on the job," whereas in most movies, with the exception of "cops, robbers, drug dealers and space captains," "hardly anybody ever works."

We meet Dante when he crawls out of his closet, where he was apparently sleeping, to answer a phone call from his boss who needs him to come in on his day off, one of the film's many reminders that one should not let work intrude upon one's life. Throughout the whole day, Dante keeps complaining about his situation, repeating "I'm not even supposed to be here today" (*Clerks*). He does not care that an extra day of work equals a few extra dollars—the job is so debilitating that no amount of money can make up for having the free day ripped from his life. Randal is over half an hour late for work, and one may easily assume it is a common occurrence. Unlike Dante, he is not bothered by the drudgery of his job. He simply treats it as an opportunity to make some money while mostly watching films and hanging out with his best friend. One of the very first conversations the two clerks share about the work ethic is after Randal comes into the convenience store to collect the tapes a displeased customer left with Dante due to Randal's turning up late. Randal takes the tapes

back to the video store and, off screen, meets the frustrated customer who complains about Randal's customer service skills. Back at Dante's store, Randal summarizes the exchange for his friend:

> Randal: Some guy just came in refusing to pay late fees. Said the video store was closed for two hours yesterday. So, I tore up his membership.
> Dante: Shocking abuse of authority.
> Randal: Hey, I'm a firm believer in the philosophy of a ruling class. Especially since I rule. (*Clerks*)



Randal is not particularly polite to most of his customers, yet, in his defence, many of the video store clients seem to treat life too seriously and have too little imagination and empathy to put themselves in Randal's shoes. The gangly video store clerk knows a lot about films, and, if approached by someone who really wants to rent a quality film, he would most probably come up with some excellent recommendations. As this seldom seems the case, Randal treats his job with very little respect and responsibility, which, as the above dialogue asserts, does not stop him from laying down some mock ground rules. By tearing up the disgruntled customer's membership, while being partly responsible for the customer's late fees, Randal exposes the unwarranted self-importance many jobs evoke in people. He, of course, seems to be using his "abuse of authority" mostly to entertain Dante.

Obnoxious self-importance, however, is a serious social issue, and very few people know how to control this unappealing personality trait. The work ethic to which many economically successful cultures ascribe, with the United States at the head, and which is the root of the insufferable self-importance most people take on along with their jobs, dates back to the Puritan doctrine of predestination and the contorted logic it instigated: "By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which . . . [a]ll are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation" (Calvin 742). Although theoretically no one knew which group they would eventually join, industrious American Puritans finally assumed that all kinds of affluence could be typologically deciphered as a sign of salvation. As a result, many people still "take on the idea that worldly success and wealth are outward signs of God's approval of your conduct," which frequently leads to a feeling of self-importance (Hodgkinson 262), causing individuals to act less nobly than one might expect from the chosen ones. By destroying the membership of the dissatisfied customer, who prior to lecturing Randal lectures Dante on how irresponsible the clerk from the video store is, Randal mocks not only the abuse of authority many people tend to exhibit in their jobs, but also the

fact that many people take their self-importance almost entirely from the jobs they do, the money they earn, and the things they buy. "The job system," Tom Hodgkinson points out, "with its rigid hierarchies of juniors and seniors, deputies and directors, executives and managers, . . . feeds self-importance. No, you are not just a quintessence of dust, you are Senior Brand Manager! . . . You are a *somebody*!" (267). Randal sees his and most other jobs for what they are—a way to earn enough money to do much more pleasant things than work, even while working. He says to Dante who sometimes treats his clerical position too seriously:



> Jesus, you overcompensate for having what's basically a monkey's job. You push fucking buttons. Anybody can waltz in here and do our jobs. . . . You're so obsessed with making it seem so much more epic . . . than it really is. Christ, you work in a convenience store, Dante! And badly, I might add! I work in a shitty video store, badly as well. (*Clerks*)

In spite of working a menial job and having little respect for it, Randal indeed "rules." No self-righteous customer is going to rub his shortcomings in his face because, even if Randal is negligent, the unimportance of his job gives him the freedom to risk losing it. Professing half seriously, half tongue-in-cheek that he is "a firm believer in the philosophy of a ruling class," Randal exploits the term "ruling class" mainly to support his slacking, which precludes anyone from ruling over him. When after another mistreatment of a client Dante calls Randal a danger to society, "to both the dead and the living," Randal tells him that he likes to think of himself as "a master of his own destiny" and, regardless of what Dante or any other employee, employer or customer might think, to him "title does not dictate behavior" (*Clerks*). As a result, Randal's belief in his ruling position and disregard for artificial work hierarchies weave into what seems to be a healthy form of self-worth, a standpoint that greatly differs from pompous self-importance.

Randal's attitude towards work lets him enjoy the "monkey's job" he does, and one has a feeling that he would be equally happy working any job that does not interfere with his social life, and if it did, he would probably quit it, because Randal's frame of mind is that of leisure. In *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, philosopher Josef Pieper argues that leisure differs from idleness, but many people have a distorted understanding of both concepts. "In the High Middle Ages," Pieper writes, "it was precisely lack of leisure, an inability to be at leisure, that went together with idleness; . . . the restlessness of work-for-work's-sake arose from nothing other than idleness" (47). In other words, in Pieper's view, if someone does not know how to be at leisure, does not let his or her mind wander freely and ponder creatively, then he or she is bound to fall

prey to "the restlessness of a self-destructive work-fanaticism," which, in turn, makes one idle not only to oneself but also to society (47–48). Numbers support this theoretical assumption. For example, one of the studies conducted at the beginning of the current millennium estimated that stress caused by work "costs the American economy $300 billion in diminished productivity, employee turnover, and insurance" (Ames 112). Stress-induced idleness, according to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, results in "more than half of the 550 million working days lost annually in the United States from absenteeism" (Ames 112). In contrast to anxiety-triggered idleness, which, ironically, is predominantly work-related, to be leisurely means to allow oneself to be calm and in agreement with one's own thoughts, "to be disengaged from the tedium of tasks—to be open, observant, and receptive to issues outside of self and one's immediate needs" (Gini 24). What truly opposes the concept of idleness is not "business ethos," Pieper states, "not the industrious spirit of the daily effort to make a living, but rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole" (49). Pieper believes that only from such a relaxed state of mind can rise "that special freshness of action," which, however, should never be confused "with the narrow activity of the 'workaholic'" (49). In this light, Smith's Randal is the epitome of Pieper's concept of leisure—he is respectful of his own current needs and never does anything that could endanger his peace of mind, which, in turn, helps him do his tedious job efficiently enough, stay open to his best friend's dilemmas, and offer him clever solutions. Randal's state of mind lets him work or not work without remorse, be creative or less creative with an equal feeling of satisfaction.



In contrast, Dante is a slacking specimen who, as his name implies, is lost in life and ridden with uncertainties and contradictions. His frequently voiced dissatisfaction with his job, as well as with Randal's behaviour, distorts Dante's work and slacking equally, or, to use Pieper's nomenclature, opposes that "special freshness of action" and, thus, becomes one of the "Seven Capital Sins" (cf. Pieper 49). Dante handles his work duties a little more responsibly than Randal, and even comes in on his free day to comply with his boss's request, yet he constantly complains about his life situation. At the end of their workday, when many things go wrong, including Dante being fined for selling a packet of cigarettes to a little girl, which was actually Randal's doing, Randal and Dante argue, mainly because of Dante's growing frustrations:

> Randal: Oh what, what's with you, man? . . . What the hell's your problem?
> Dante: This life. . . . I'm stuck in this pit, working for less than slave wages. Working on my day off, the goddamn steel shutters are closed, I deal with every backward ass fuck on the planet. . . .

> Randal: That's all bullshit, man. You know what the real problem here is? . . . You should shit or get off the pot. . . .
> Dante: What the hell are you talking about?
> Randal: I'm talking about this thing you have, this inability to improve your situation in life. . . . You sit there and blame life for dealing you a cruddy hand, never once accepting the responsibility for the way your situation is. . . . If you hate this job and the people, and the fact that you have to come in on your day off, then why don't you quit?
> Dante: Oh, like it's that easy.
> Randal: It is. You just up and quit. There's other jobs, and they pay better money. You're bound to be qualified for at least one of them. So what's stopping you? . . . You're comfortable, right? This is a life of convenience for you, and any attempt to change it would shatter the pathetic microcosm you've fashioned for yourself.
> Dante: Oh, like your life's any better?
> Randal: I'm satisfied with my situation for now. You don't hear me complaining. You, on the other hand, have been bitching all day. (*Clerks*)

Dante admits that his constant dissatisfaction with work and life is his own fault because since childhood he has been unable to initiate change. "I don't have the ability to risk comfortable situations on the big money and the fabulous prizes" (*Clerks*), he declares melodramatically, but when Randal assures him he does, Dante meets his friend's support with another round of excuses. While there are moments when Dante succumbs to Randal's influence and manages to have a good time at work, like when they close the store to play hockey on the store's roof or to go to a funeral wake, ultimately, Dante is a remorseful, self-pitying slacker. Fortunately for Dante, Randal's belief in his lost slacker friend brings balance to their relationship, elevating their daily conversations and activities from the pit of Dante's despair to a level that is uplifting enough to make the audience look more closely at, and possibly revise, their own attitudes towards work.

Because *Clerks* indeed focuses on work much more than Linklater's *Slacker*, or most films in general, the question of advancing one's life status and career resurfaces in Smith's story as well. One of the reasons why Dante is not such a happy-go-lucky individual as Randal is that Dante's girlfriend, Veronica, who attends college, triggers his remorse by frequently pestering Dante about making something of himself. Her pep talks are well-intended and, at the end of the day, she is a positive character, but Dante does not want to follow the path she has chosen for herself because, as Randal puts it, he actually enjoys his "life of convenience" (*Clerks*). While "the question of ambition hovers" in Smith's film (Lutz 93), the director's own career story shows that low-paying

jobs can be more than inspirational. At the time when he came up with the idea for *Clerks*, Kevin Smith had been working on and off for three years in the very convenience store where he eventually shot the film. Smith "saw dramatis personae in the people hassling him for Pick-6 tickets" and ended up writing *Clerks* in 30 days and shooting it over 21 nights (Smith 52). He exceeded the limit on a dozen credit cards and "pawned his precious comic book collection," which was not an easy decision, but the risk paid off and *Clerks* made him an almost overnight success (Smith 52). Traditional education and a conformist career path work for many people, but Smith's story proves that so do less orthodox ways of earning a living. Tom Lutz observes that in many cases the creators of slacker characters tend to be workaholics, and by the time Smith was in his mid-thirties, ten years after the success of *Clerks*, he had already produced "eighteen films, written, directed, and acted in twelve of them, and edited eight" (295). This may make the driving idea in *Clerks* appear slightly hypocritical at first. Yet, as exemplified by Randal, slacking does not have to equal doing nothing or having a dull personality—many slackers, among them film buffs, musicians and many other artistic individuals, oppose the Puritan work ethic by living creatively and setting their own work terms. Their *raison d'être* is not to make a one-track career, but to open themselves to a range of possibilities, frequently by doing very little for extended periods of time. Following the advice of one of his characters, Smith found "a job that makes a difference" both for him and for others (cf. *Clerks*). The character who voices this wisdom says she "masturbate[s] caged animals for artificial insemination" (*Clerks*), which puzzles the clerks and provides another, in the film's overall context, rather ironic perspective on the significance and insignificance of what work we choose to do.



It would be too idealistic to assume that *Slacker* and *Clerks* changed many people's attitude towards work in the 1990s, or that they can influence the present career-obsessed culture in America and other Western countries. The films did, however, reflect the social and economic changes in America at that time and inspired many other artists to join the slacker club, giving rise to probably one of the last memorable artistic counter-cultures which opposed a work-focused lifestyle and consumerism. Linklater's and Smith's respective visions of the unimportance of the traditional work ethic appeal to some but probably anger even more people, as work is what conditions and gives identity to most lives. Americans, Al Gini writes, are "'dutiful soldiers'" who live out "the virtues of [their] Puritan past and pioneering forefathers" and perceive work as their defining national feature:

> Like it or not, too many of us, out of desire or necessity, choice or chance, put too much time in on the job. We have made a fetish out of work. It's now part of our character and culture. We have become addicted to the *promise* of work. . . . Work *promises* power, money, and influence. Work *promises* we will be accepted, respected, successful. And so, we work. (1)

In this context, a slacker lifestyle turns out to be a rather unattainable American dream which only the chosen few may be brave enough to live. "[M]ost Americans," Ames states, "are more comfortable at work . . . than they are on vacation, on their own, with their families" (95). Away from work they have to be creative and look at their lives more closely; "they have to make conversation not directly linked to the office, invent plans that result in pleasure, and keep themselves entertained rather than merely busy carrying out other people's orders" (Ames 95). In other words, outside work, overworked Americans have to do what to Linklater's loafers and Smith's clerks comes easily, but, sadly, many of them do not know how.



Of course, the United States is not the only country which has been plagued by overwork and stress-related accidents and deaths. *Karōshi* has been a widely discussed phenomenon for many years, and one of its recent famous victims was Mita Diran, a 24-year-old copywriter from Indonesia, who, on December 14, 2013, tweeted: "30 hours of working and still going strooong" (Diran), only to collapse into a coma and die the following day. Tom Hodgkinson, a strong advocate of reduced work hours, claims that work, especially in the service sector, is extremely dangerous, killing around four hundred people and injuring an additional 30,000 a year in the UK alone (315). Although Reagan's witticism on avoiding hard work seemed unintentionally to have heralded a new *zeitgeist* for the 1990s, his assumption that hard work never killed anybody can be refuted *ad infinitum*. Linklater and Smith, as well as many other creators of American slacker films made during the 1990s, voiced a hidden need for more leisure and an alternative lifestyle and thus rebelled against new job regulations, stress, and tragedies which permeated the American workplace at that time. *Slacker* and *Clerks* continue to urge their old and new viewers not to take any job too seriously and not to yield to a common faith in the redemptive power of hard work, because fulfilling the goals or ideals that other people set for us is hardly the best road to healthy self-esteem and happiness. Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative-care nurse, who spent several years looking after dying patients, asked many of them what were their main regrets in life (Steiner). Among the top five were: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me"; "I wish I hadn't worked so hard"; and "I wish I had stayed in touch with my

friends" (Steiner). By asserting their socially different lifestyles, providing alternative perspectives on the role of work in life and putting human relationships before work, Richard Linklater's rambling, Whitmanesque individuals and Kevin Smith's eloquent, uncompetitive clerks offer their audiences a chance to revise this list before it is too late.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0015

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# Going to America to See the Fens Better? Stephen Gyllenhaal's *Waterland*

## ABSTRACT

*Waterland* (1992), directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal on the basis of the screenplay by Peter Prince, is a film adaptation of Graham Swift's novel under the same title, published in 1983. The book could be called unfilmable although the history of cinema knows examples of successful screenings of apparently unfilmable novels, e.g., *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* In the case of Swift's novel, the main potential difficulties could be seen in its wide scope, its intricate mosaic character, and its style.

The article analyzes the changes introduced in the adaptation, including the shift of the contemporary action from Greenwich, England to the American city of Pittsburgh. The way of connecting the present with the past by means of "time travel" is discussed. Consequences for possible interpretation resulting from omitting certain elements of the book and introducing new material as well as changing the order of presentation of some of the scenes are shown. Comments on the film are juxtaposed with interpretations of some aspects of the novel taken from key critical texts on Swift's book. Also specifically cinematic solutions present in Gyllenhaal's movie are taken into account.

*Waterland* (1992), directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal on the basis of the screenplay by Peter Prince, is a film adaptation of Graham Swift's novel under the same title, published in 1983. The book could be called an unfilmable one although the example of other apparently unfilmable novels shows that it is rather the problem of finding a proper key, the way to be taken, necessarily having much more to do with the spirit of the book than with "being faithful" to the novel. A good illustration here might be Harold Pinter's screenplay adapting John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the subsequent film by Karel Reisz shot on the basis of Pinter's script.

The main difficulties for a director ready to take up the task of screening Swift's novel can be seen in its wide scope, its intricate mosaic character, and its style.

Swift's *Waterland* is a family saga, encompassing eight generations over the period of more than two hundred years. It is also a regional novel, dwelling much on the history of the Fens, a marshy region in Eastern England, to some extent being reclaimed land. One can find here literary echoes of novels by George Eliot or by Thomas Hardy, or of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, signalled by one of the novel's epigraphs, "Ours was the marsh country . . ."[1] There are very clear elements of a fairy-tale, starting almost at the very beginning of the novel: "Fairy-tale words; fairy-tale advice. But we lived in a fairy-tale place" (Swift *Waterland* 1).[2] It is a novel of psychological development, but it also contains a non-fiction essay presenting the breeding cycle of eels (Malcolm 13). There are traces of the detective novel, with the narrator looking for some answers. There are also some Gothic motifs, involving Sarah Atkinson's "gift to see and shape the future" (*W* 72), including her influence on some events after her death (the flood, the burning down of the brewery). From this, the movie director tries only to preserve some fairy-tale references, making Tom begin his voice-over narration with "Once upon a time . . . ," the phrase that so often recurs in the novel (*W* 6, 20, 35, 109, 110, 195, 297), and some of the suspense of the detective story.

An important element of the novel is formed by Tom's long explanations of the nature of the Fens. In order to retain at least some of them, the adaptors may have found it necessary to create a more credible narrative situation. For that reason the contemporary part of the story has been moved to a place where such explanations might seem to be more natural. In the film Tom has emigrated to the United States and is working in a secondary

[1] For more on possible literary influences, see Malcolm 11–12, 81–82.

[2] For brevity's sake, further bibliographical references to this source will be given as *W*.

school in Pittsburgh.[3] His American students form an audience for whom the landscape described by him is something new.

Unfortunately, the shift to America has some unexpected negative consequences. One of them is vulgarization of the language. It is not only that Price, in one of his two renderings of the sense of the statement from the novel, "The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end" (*W* 6), says, "The fucking world's gonna end." The F-word is used again when the students refer to the sexual activities between the young Tom and Mary. When stating that Mary was curious about Dick, Tom hears giggles and realizes that for his American pupils the name has some obscene associations, especially in the context of the story of the eel inserted into a girl's knickers and the swimming competition. Thus he has to stress that he is referring to "my brother Dick." When Mary's sexual curiosity arouses a negative reaction from the class, the teacher tries to justify her, saying, "Mary, my Mary was not like that. She wasn't—." At that moment, one of the boys ends it for him: "A slut." None of this has any equivalent in the book.[4]



The coarseness of the language forms a part of a larger problem, not necessarily connected with the setting. Swift's book is quite explicit in its content, it even names one of its chapters with words describing human genitals; also Tom and Mary's love meetings are referred to in detail. In the film, the nakedness is present although it is considerably limited in comparison with what is presented in the novel. However, what matters is the manner of presentation. In the novel, the use of language is of primary importance. The title of the chapter mentioned above is in fact, "About Holes and Things" (*W* 36). Despite its considerable openness in presenting sexual themes, the novel remains very restrained on the verbal plane. The book does not contain a single word that could be called vulgar.

While in the film Tom and Mary's coupling in a compartment of the commuter train is shown as a quickie, without paying much attention to any signs of their mutual love, the book goes into the following description:

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[3] Also the time of action has been slightly modified. In the novel, the contemporary action is set in 1980, in the film—in 1974. One can only wonder about possible reasons for the change—is it because in the novel Mary is 53 and becoming pregnant at that age (the reader still does not know about her barrenness inflicted by the crude abortion) would be really close to a miracle? Or maybe it was only to make the characters closer to the real age of the actors: Jeremy Irons (Tom) and Sinéad Cusack (Mary), both born in 1948?

[4] In one of press film reviews, Rita Kempley complains about "Peter Prince's decidedly eclectic screenplay, in which Swift's elegant, descriptive phrases coexist inelegantly with classroom vulgarisms."

> Thus the Great Eastern Railway which brought these two young people into twice-daily contact—she in a rust-red uniform, he in inky black—is to be held responsible for loosening inhibitions which, without its nudging and jostling, might have stuck fast, and for a merging of destinies which might otherwise never have occurred. For while the shadow of the engine—westward-slanting in the morning, eastward-slanting in the evening—rippled over the beet fields, the unattainable was attained. Certain notions were gradually (and not unpainfully) dissolved, certain advances made and, less falteringly, encouraged, and, at last (but this was the work of two years' railway travel), an undeniable intimacy mutually—but always circumspectly—achieved. (*W* 41)



In the book, the contemporary plane is set in London—to be precise, at Greenwich. The loss of the original location might not be without importance. Daniel Lea stresses the choice of Greenwich, seeing in "Crick bestriding the defining point of geographical origin—longitude 0°" a sign that "*Waterland* is driven by the search for definable beginnings—points of origin that shape the histories that they initiate" (79). David Malcolm stresses a different aspect of this location:

> It is noteworthy that the setting for their walks together, for Mary's revelation of her madness, and for Tom's own bleak future should be Greenwich Park and the meridian that represents Britain's imperial expansion and (literal) centrality in the world. . . . At the end of chapter 47, Crick surveys his failed life and bleak future while in the setting of Greenwich Park. . . . The national, imperial, and progressive associations of the setting are surely quite telling here. (105)

In Swift's work, the voice of the narrator is heard almost all the time, telling the story, commenting on it, asking rhetorical questions. Movies usually make do without voice-over narration. However, it is not entirely so in the case of *Waterland*. Although the film has not got a narrator for the contemporary parts, Tom Crick acts as one for some of the flashbacks. The director seems to have found it necessary to provide information about the setting as well as to supply some additional summing up of those events that would be too time-consuming to show, for example, the relationships between Ernest Atkinson and his daughter, Helen, and then between Helen and her future husband, Henry Crick, or earlier the causes of Ernest Atkinson's decision to produce the Coronation Ale, which was to have such ominous results. Thus numerous flashbacks contain a mixture of showing (enacting) and tell-

ing (recounting)[5]. The very telling can itself be dramatic, as when Tom first tells the students that his grandfather Ernest had only a daughter, and then mentions Ernest's son. This creates suspense, strengthened by Price's question. "I thought he had a daughter." The answer to this being delayed for some time, while the action concerns other events, contributes to the growing interest on the part of the viewer when the matter is mentioned again.

The adaptors have also tried to avoid having too much of the narration provided by a voice-over. Their solution to this problem has been via some trick that could well fit a book written in the convention of magic realism. At some point Tom Crick takes his American students on a ride in a strange vehicle. In fact, it is a charabanc, an early motor coach used for sightseeing in the early years of the twentieth century that became obsolete in the 1920s. To a modern viewer, however, it has the look of a product of the filmmakers' imagination. This is a trip in time and space—from Pittsburgh in 1974 they go to the English region of the Fens in 1911. Thus the curious car may bring associations with a time machine, the concept introduced by H. G. Wells and then used by dozens of science-fiction writers. The visitors from the 1970s not only can see the events in the past but they can even get in contact and in conversation with some of the people from the past, as proved by the scene when Tom and Price enter a pub demolished by victims of the Coronation Ale, and its owner, on seeing them, grasps a cudgel and asks them, "You drank any of the bloody Coronation Ale?" Then even the pretext of the "time machine" is discarded, and Tom and Price just walk around on the Fens of the past, witnessing events featuring in Tom's story. In several scenes the old Tom can observe himself as an adolescent, and what is more, the viewers can see both of them at a time.



Tom as the narrator of the novel is not omniscient. What is more, at some points he becomes unsure whether he is really able to discover things as they really are:

> Now tread carefully, history teacher. Maybe this isn't your province. Maybe this is where history dissolves, chronology goes backwards. That's your wife over there; you know, Mary, the one you thought you knew. But maybe this is unknown country. (*W* 229)

Sometimes he is only able to ask questions to which he cannot give any answers. It is so, for example, in the case of Sarah Atkinson at the time of erecting the New Atkinson Brewery:

[5] Those terms are generally used in reference to narration in a written text, for example by Chatman (32–33), but they clearly can be also employed in relation to a film.

> Sarah hears, in her room, the sounds of work in progress. . . . Does she notice? Does she care? Is she pleased, is she proud? No record notes that she is present among the guests of honour on that day in June, 1849. . . . But was she there in spirit? Was she cheering with the rest of them? Or was she still, in her upper room, keeping her watch over Nothing? (*W* 78)

Unfortunately, the movie adaptation has no place for such subtleties. Tom Crick is our exclusive source of knowledge, and he cannot hesitate in his narration.



From the tightly-knit web of the novel, the filmmakers have picked out the part of the plot presenting the relationship between Tom and Mary—their early sexual encounters, Mary's sexually tinged curiosity about Dick, Tom and Mary's reaction to the news of her pregnancy, Mary's telling Dick that the child is not his but Freddie Parr's, the abortion at Martha Clay's witch house, and, after years, Mary's mad ideas about God giving her a child, resulting in her kidnapping a baby from a shopping centre. Although Tom represents the sane approach, convincing Mary that they should return the stolen baby to its mother, he does not remain untouched by the preoccupation with the child that was never born, the foetus he had to discard into the Ouse. In a significant scene, when inebriated and so not fully controlling himself, he—as if unconsciously—assures the bartender that he knows that Price is of age because "he's my son."

The choice of the remaining elements of the plot seems to have depended on their connection with the relationship between Tom and Mary. Thus the long history of the Cricks and the Atkinsons has been abridged to several items: the story of the Coronation Ale (explaining the origin of the bottle used by Dick to kill Freddie Parr), the incestuous relationship between Tom's mother and his grandfather (revealing Dick's origin), Tom's mother taking care of Henry Crick, her future husband, in the Atkinsons' mansion turned into a hospital for soldiers mentally maimed in the First World War.

Despite the necessary cuts one could say that as far as the main plot is concerned, the film has preserved most of the important elements of the novel. However, the order of the presentation of some of them has been changed. As the film has moved the focus to the motif of the child, Mary's stealing a baby from a supermarket has been given much more attention. The film opens with the cry of a baby, and this sets the main theme for the viewers.

Paradoxically, though the theme of Tom and Mary is the one most carefully preserved from the elements of the plot, it is also the one into which several serious changes have been introduced. Unlike in the novel,

where both Tom and Mary acknowledge her guilt of stealing the baby, and Mary is put in an asylum, the couple are let go after Tom has assured the investigating policeman that Mary and he found the child outside his school. The fact that Tom is alone in the later stages of the story results not from Mary being isolated in a mental institution but from her leaving him. And then the film offers something entirely new: after their separation Tom and Mary get reunited. In the final sequences we can see Tom Crick arriving on the Fens and there meeting Mary, who has also made a long journey to England. This happy ending considerably changes the impact of the story and forms a sharp contrast to the book, on which Tamás Bényei comments in the following way: "*Waterland* is perhaps the most negative in tone among Swift's novels, at least as far as the possibility of overcoming trauma, of spiritual reconciliation and regeneration is concerned" (52).



The changes in the order of presentation, resulting from foregrounding the story of Tom and Mary, have destroyed the structure built by Swift. In the book, Tom quite clearly tries to postpone the presentation of the most painful memories as much as possible. Dominic Head explains the structure of the novel by pointing out that Tom Crick's "quest is conducted through the uncovering of layers of personal guilt . . ." (205). The last item to be described to the readers is the suicidal death of Tom's brother, Dick. Apart from expressing the psychological attitude of Tom, this positioning might be also said to correspond to the circular character of the book. As Alison Lee observes, *Waterland* "is so cleverly structured that the end of the novel is only mid way through the story" (42).

An important element of the novel is the use of references to the Fens as symbols of human life. This especially applies to the motif of land reclamation. For example, Tom and Mary's marriage is compared to a fenland (*W* 102); Tom speaks also about "the tenuous, reclaimed land of our marriage" (*W* 111). At some point, this motif is used to refer to our activities in general:

> There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress. It doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It's progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires. (*W* 291)

Unfortunately, nothing of it could be rendered in the film.

Another important symbol in the structure of the book is the eel. It is no accident that a whole chapter (Chapter 26) has been devoted to

discussing its particularities. The breeding pattern of the eel can be seen to represent the circular character of nature. As Tom says,

> [w]e believe we are going forward, towards the oasis of Utopia. But how do we know—only some imaginary figure looking down from the sky (let's call him God) can know—that we are not moving in a great circle? (*W* 117)

And the same image is applied more precisely to history: "How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists, turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place" (*W* 123). In the screen version, the role of eels is practically limited to two scenes: when Freddie Parr puts an eel into Mary's knickers,[6] and when an eel for dinner forms a pretext for Mary to meet Dick at the river bank.



The screening includes a number of changes which may not be too important but still influence how the action is perceived. They could perhaps be referred to summarily by mentioning Freddie Parr's vehicle. In the novel, he makes his shady business trips (incidentally, not on his own initiative but for his father) on foot or on his bicycle. As this might look too unattractive, in the movie he drives around in a jeep.

The original time of the main events in the past—that of World War II—has been preserved but the war, unlike in the novel where it is given a symbolic role, remains quite marginal and can be guessed at only by some details, e.g., the presence of American soldiers with whom Freddie conducts his illegal trade.

One might expect that facing the task of screening a long and complex novel, the filmmakers would be anxious to preserve as much as possible and thus would be wary of introducing new material. However, this is not the case. The decision of moving the place of action to the United States has caused the necessity of explaining some matters. Another factor responsible for the additions may have been the decision to signal more clearly the presence of the pupils. In Swift's work, the class is present only as mostly impersonal listeners to Tom Crick's elaborate yarns. The only student truly individualized is Price. Only once are two pupils named. Characteristically, however, no other student besides Price voices any objections to Tom Crick's narratives:

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[6] Deprived of any comment, this remains only a rude joke. In the novel, a long time before Chapter 24, in which the swimming contest takes place, the reader is given a piece of folk wisdom: "a live fish in a woman's lap will make her barren" (*W* 16). This will be referred to later, in Chapter 28: "Mary, in navy blue knickers which she has shared briefly with an eel; a live fish in a woman's lap . . ." (180).

> Prurient mutterings around the class. Exchanges of leers. Judy Dobson and Gita Khan in the front row cross their legs, feminine-defensive, experiencing, no doubt, inside their knickers, navy blue or otherwise, uncomfortable sensations; but, up top, are all eager and pricked ears. (*W* 168)

Gyllenhaal presents a different situation. The pupils seem to be more willing to participate, and sometimes to voice their objections to the explicit content of the stories. However, this results in adding details irrelevant for the action and also contributing to the viewers' impression that Tom Crick is rather helpless in his attempts at making his pupils realize the true meaning of his stories. The film wastes its time by going into such exchanges as "Why did you have to do it on a train?"—"We didn't have a car." What is worse, this does not end the matter. Another question follows: "Why didn't you go to a motel? That's what I'd do." A similar objection could be formulated in the case of a dialogue between the teacher and his pupils, added in the movie. When Tom says, "The First World War . . . Who gives the dates?", the kids' answer is, "1917–18"; he has to remind them, "We're in England," and only then does he receive the correct answer.



The situation in the classroom seems to have changed also in another respect. The reason for Price's opposition to the history teacher seems to be different. In the novel, the difference between the attitudes of the two characters could be summed up as a contrast between useless history and dangerous future. In the film, this contrast seems to be between useless history and useful mathematics.

After Tom has been notified that he is going to be "retired," he meets Price. In the movie, Price comes from extra maths. In the novel, he is coming from a meeting of the Holocaust Club, the organization expressing the youths' preoccupation with the possibility of a nuclear disaster. Similarly, the pupils' cry "Fear is here" (*W* 288, 289) during Crick's final speech is never heard in the film. While the nuclear threat forms a vital element of the novel (Lewis Scott's fallout shelter and the activity of the Holocaust Club, with Price as its head), nothing of it has made its way into the movie. When Tom asks Price to be more specific why history is to come to an end, the student answers in a way that is both vague and rude: "Take your choice." This is as close to mentioning the possibility of a nuclear disaster as Gyllenhaal chooses to come. Crick, played by Irons, voices his concern that children are scared but there seems to be little support for this conviction of the teacher.

David Leon Higdon observes that "*Waterland* is . . . a profound meditation on the uses of the past and the necessity of history" (189). As opposed to this, the movie could be said to be a requiem for history, which

seems to be relegated to retirement together with the history teacher made redundant.

The film suggests also—without any connection with what can be found in the novel—that in telling his tales about sexual initiation from the past Tom becomes sexually attracted to some of his female pupils. At some point we share his subjective vision of one the girls sitting naked in the classroom, which might make Tom a kind of Humbert Humbert.[7] Another new element, which might seem to be an unnecessary addition, is the subplot of a blind pupil whom Tom meets in the schoolyard; she is not even in his class, and there seems to be no particular justification for her inclusion unless this has been done for reasons of political correctness.



The film has some strong points. First of all, thanks to the cinematography of Robert Elswit, it impressively presents the fenlands and makes them "as eerie and singular as the characters who inhabit" them (Maslin). There are several scenes in which the film makes full use of its visual possibilities. One of them is connected with Tom's lesson on the French Revolution. He shows the pupils a slide showing a scene from the time of the Revolution—to be precise, it is a picture presenting the guillotine—and then he moves to stand in front of the screen; thus the slide is superimposed on his face. This seems to be a perfect, symbolic visualization of the narrator's comment in the novel: "And then it dawned on you [Tom's pupils]: old Cricky was trying to put himself into history; old Cricky was trying to show you that he himself was only a piece of the stuff he taught" (*W* 5).

One should also mention the three scenes connected with Dick's swimming. The first one follows the events of the kids' swimming contest containing sexual undertones. After having rescued Freddie Parr, so willing to take part in the contest as to ignore the fact of his not being able to swim, Dick asks Mary, "Me swim too?" and then makes a dive. He stays under water for quite a long time. Only after everybody (including the viewer) has become afraid whether he has drowned does he surface. A similar scene is repeated when Dick swims across the river in order to deliver an eel to Mary waiting for him on the other bank. After such preparation it is only natural that when Dick takes his final plunge from the deck of the *Rosa II*, and the camera dwells on the flow of the river for a considerable time,[8] we expect his head to appear somewhere downstream. The image is

[7] Incidentally, Jeremy Irons did play Humbert Humbert in Adrian Lyne's film adaptation of *Lolita*, but it was only in 1997, five years after *Waterland* was released.

[8] The camera remains stationary, fixed on the river, for close to twenty seconds, which is very long in a film; to this one should add several more seconds before this, when the camera pans the water.

accompanied by Tom's answering his father's question, "He's gone?" Tom says, "No. . . . He can swim so far." This is probably as close as the film could get in rendering the comment given in the novel:

> Because he [Tom] knows (though he doesn't say; he'll never say: a secret he and Mary will share for ever): there'll be no bobbing top-knot. There'll come no answering gurgling, rescue-me cry. He's on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea . . . (*W* 310)

In the book, those words were meant to remind the reader of the breeding cycle of the eel (this is the meaning of "obeying instinct") but also of the narrator's earlier comment on the Ouse:



> As we all know, the sun and the wind suck up the water from the sea and disperse it on the land, perpetually refeeding the rivers. So that while the Ouse flows to the sea, it flows, in reality, like all rivers, only back to itself, to its own source; and that impression that a river moves only one way is an illusion. And it is also an illusion that what you throw (or push) into a river will be carried away, swallowed for ever, and never return. Because it will return. (*W* 127)

Although the film does not voice such thoughts, the camera lingering on the water of the river flowing into a sea may evoke a similar reflection in the viewer's mind.

Another scene that should be pointed out for its impact on the viewers is the presentation of the fatal abortion. Basing more on the atmosphere and what is only implied rather than on what is really shown, Gyllenhaal manages to render the painful experiences of Mary undergoing the crude abortion performed by witchlike Martha Clay.

Stephen Gyllenhaal summed up his approach to the movie in an interview given at the Toronto Film Festival in 1992: "More than anything else, this is a love story. . . . It doesn't matter where it is set because the appeal is universal. It's about marriage, but it's also about fathers and sons" (qtd. in Ryan). The problem is that this renders only a part of what can be found in the novel, and even in this very limited scope the movie introduces a number of changes that significantly modify the impact of the original story.

Those few film reviews that make more than a passing reference to Swift's novel are mostly critical of the film as a whole though usually they praise some of its elements. Desmond Ryan states that

> Peter Prince's script doesn't solve all the problems—especially when he resorts to having the students time-travel back to Crick's youth—and it often betrays the film's literary origins. But it does catch an eerie resonance between a painful past and an unresolved present.

Todd McCarthy remarks that

> [d]espite a tight and cleverly constructed time-jumping structure, it can't be said that scenarist Peter Prince has really solved the problem, since what's on-screen unfortunately creates the constant impression of a story that would be much more effectively told on the printed page.



He also complains that

> [w]hen Tom's most insolent student, Matthew Price (Ethan Hawke), challenges him to defend the teaching of history, one awaits the elaboration of the teacher's justification with reasonable expectation.
>
> Instead, we get superficial, borderline-laughable scenes of the students riding through moments of British history in an open-air tour bus, and a summing-up by Tom that, in its fumbling sentimentality, seems like a portrait of the deterioration of teacher-student relations since the days of Mr. Chips.

His conclusion seems to sum up the problem quite succinctly: "Stephen Gyllenhaal . . . handles the often delicate subject matter with integrity on a scene-by-scene basis but can't transform what may simply be intractable material." Rita Kempley's objection has already been quoted (see note 4).

Swift's own remarks on this film adaptation can be found in his essay "Filming the Fens" in his collection *Making an Elephant*. Reflecting on his not getting involved in the work on adapting *Waterland*, he writes:

> So ungodlike was my role that I knew very little about what was happening—I assumed nothing would happen—until about a fortnight before the filming began. But suddenly everything was happening. A script had been written, a director had been found and a cast and crew had been assembled on location in Norfolk, where the cameras were starting to roll. Would I like to come and take a look?
>
> It was only when I did go and look and talk to some key people that I discovered certain things that might have made a more wrathfully godlike author throw a fit. For example, that large chunks of the novel which are set in Greenwich (London, England) were to be transposed in the film to—Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And that while Jeremy Irons as Tom Crick would retain his Fenland childhood (hence we were in Norfolk),

> he would mysteriously become in later life a teacher in a mid-American school. ("Filming" 189–90)

Trying to be as kind as possible and dwelling on his friendly relations with Stephen Gyllenhaal, Swift cannot but state: "I wish a better film had finally emerged—a film that hadn't distorted basic elements of the book and a film that, as film, had lived up in all parts to the real strengths and sensitivity it had only in some . . . ("Filming" 191–92). This seems to confirm at least some of the observations made in this article.



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# EXHIBITIONS

https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0016

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# thurnauer: *vt* and *vi*, to paint in the second person

## Abstract

Many of the figures in Thurnauer's paintings who fix us with their gaze have been borrowed from the work of Manet, the artist who organized so many of his paintings around a face-to-face confrontation of viewer and work. The painting returns the viewer's gaze with total impartiality, making us see our own motives and investments more than the illusion that the figure in the painting will accommodate them.

Issues of language often surface literally in paintings by Thurnauer; written language appears sometimes as part of the material fabric in which human figures move or recline. The textual elements are not superimposed on the figures but appear to exist in the world they inhabit, requiring the painter to relate figure to ground in a process of interlacing. When the viewer's eye traverses the painting it falls under the magnetic influence of the text to the extent that viewing must succumb in some degree to the operations of reading with its specific rhythms and expectations.

In these paintings, visual and verbal languages provide us with different maps of the same territory; and Thurnauer's hybridized representations argue that the world can only be rendered through a dialogue, an interlocution of different forms, genres, media. We approach her work, not as viewers whose function is predicated through a gaze regulated according to the distorting demands of consumption or control, but as readers engaged in a critical activity seeing around the edges of historically produced versions of the self.

Agnès Thurnauer,
*Les Lecteurs*.
Courtesy of the artist.

Agnès Thurnauer,
*Autoportrait*.
Courtesy of the artist.

Agnès Thurnauer,
*Matrices*.
Courtesy of the artist.

The museum installations of paintings by Agnès Thurnauer (first Angers, now Nantes) are a making manifest of one of the most important organizing principles of her work: its persistent approach towards, its adaptations of, its conviviality with, the canonical art historical genres, motifs and gestures of the past.[1] Her paintings are often in part like recitations in a female voice of those authoritative male formulations that have acquired the status of pronouncements on the scope and agenda of western art practice. In her subtler, more sceptical, and more playful tones, which have changed the emphasis, the accentuation, and most importantly, the inflection of these resonant statements—once so mobile and mobilizing but now a little stiff and uncooperative—she has opened up a new space for the woman artist. Equally importantly, she has opened up a space for the critical viewer of a field in which the historical contexts for these acts of painting have been lost, in the repetition of torn-off shreds, bits and pieces of the original embodiments, fragments that have been inserted between quotation marks and launched on a separate career of their own. Thurnauer reminds us that the perception of art is often clouded, shrouded even, by an atmosphere that is filled with these particles we breathe in without thinking, without remembering that they were once created out of nothing, that there was a time before they existed; that they might have been conceived, and performed, and perpetuated, to very different effect.

Thurnauer is an historical artist in a post-historical situation, restoring a sense of perspective to these relics of a lost history, these parings and clippings that have been caught up by the hot air of publicity and now float in a kind of timeless dimension. But although her work is always posterior to the history of art it is also anterior to it, and in this doubleness it is not timeless but folded back on itself. In her short text "Aujourd'hui Lascaux," Thurnauer describes her studio practice as taking place in an environment equivalent to that in which the history of art is anticipated and inaugurated while being wholly reconfigured and transformed:

> Lascaux is the place I happen upon in my work, when I hold myself back in the face of what arrives on the canvas, when what is revealed there is all questions, uncertainties, sudden illuminations. Lascaux is where I am when I'm in the studio, in this space closed off from the world, where all silences and all noises alike reach me amplified to an extreme, more naked and much clearer even than at the point of emission. There, everything

[1] This essay was published originally in French translation in *Agnès Thurnauer: Now When Then* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2014).

> can be heard, just as everything can be said, through painting. (133, my translation)

This return to the imaginary moment before the creation of all painting—all that has survived and been recorded, all that is now part of the history of art—is the situation of the contemporary artist enabling the work that has never been seen before: it is separated from Lascaux by 17,000 years, but it mirrors, in a "sudden illumination," the same moment. The artist carries the knowledge of art history forward to the present, but that present is also the point before the inception of an alternative history, one that may be precipitated by her work.



This fascination with the historical achievements of art, in the very act of imagining how differently their messages might have been formed, how differently they might have been "heard," is behind the artist's continuing preoccupation with the "matrices" that she has been working on for the past several years. These resin casts of alphabetical letters are the building blocks of language, but they are disposed in arrangements that make no linguistic sense; they exist in a state before grammar and syntax have been imposed, before even a recognizable language (French, English, Italian . . . ?) has been chosen for them to be part of. Their capacity for the endless combination and re-combination of elements corresponds to that of language itself.

Thurnauer herself regards the "matrices" as the shoals, reefs and sandbanks of language, using a vocabulary suggestive of submerged and hidden meanings in a medium that is inherently fluid and unstable. She merges language and art in proposing the inaccuracy, the unreliability of our existing conceptual grids, our maps and charts, to make readable a set of materials that are always changing shape, always changing the relationship between depth and surface, and above all, always challenging our sense of being in control of the medium, always testing our ability to grasp and manipulate its elements. In conversation, her own way of characterizing her relationship to the practice of painting is to say "I'm swimming" (Thurnauer, Interview) and she describes the act of abandoning herself to the medium as one that produces the strangely comforting sensation of being buoyed up by it. In French, she uses the verb "traverser," both actively and passively, to evoke the experience of mental and physical immersion in the work. The relationship between the embodied subject and the process of painting, therefore, involves the artist observing the way her own body behaves in reaction to the evolution of the project, as well as observing the way her understanding of the work involves a de-focusing of her subjective vision, and a re-focusing, adjusting to the expanded vision the work itself seems to insist on.

The relationship between language, in its condition of constant organic change, and its rules, which also change but at a much slower rate, provides a dynamic parallel to Thurnauer's understanding of how the activity of painting relates to the institutional and discursive contexts that frame it. Her "predella" series gives the parallel an essential structural role, through the frequency with which imagery is conditioned by text and vice versa. The "now" paintings epitomize the handling of this relationship. The word "now" preserves its meaning despite being incarnated in different fonts, one for each painting, while the range of different cloudscapes that surround the word offers a model for the way that each enunciation of the word "now" must refer to a unique moment in time, a unique set of conditions. The word has a seemingly permanent use-value but its referent changes with every single use in historical time.

The inability of conventional framing—of institutional and discursive frameworks—ever to capture or contain the experience of painting for the artist, or the experience that the finished painting offers to the viewer, is rendered in material terms, and even theatricalized, by the use of the physical frame, of the edges of the painting, to show how painting always exceeds the limits devised for it. Many of the predellas consist of pairs of canvases that share a single verbal message, insisting on the lack of synchronization that inheres in any attempt to make the textual message function as a translation of the painting's meaning. Thurnauer herself has used the prosodic term "caesura" to describe the suture, both binding together and separating, the divided halves of these binary works. The relationship between text and image is not one of commensurability, but of parallel activities in which performance always moves beyond established criteria: beyond the available conventions of meaning. The words divided between canvases include "id / ea," "soli / tude," "ran / dom," "fig / ure," "win / dow," and "pain / ting," while ready-made phrases include "not / yet," and "prime / time." The latter two examples help to clarify what is stake when the artist chooses to paint serially, when she sets out systematically to make the individual work porous, open to the influence of other components in the assemblage as a whole. Two works are enough to make a sequence, to hesitate the boundaries of the individual painting, although Thurnauer has experimented also with threes and fours, and has exhibited large numbers of these fissile paintings in a way that appears to give a cellular structure to the overall predella project. The breaking up and distribution of the textual messages is the clearest signal of the conditional mood in which these paintings exist, but the use of imagery contributes equally to the realization of the open-endedness that is fundamental to Thurnauer's practice of painting. The spatial porosity of this work, the permeability of

its boundaries, is actually a form of recording its response to the flow of time—its acknowledgement that time is one of the tools used in painting; time as a medium of change and transformation. As the artist herself has observed, "your arm is not the same each day" (Thurnauer, Interview). The artist's body and mind move through time, leaving behind a set of provisional answers to a series of minutely adjusted questions.

Perhaps increasingly, Thurnauer's work performs as a visual expression of the poetics of the version, where the proliferation of versions represents an exponential increase in the distance travelled from the very idea of an original. The slippage of meaning between versions becomes increasingly busy and compulsive, acquiring particular intensity in the beautiful "winged" predellas painted between 2007 and 2009. Here, the imagery has been generated to a significant extent from the slippage between the French words and phrases "*prédelle*," "*près d'elle*" and "*près d'aile*." The homophony of the French language allows the word for a series of small paintings to be moved conceptually and literally into proximity with female subjectivity and then further into proximity with the idea of a wing. The image of the wing outspread then turns it into a visual metaphor for a palette, and the palette is literalized by the application of a spectrum of colours to the spreading feathers. Feathers or "*plumes*" are traditional writing instruments, and their presence in the language that refers to writing has outlived their practical use. "Écrire au courant de la plume" refers to a kind of writing where the pen itself appears to do the thinking. Thurnauer's painting allows the medium of language to do the thinking in the choice of visual content, but her own use of that content has placed the emphasis on slippage and distance, on allowing the work to take flight when it has been fully transformed, when the relationship between original and version, between literal and metaphorical, between figurative and conceptual, has been rendered vertiginous. The viewer's experience of the painting is governed by a sense of movement between different possibilities, of only ever being able to grasp fragments of meaning, parts that come away from a whole, just as the images of wings are of anatomical parts, limbs detached from bodies. The painting articulates quite literally the underlying bone structure of these wings, just as a painting in the *nature morte* tradition would do, but the painting also articulates metaphorically the language which joins the wing to several different bodies of meaning.

These are wings that could grow a new body which would exist in a gravitational field determined by the mind of the viewer. In the *Grande Prédelle* series, each painting includes a used palette, attached to the painted surface of the canvas depicting a wing. Although the palette is superimposed on the wing, making it appear an afterthought, it also takes precedence over

the wing, since its use is a precondition of the image ever taking shape on the canvas. The appearance of the wing, with its graduations of colour, is a strong pretext for the addition of the palette, while the end to which the palette is the means suggests that all palettes have the ambition of wings in the first place. Neither palettes nor wings are used as elements of description but of metaphor, of substitution and metamorphosis. In the hands of Thurnauer, the identity of painting is not to be lodged in any one body or form but in the movement from one to another.

The predellas incorporate key linguistic signs as part of their visual content but activate language at a conceptual level for the most part. In the *Origine du monde* works, and in more recent paintings such as *Les Lecteurs*, written language appears as part of the material fabric in which the human figures appear. The textual elements are not superimposed on the figures but appear to exist in the landscape, requiring the painter to relate figure to ground in a process of interlacing. When the viewer's eye traverses the painting it falls under the magnetic influence of the text to the extent that viewing must succumb in some degree to the operations of reading with its specific rhythms and expectations. In *Les Lecteurs*, the figures included in the visual field are themselves engaged in the act of reading. They are clearly removed from different points of origin and drawn together, bringing with them hints of the different times and places from which they have been disengaged. The engagement of reading brings them into the same—or a very similar—experience of time, which is comparable to that of the viewer, for whom reading the painting is a hermeneutic exercise that cannot be terminated. The relation between the text the viewer sees and the texts the readers see is inscrutable, while the relations between the separate parts of the text available to view are innumerable in character, since they have ceased to belong to the bodies of meaning they derive from, yet remain withheld from bodies the reader wishes them to have.

In *Les Lecteurs* and *Reflexion on reflection*, the individual letters that provide the textual dimension of the work are capital letters shorn of the diacritics that would confine them to French or any other single language. They are arranged in a grid pattern that stays on the same plane despite the changing angles of the tables, costumes and backdrops that share the same space. In both paintings there is one figure whose gaze is directed out towards the viewer, although in *Reflexion on reflection* the gaze is supplemented by projecting camera lenses, trying to thrust beyond the front of the canvas. Many, perhaps most, of the figures in these paintings who fix us with their gaze have been borrowed from the work of Manet, the artist who organized so many of his most important

paintings around this face-to-face confrontation of viewer and work. Although Thurnauer herself speaks of the need to "take the canvas by surprise" (Thurnauer, Interview) while in the throes of composition, the viewer meeting the finished work is likely to be taken unawares by this unwavering regard. The sense of disadvantage the viewer experiences forestalls their capacity—perhaps readiness—to eye these female figures with the expectancy of a customer or consumer. The painting returns the viewer's gaze with total impartiality, making us see our own motives and investments more than the illusion that the figure in the painting will accommodate them.

In the recent *Exécution de la peinture*, a naked artist with her back turned to the viewer takes on the central role we might expect to be given to a nude model facing the viewer. However, the figure on the canvas being painted by the artist is another version of the barmaid from the Folies Bergère, taken from the painting that perhaps undermines the position of the viewer more than any other canvas by Manet, since its manipulation of the arrangements seen in the mirror behind the barmaid does not correspond to the view a mirror would give in reality. The viewer seems to usurp the place of a top-hatted customer who is seen, from the wrong angle, in the mirror's reflection. And this substitution renders her glance at the viewer an especially complex one. Who is she actually looking at, and what is her attitude to their reciprocal gaze? Thurnauer has added extra layers to these questions, surrounding the barmaid with an array of press cameras, and providing the viewer with a new gaze to mediate their own perception of the girl: the imagined, but unseen, gaze of the female artist. The cameras are directed not at Manet's barmaid but at Thurnauer's artist, or that is our initial assumption, until we realize that, like Manet's mirror, they are actually pointing in another direction, straight past the naked artist to connect more directly with those for whom their images are intended. If Manet's painting represents the arrival of the social being organized by the dynamics of the spectacle, Thurnauer's painting captures the extent to which the spectacle has engrossed almost all the space available for representation. Encrypted within this space—existing within the same space but operating according to a different code—is the closed circuit of the reciprocal gaze that connects the female artist and the girl at the bar. This is the artist of a critical painting that comes into being with Manet; the critical artist is composed by the gaze of Manet's painting, although she holds in her hand a brush that authors anew the girl who was once Manet's subject. The critical artist is posterior to an art history that hinges on the experiments and disclosures of Manet, anterior to another history in which the artist is either female or one who stands in the place where a female artist should be.

In a recent conference at Yale University, Thurnauer specified how her painting had arrived at a point which shares in Manet's discoveries while also departing in another, twenty-first century direction. Her response to Manet's *Olympia* turns on the complexity of the gaze: "Olympia is the painting taking visual stock of me. It is not so much its own nakedness but more me being stripped naked by the fact that it is staring back at me. . . . Olympia's nakedness strips me bare" (Thurnauer, Seminar). In her own, twenty-first century, version of the painting, the figure of Olympia is held within the field of a text consisting of all the words synonymous with "woman" in the history of the French language, from the twelfth century to the present. By bringing together this multitude of definitions, Thurnauer's painting emphasizes the poverty of definition, the impossibility of a definitive version of woman:

> The word is a definition, a frame, but the figure escapes all definition. . . . Olympia cannot be reduced to a definition. She is naked and free like painting. She is eternally looking at us and eternally brings our eyes to life. (Thurnauer, Seminar)

This beautiful idea, that the painting looking at us is what brings our eyes to life, proposes an utopian freeing of our vision, but it also necessitates a critical painting that must be resumed and maintained, and renewed in each successive work.

Three of the four cardinal points of the Nantes installation are occupied by the Manet-inspired paintings *Olympie*, *Reflexion on reflection* and *Exécution de la peinture*, but right at its centre are the three female portraits that reflect for Thurnauer three essential facets of painting that have to do with the language of cognition, the language of desire, and the language of feeling. The title given to each of these canvases is *You*, since the gaze directed at the viewer by the painting is enlarged, dilated, more than in any other work by Thurnauer. Just as the three female subjects cannot represent individually only one of the three separate languages of cognition, desire and feeling—since all three women exist in the realms of all three languages—so the viewer cannot be constructed exclusively by the gaze of only one of the three figures: they can only be brought to life by all of them.

The intensity with which Thurnauer insists on the reciprocal gaze in her work, and the passion with which it has been sustained, reflect a deep and resourceful critical awareness of the social politics within which contemporary painting operates; but it also has deep roots in her own experience. As a child, her earliest awareness of the obligations that come with

reciprocity, together with a realization of how relationships are mediated by language, took form in the company of an autistic brother who did not speak. The lack of verbal response, the silence of the interlocutor, places a responsibility on the one with language to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the one for whom language does not do its work in the open. The language of the first person is therefore always implicated with language that is stored in the second person. In Homeric Greek, it was possible to speak with a "dual voice," but this grammatical possibility has not survived in fossilized form in modern Indo-European languages, except in Slovene. There is a profound sense in which all of Thurnauer's painting communicates itself with a "dual voice," but it does so most dramatically in the series of paintings entitled *Big-Big and Bang-Bang*, whose characteristic iconography greets the viewer at the entrance to the Nantes exhibition in the trio of paintings *Now*, *When*, *Then*.



The two enigmatic figures that cross from one canvas to another in this trio of works can be found crossing the whole of Thurnauer's *oeuvre*. Their symbiosis is often associated with the genesis of representation through being contained within an outline that evokes traditional depictions of both the *sindone* and the handkerchief of Veronica. Both were supposed to have preserved the perfect impression of the body of Christ, through chemical transformation, although which came first and which second in this chemical process, which took the active and which the passive role, is precisely the question behind Thurnauer's dual personages. The juxtaposition of the three paintings with titles that obscure the relationship between them in the very act of seeming to offer temporal markers, borrows its authority from the temporality of autism, an experience of time in which linearity makes little sense, in which the relationship between events is not felt as a chain of connections but as an amplification, an intensification of something that floats freely in a time without measure.

Thurnauer's dual figures populate her output recurrently and cannot be tied to any particular phase of her development as a painter. As the one with language, she now addresses her work as if it were the silent but eloquent interlocutor in a relationship of intimacy that she conducts in public. Written language is an integral part of that relationship, not solely through its incorporation into the visual information on the canvas, but through the parallel activity of keeping a diary, requiring the painter to turn her back on the canvas in order to use a word processor. She describes her method of composition as one of "pouring" words onto a screen, without ever pausing to make corrections, transferring to her language-work the methods of free expression more common to painting and, *vice versa*,

transferring to the use of paint the kind of editorial oversight more common to verbal language-use.

In her painting *Les Lecteurs*, the two figures, one male, one female, both chosen from the history of painting, share the space with a framed map of the world. The world is represented by the familiar image achieved through the systematic distortions of the Mercator projection; this is how we perceive the world although we know its image is an artificial one. Both visual and verbal languages provide us with maps of the same territory; and Thurnauer's hybridized representations argue that the world can only be rendered through a dialogue, an interlocution of different forms, genres, media. When we approach her work, it is not as viewers whose function is predicated through a gaze regulated according to the distorting demands of consumption or control, but as readers engaged in a critical activity that sees around the edges of historically produced versions of the self. While we look for the subjects of Thurnauer's paintings, we are the subjects that they construe; there is no priority in this exchange, and no way of coming to terms with it; rather, it is in the territory without maps, in the uncertain borderland between the first and second persons, that strangely familiar no-man's-land, a female *terra nullius*, that the voice of twenty-first century painting is both lost and found.



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https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0017

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# Framing *Madame B*: Quotation and Indistinction in Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker's Video Installation

## Abstract

The article engages with the video installation *Madame B* by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker. The work was premiered in the city of Łódź in Poland (between 6 Dec. 2013 and 9 Feb. 2014). The author makes use of the exhibition brochure by two artists published by the Museum of Modern Art, and the recording of a seminar held by Bal and Williams Gamaker after launching their work. The article focuses on the innovative audiovisual interpretation of Flaubert's famous novel. Basing the argument on the concept of framing created by Bal, the author applies it to Bal and Williams Gamaker's exhibition by relating it to the history and culture of the Polish location where it was first shown. Above all, however, the article discusses the importance of quotation and indistinction in *Madame B*, where the artists quote from (among others): Louise Bourgeois, Maya Deren, Artemisia Gentileschi, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William Kentridge and Sol LeWitt.

## In a Polish Location

An innovative interpretation of Flaubert's classic *Madame Bovary* emerges from the work of two visual artists, Mieke Bal, a scholar and art critic, and Michelle Williams Gamaker, directors of the video installation *Madame B: Explorations in Emotional Capitalism*. The artists decided to premiere their work in the Museum of Modern Art (*Muzeum Sztuki*) in the city of Łódź (from 6 December 2013 to 9 February 2014) in Poland. This choice of "framing," to invoke a concept thoroughly discussed in *Loving Yusuf* (Bal 218), attracts the viewer's attention to the capitalist exploitation of emotion, which became particularly aggressive in a place that after forty-four years went from the communist regime to uncritical consumerism whose mechanisms we see exposed in Bal and Williams Gamaker's take on Flaubert's novel.



Significantly, the video installation was placed in the rooms of the building that had been built as a residence for a nineteenth-century cotton tycoon, successfully pursuing his career at a time when Poland had lost independence, and Łódź belonged to the territory taken over by Russia. The residence brings to mind the original capitalist boom in the city that grew due to cotton and textile industry, creating leisure for its *nouveaux riches*, flaunting boredom as their status symbol. The location of the exhibition emphasizes the things that *Madame B* makes so apparent, that is, the seductions of capitalism, especially its unfulfilled and yet continually recycled promise that consumerism will offer permanent excitement.

The opening of the exhibition was accompanied by a seminar devoted to the project. Held in the former ballroom, it was framed by the architectural message of ample space, encouraging the participants to expand Emma-like in tune with its implicit promise. Several weeks later, the screening of the film *Madame B* took place in *Manufaktura*, the trendiest shopping centre in Łódź. The illusions created by these respective places in the past and the present played into the meaning of the video installation during its stay in Łódź. Like "travelling concepts" from Mieke Bal's book (*Travelling Concepts* 13–14), *Madame B* hit the road, and she did that in Łódź. In their booklet brochure on the exhibition, the artists describe it as "immersive" and "site-responsive" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 3). The next setting for the exhibition was going to be the country house playing the role of Rodolphe's place in the installation and the film (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*).

## Participatory Exhibition vis-à-vis Laboratory Theatre

The word "immersive," as defined by the directors, "refers to an artistic form, in which form, meaning, technique, and ambiance collaborate

to solicit the participatory presence of the spectator" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 3). The concept converges with and seems indebted to the idea of laboratory theatre envisaged by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, who made use of the ritual significance of the theatre to demand the "total participation" of spectators and placed them in the role of "active" collaborators (Barba 154–55). If *Madame Bovary* is rendered in a different medium through an act of intersemiotic translation, so is Grotowski's theatrical project which gets translated into the site of the exhibition, where the spectators wander or sit in front of nineteen screens positioned in various ways, and forming eight video installations. As in Grotowski's project, there is no centre or stage, or, to translate it into the reality of the movie theatre, there is no screen that would dominate the audience grouped in predictable rows in front of the film's inexorably linear development. Let into the site of the exhibition, the spectator finds herself or himself surrounded by the audiovisual phenomena that beg for attention cascading from many screens at once in the visual and sonic stream of consciousness, whose initial amorphousness can only be sorted out with participatory attentiveness. The spectator can wander among the screens with actors playing literally around her or him, and since the moment of entry into the site is always arbitrary, every time the spectator lives through a different experience. While Grotowski strips the theatre of excessive make-up, scenography and verbosity, Bal and Williams Gamaker use an array of stimuli to involve the spectator, but, like Grotowski, they continually insist on doing away with aesthetic distance and passive contemplation. As in laboratory theatre, the goal is not to "show the world separated from the spectator but within the limits of the theatre to create with him a new world" (Barba 158). The description could not be truer when applied to the video installation *Madame B.*



## Anachronism in Colonial Frame

During the seminar, the directors admitted they felt attracted to Flaubert's novel because of its theme and its audiovisuality. In their commentary on the exhibition Bal and Williams Gamaker stress the significance of anachronism for their project (*Madame B: Explorations* 2–3). In order to be faithful to the contemporaneity of Flaubert's *oeuvre* they both chose to translate Emma into the contemporary reality while retaining some elements from the past in directly quoted dialogue and also in dress code. Thus the spectator sees Emma at a party organized by a French pharmaceutical corporation, or on shopping sprees in a fashionable and expensive shop of *haute couture*. Also, the opera she watches is not *Lucia di*

*Lammermoor* by Donizetti, but *Refuse the Hour* (2012) by William Kentridge, a South African artist, who shows the influence of the European concept of time on colonization and trade (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 11). The colonial undertone (involving fragments of Kentridge's work) is woven into the scene "Loving Léon," where a museum filled with stuffed exotic animals serves as a setting of the sexual hunt, reducing Emma to a trophy woman.

Thus the exhibition also responds to the colonial "framing" of Flaubert, whose other works were discussed from that angle by Edward Said in *Orientalism.* While *Madame Bovary* on the surface had nothing in common with French colonial expansion, the work became extremely important in the colonial and postcolonial reality, to mention only the novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J. G. Farrell, or *Maya Memsaab* (1993), a film by Ketan Mehta. The former deconstructs the Raj as Victorian exotic fiction, by focusing on the issues that attracted Flaubert in his classic, namely: "preoccupation with illness, abject details of physical life, satirical deconstruction of bourgeois mediocrity" (Booker 86). Colonialism is satirized here the way Romanticism is satirized by Flaubert. While not informed directly by this text, the directors of *Madame B* pick up on colonialism as the fiction that was deconstructed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and they use it in order to do justice to Flaubert's critique of illusions contemporary for his time. As for the Bollywood film made in independent India, it follows the metamorphosis of the eponymous character from the loving wife of a local doctor into an adventuress who takes lovers and spends huge amounts of money on her new image, a copy of Flaubert's classic sitting conspicuously at her bedside. Implicit in the name of the protagonist (Maya) is the Hindi concept of illusion that the eponymous character continually embraces so as to free herself from the tedium of country life which does not offer any stimuli to her intellect (Donaldson-Evans 38).

While not quoting from the above two sources, Bal and Williams Gamaker's project intersects with the highly intertextual field of interpretations of Flaubert's classic, including the Polish film *Pani Bovary to ja* (*I am Madame Bovary*), made in 1977 by Zbigniew Kamiński. Its protagonist, Anna, decides to walk out on her married life after reading *Madame Bovary.* Having experienced the communist glitz in a fashion show, shopping for expensive cosmetics and dreaming about a trip abroad, she returns home after a harrowing time spent in the city while looking for a former boyfriend who did not turn up for their date. Made much earlier than the Indian film, Kamiński's work also focuses on illusions embraced by a woman disappointed with everyday life and searching for agency and significance in the country colonized and exploited by the former Soviet Union in her days.

## Approaching Quotation and Indistinction

During the seminar, both artists repeatedly stressed the importance of quotation for the project, thus situating it in postmodernist aesthetics. One of the inspirations behind their work, Sol LeWitt, was known for his rejection of individual authorship, and his collaborators did the actual work (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*). The artists referred to their project as "interactive" in the sense that there was no clear-cut division of tasks. Also, actors and technical crew became contributors to the work, since each had their share in the actual message by offering their interpretations. LeWitt was also quoted in a direct way on the video screen showing Emma during an art history tutorial in the gallery with his murals all over the walls. Her question: "Where is the art?" and the teacher's answer: "It's around you" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B,* Video Exhibition) provide an apt metaphor of the "immersive" exhibition as discussed above. Even before crossing the threshold to the rooms housing the installation, the spectator was immersed in an introductory soundscape (by Sara Pinheiro) already seeping into space, attracting attention. This dissolved the boundary between the installation and its outside. Indistinction is another feature of the audiovisual discourse in *Madame B,* and another quotation from Flaubert, a master of "elusive narration," where "shifts in perspective are designed to undermine one's judgement" (Culler 243–44).



Indistinction is certainly one of the key concepts in Flaubert criticism, associated as it was with the writer who challenged the binaries. While juxtaposing the scenes from Emma's everyday life (in the part of the exhibition titled "Boredom sets in") and an apparently adventurous event of party going, Bal and Williams Gamaker stress that "the contrast we expect [between the scenes] trained as we are in thinking in binary oppositions is challenged" (*Madame B: Explorations* 7). The experience of the exhibition abounds in realizations that when we have looked long enough, what we see is not quite (or is not at all) what we expected to see.

## When Seeing Is (not) Believing

Bal and Williams Gamaker focus on seeing and looking not only in connection with the characters who look and see, but also in a deliberate attempt to make the spectators realize the cultural framing of what they see and the socially shaped ways of looking at particular people, events and settings. Emma's visit to the gallery featuring LeWitt's murals ends with her insistence on seeing a woman crouching underneath a layer of paint, while the teacher responds: "I don't see anything." Prophetic and ominous as the scene is for Emma's fate, it also draws attention to the way we construct

what we see. Bal continually brings the readers' attention to this issue in her books. Writing about one of the two paintings by Rembrandt depicting Joseph and Potiphar's wife, she discusses her experience of proximity to the actual canvas and the effect that arises when you step back or step forward. In one instance Joseph seems frightened by the erotic desire of a married woman; in the other, he seems to be smiling (Bal, *Double Exposures* 309). Bal's commentary on the painting ends with the words urging the reader to repeat her experience: "Do you see it?" (*Double Exposures* 311), another invitation to scrutinize the cultural, political or social preconceptions that get in the way of our act of seeing.



Visual quotations abound in the installation: for example, attention is drawn to a painting by the famous Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, known for her renditions of Judith, the slayer of Holofernes. Emma looks at one of these paintings in the company of her mentor, who refers to the work as "the birth of that head." Holofernes's head rests between his huge muscular shoulders, the way his frightening face might emerge from the belly of a woman, her solid thighs/arms spread to give birth. The "confusion of arms and thighs" in the painting is the object of Bal's study in *Double Exposures* (297), where the critic sees Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* as a response to the painting of Medusa by Caravaggio. Significantly, in the video installation the painting of Judith beheading Holofernes is followed by Luca Giordano's *Perseus Turning Phileas and His Followers to Stone,* where Medusa's head is used as weapon. The spectator is now disorientated by the clash between what s/he hears and what s/he remembers, because s/he sees both in the video, where "that head" becomes ambiguous not only through the dialogue with Giordano's painting, but also due to the conflation of death and birth. Through Artemisia Gentileschi, Mieke Bal revisits her interdisciplinary works on biblical women, especially *Murder and Difference,* but also *Death and Dissymmetry,* where the murdering of Sisera by Yael is analyzed against the ambiguity of Yael's life-giving maternal role and her role of a slayer (Bal 216–17).

While facing the video with the painting by Gentileschi, the spectator can turn left and get a glimpse of Emma in a beautiful church singled out for a highly ritualized marriage ceremony. She can be seen walking towards Charles very slowly, as if reluctantly, for this will eventually take her towards her death. Having been warned that things are not what they seem, the spectator is wary of happiness apparently projected upon the ritual. Indistinction seeps in. "Do you see it" (Bal, *Double Exposures* 311)? If the spectator is reckless enough, s/he might lose her/his current mooring and dart across the room into the only space that is tantalizingly sealed off from the rest of the exhibit by means of a heavy curtain that must be lifted

in a deliberate gesture of trespass. Then a suffocatingly tight movie theatre with one screen is revealed. It is there that Emma's last erotic experience, "Loving Léon," is shown and seen. The space of four seats is indeed embarrassingly uncomfortable. Should anyone else be there, the experience of watching intimacies on the screen that is too large and too close to indulge in an illusion of innocent curiosity might become unbearably voyeuristic. It is voyeuristic enough for the spectators to be exposed to Emma and Léon's repetitive love-making which is not supposed to titillate them, but to prove that they should not pry into the room where the noises of physical contact between the two bodies are just too apparent, as are the creases in the material that their clothes are made of.



But when you enter the exhibition space you have to confront two screens that are opposite each other. On one of them you see Charles involved in what the artists call a voyeuristic act of seeing (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*), while Emma goes about her business on the farm, trying to attract the invisible man's attention at the same time. In the cinema theatre the spectator ends up feeling like the people who watch, stalk or follow Emma, like Charles, Rodolphe, Léon or Homais. In her book *Loving Yusuf*, Bal reminds readers that the "voyeuristic position" is "gender-specific." The critic's comment made in the context of her analysis of a painting by Rembrandt is highly relevant for the spectator in the cinema theatre part of the video installation: "It is a 'me' who, in spite of my feminist convictions endorses a male habit as a reluctant guest" (Bal, *Loving Yusuf* 88).

On emerging from the sealed off space the spectator can watch Emma move downhill towards death, or can opt for a different ending. The final sequence of five screens adjacent to one another plays, among others, alternative endings. This, as Bal admitted during the seminar, was inspired by John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*). The very fact of involving Fowles provides Flaubert's Emma with a choice she did not have in her time. She is released into the indeterminacy of two alternative endings. In one of them she becomes hysterical and nearly drowns herself, Ophelia-like, in the lake that used to be the background of her love affair with Rodolphe. On seeing that, Homais phones emergency and has Emma tied to a stretcher and locked in the ambulance, her small daughter watching an incomprehensible and cruel scene. Emma, like many women whose emotion has become excessive, will be confined to a mental asylum, and thus disciplined and punished, to invoke Foucault. Significantly, Homais imitates her behaviour in his most "abject" moment in the film, that is, after she poisons herself and dies. The pharmacist plunges into the water and is overcome

with hysteria, the weeds clinging to his body. As both artists suggested in the seminar, the water induced indistinction by dissolving the boundaries. A hysteric that Homais turns into "blurs the differences" within signification that abhors indistinction (Beizer 164).

The most "optimistic" ending in the last installation set at the exhibition is the one where a friendly female lawyer helps Emma file a divorce suit on the grounds that she does not love her husband. Although it is the only ending that leaves Emma safe from home or institutional confinement, she is going to live on welfare, and her perspective will be narrowed down, which is subtly suggested when she tries to peer through the slats of the Venetian blind in the lawyer's office, but her view is limited. Through anachronism in the two alternative endings Bal and Williams Gamaker show the consequences of female desire that are still difficult to deal with despite the apparent equality of the sexes. Pamela Sue Anderson contends: "Desire has a negative meaning for patriarchy; in the patriarchal configurations of Adam and Eve, it is a conscious inclination to deviate from a good rational intention" (151). It is certainly this aspect that has often made readers and critics judge Emma harshly. But the exhibition by Bal and Williams Gamaker elicits a different response. Dominic LaCapra was quoted in the seminar as an influence behind it. His concept of "empathic unsettlement," used in trauma discourse responding to the Holocaust (135–36), is applied by the artists who want to unsettle the spectator so that s/he would be able to empathize rather than either judge or sentimentally and uncritically identify.



The alternative endings played simultaneously with the actual one on adjacent screens make spectators doubt the finality of what they see. Beizer argues that Flaubert "accidentally substituted the symptoms of mercury poisoning for those of arsenic"; he was treated with mercury for syphilis, so "his cure" became Emma's "poison" (165). With an inky stain on her white dress, the result of poisoning, *Madame B* brings to mind a blank page marked by the writer's script, now rewritten and perhaps released, like Anna Karenina reclaimed in *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990) by Canadian writer Aritha van Herk, who takes Tolstoy's heroine into the Arctic north, "un/reading" her there (86) in order to free her from "her lover/her killer/her necrophiliac scribe" (142).

## From the Verbal into the Visual

Though image predominates, language is given a special power in the scenes of seduction. Only Charles is totally inept using it. In the only scene where he is shown talking to Emma at length, the spectator witnesses the visual rendition

of the famous quote from Flaubert about his conversation that was as flat as a sidewalk. The scene shows the effect of Charles's speech on Emma's bored face. Her husband keeps discussing medical cases involving arthritis, mentions his plan to make a garden shed, and finally tries to encourage Emma to make cherry jam, and upon her failure to reply he says he will ask his mother to do it. To this Emma responds with a scream. The couple are shown in an elegant setting of their home; the meal in front of them brings to mind communion because of fish and wine. But the fish looks more dead than in Dutch still lifes; it seems to fix the spectator with its glazed eyes. The way Charles speaks has a similar effect on Emma. She feels locked into her house, inert and served on the social menu in the role that deadens her, as it intensifies her passivity.



Emma has always dreamt of verbal seduction. When Homais talks her into persuading Charles to take part in the TV show devoted to antidepressants, she is only too eager to comply. Charles does appear on TV impeccably dressed, but verbally he fails conspicuously in front of Emma on the other side of the screen. A screen showing him is embedded in another screen that the participants of the exhibition watch, being able to follow Emma's excruciatingly acute sense of humiliation and her anger with the loser when he comes back home. Charles does not see the speaker's point when faced with the statement: "you are the gate-keepers," which refers to the general practitioners' responsibility for prescribed medications. He does not understand depression either; he is out of touch with psychological phenomena, even if he can treat physical wounds. He will not be able to see his wife's condition when she begins to develop bulimia. An ironic undertone to the speaker's statement is that Charles will not be able to keep the gate closed sexually. The gate opens the moment he loses, which is not explicit in the exhibition, but the film makes the spectator aware of the fact that Charles used a surrogate seduction, that is, the temptation of financial safety and social position—too little for an individual like Emma.

Brought up on novels, Emma lives on words, but "[r]eading persists as the most dangerous activity any character can engage in" (van Herk 135), to mention only Brian Moore's *The Doctor's Wife* (1976), a novel about an educated housewife from Belfast, who read herself into freedom from political and marital oppression after she had had a fling with a younger man in France, in another twentieth-century work inspired by Flaubert.

## A Dialogue with *The Doll*

It is significant that Bal and Williams Gamaker mention the Polish novel *The Doll* by Bolesław Prus (1890), while commenting on the nineteenth-century novels of female desire, a phenomenon that attracted male writ-

ers (*Madame B: Explorations* 3), who thus paved way for the Freudian colonial comparison of a woman to Africa, since her sexuality remained swathed in impenetrable mystery like "the dark continent" (Anderson 104). While *The Doll* is not, technically speaking, an adultery novel, it does contain the motif that invites comparison with Flaubert's work. Its protagonist, Stanisław Wo-kulski, is a shopkeeper who notices a beautiful daughter of an impoverished aristocrat at the theatre and decides to risk everything in order to make the money that would give him access to her. The theatre setting already alerts the reader to Wokulski's construction of romantic femininity he wants to adulate. When he returns from mysterious expeditions rich and generous, he gradually gets closer to Izabela Łęcka, who sees through his dream, and says to her confidante that if the man wants to buy her, he will find out she is very expensive (Prus 97). But Wokulski eventually proposes to her and is accepted as a solid and reliable investment in her future. Yet, while the couple are on the train with Izabela's father, her cousin begins to flirt with her in English, and it soon becomes clear to Wokulski, who also invested in learning languages, that they have been lovers. Izabela did not want a man to adore her wordlessly or simply buy her; she wanted a verbal seducer, the only advantage her lover has.

Early criticism in Polish was scathingly unkind to Izabela (Krzyżanowski 387), who was (falsely) seen as the eponymous doll and corrupting influence on the highly patriotic though disillusioned idealist fighting first for Polish independence, but then applying his great mind to financial machinations, so as to secure for himself the status of a husband to a woman of noble birth and rare beauty. Continually bored, prejudiced and brought up, Emma-like, on French novels, Izabela has long been treated as an embodiment of carnal temptation that made the hero fall. *Madame B* offers a fresh perspective with which to "frame" her. Wokulski is not really interested in a personal relationship but in adoration and conquest. He wants a fiction, not a real woman. Izabela plays his game mercilessly. Let him indulge in his fiction; he still will not be the master of her sexual life. The same could be said about Emma, who gets bored with the role the Victorians termed "the angel in the house," and her adultery is a way to regain influence on her life that she gave up out of obedience to custom and convention. Leckie notes that in Victorian England adultery challenged the dominant story of domestic stability, and problematized the angel turned into the adulteress in the house, knowledgeable about her sexuality (59–60).

Like Izabela, who falls for singers or suave talkers, Madame B is sensitive to singing and discourse. In the installation we see her reading the

*Héloïse-Abélard Correspondance*. This feeds into the "eroticization of women's reading practices" in the nineteenth century (Leckie 60). If Abélard seduced Héloïse, while being her teacher, using his intellect and speech, Madame B craves the same, and at some stage she seems to obtain it. Her lover, Rodolphe, seduces her by means of persuasion and promises he never intends to fulfil. On one of the screens we see Emma giving him a quill he uses in foreplay to touch the intimate parts of her body, while she responds with excitement. Through its connection with medieval scribes, the quill refers to the book Emma has been reading. The same quill is later used by Rodolphe to write a letter of rejection. It is dipped in water containing wilted flowers in order to stain the paper with moisture imitating tears. That is not what Madame B expected from her bourgeois version of Abélard. Léon later seduces her in a very similar way. Léon talks her into making love to him. When he stalks Emma at the beginning of her married life, he is first of all an interlocutor, even if they miss each other in their messages.



The casting decision that resulted in one actor playing Charles, Rodolphe and Léon was especially significant since, combined, they represent a fiction that Emma never ceases to indulge in. None of the lovers understands Madame B, who in turn does not really register that fact until it is too late. The lack of understanding is expressed in the fact that Charles/Rodolphe/Léon speaks French, while Emma speaks Finnish, the language of the actress (Marja Skaffari). Though distinct from each other due to make-up, hairstyle and dress code, the men are subsumed by indistinction as a result of conflating three different personalities in one actor, Thomas Germaine (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*).

## Gothicized Houses of Maya Deren and Louise Bourgeois

While discussing quotations embedded in the project, Michelle Williams Gamaker mentioned Maya Deren, a film director and actress, who had been born to a Jewish family in Kiev, and then made her home in the United States. Williams Gamaker referred specifically to the silent film *At Land*, which shows Maya Deren crawl along the driftwood on the beach, but the driftwood suddenly changes into a long table at a highly conventionalized social gathering. Maya crawls on ignored by elegantly dressed people and a man involved in a game of chess at the top of the table. When the man disappears, Maya suddenly finds herself on the road leading to a desolate house. Gothicized by the presence of a shape swathed in white canvas, the house exudes the sense of death and finality of destruction.

In the final part of the installation with five screens placed on the wall, in the one on the left edge, we see an actress playing Emma involved in

a sensual encounter with rough surfaces as her face is sliding off the wall of a broken, roofless, forsaken house. One more quotation can be detected here. Bal has written extensively on Louise Bourgeois, among others on her project called *Cells*, where "architecture is involved, explored and contested," and the form is infused with memory (Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* 2). "Cell Choisy" shows an opulent country house in France with the blade of a guillotine invincibly hovering above it, implying emotional devastation. Likewise, the broken house in *Madame B* is a comment on the loss, dissolution and breakup of a relationship and family.



## Underneath "The Yellow Wallpaper"/Mural

Williams Gamaker repeatedly reverted to the intertext that both artists found so seminal in their installation, namely "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where the nameless protagonist, another doctor's wife, spends her life confined to a former nursery in a country house haunted by colonial undertones. There she is dissuaded from writing since it is bad for her health according to her husband. Infantilized and always "at rest" she focuses on the hideous yellow wallpaper whose design apparently hides a woman crawling underneath, much like Emma's invisible woman crouching in the mural by LeWitt, or like Maya Deren crawling on the table, while being totally ignored, unseen by the participants of the banquet.

Williams Gamaker stressed in the seminar that Gilman had blurred the boundary between reality and insanity in her story, which is "quoted" in Emma leaning inside into the ground of LeWitt's work, without knowing it. Emma is concerned with crossing thresholds. Faced with LeWitt's mural, she senses a hidden dimension of herself that can only be seen when the light falls in a certain way. She symbolically dissolves the boundary between fiction that goes into the making of her socially acceptable self and inner reality that she intuits through the mediation of art whose message speaks only to her. The condition of Gilman's protagonist is anachronistically projected on Emma, who gives birth to her baby at home in the room upstairs that only Charles can enter. She is thus his wife and his patient at the same time. He admits in front of Homais that Emma is doing fine in response to the latter urging him to take his wife to hospital. While the two men discuss her below in the public part of the house, Emma is above, confined to the room that is turning into the actual nursery from Gilman's short story.

It is interesting that the men surrounding Emma (except Charles) encourage her to cross thresholds. Rodolphe does it by taking her into the open space around his mansion where peacocks flaunt their feathers the

way he flaunts his sex appeal and suave seductive discourse. Léon, who lacks Rodolphe's cynicism, eagerly draws Emma into conversations, first as an innocent interlocutor, then as a seducer hunting for her in the anonymity of the city. Homais makes her force Charles to take part in the TV show, and then facilitates her transit into the city, when he persuades Charles to give her permission and money to take singing lessons. Every time she is confronted with another fiction, rather than her inner self that she may have wanted to unwrap and express. This encounter with successive fictions is particularly acute in an *haute couture* shop where the screens on the wall hide another closet full of clothes that recycle the promise of self-fulfilment. Emma will lean into it in her imagination the way she leaned into the ground of LeWitt's painting, but she will return from the trip empty-handed, even if she has her hands full of shopping bags with attractive clothes.



## The Art "Around You"

In the booklet on the exhibition, the two artists note that "Emma's activities are heavily indebted to the world that feeds them. Cutting out clothes from fashion magazines indicates that already before leaving the farm the lures of the world have her in their grip" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 6). Feeding becomes a crucial word here, since Emma consumes food for thought or literal food uncritically. Emma feeds on visual messages or erotic experience, or she feasts alone in the kitchen, her fridge emphasizing the isolation and compartmentalization of the consumerist world where she seeks solace in vain. The exhibition does solicit participation through empathy. But the full message will change with every spectator; with art around her/him, s/he will be encouraged to lean inside into the "visual narrative" (Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* 4) and answer the question: "Do you see it?"

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# REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS

https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2015-0018

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# *A goldene medine?* A Dialogue in Many Voices on Canadian Jewish Studies and Poland

## Abstract

This paper is an account of the conference titled *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture / Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes*, which took place in Łódź in April, 2014 as a result of collaboration between the University of Łódź and Concordia University (Montreal). As a venue for discussing Canadian Jewish identity and its links with Poland, the conference supported a dialogue between Canadians, Polish Canadianists, and European scholars from further afield. Established and young scholars attended from Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Canada, in addition to many Polish participants. The presence of scholars such as Goldie Morgentaler or Sherry Simon as well as curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett contributed to an examination of both past and present Canadian and Polish Jewish life and led to an examination of Polish and Canadian literature and history from a highly personal perspective. Conference-goers took advantage of the opportunity to get to know Łódź, via walking tours and a visit to the Łódź Jewish community's Lauder-funded centre on Narutowicza. The paper aims, as well, to investigate how the history of Jewish Łódź is conveyed in the novels of Joseph Roth and Chava Rosenfarb.

In the English translation of Joseph Roth's *Hotel Savoy*, the novel's actual location is not named. "This is the town where my relatives live," Roth writes, at the outset of his narrative, "my parents were Russian Jews" (3). The novel's setting is a town of music hall performers, industrialists, demobbed army men, striking workers, as well as a Jewish quarter of questionable character:

> We arrive at a small lane. There are Jews standing around here and walking about in the middle of the street with ridiculously rolled umbrellas with crooked handles. They are either standing still with pensive expressions or endlessly walking up and down. Here one of them disappears, there another one comes out of a doorway. . . . The people pass each other like silent shadows. This is a collection of phantoms; this is where people long dead walk about; for thousands of years this tribe have frequented these narrow lanes. (30)



The final line in this passage is indicative of Roth's way with his setting; a mysterious and seemingly misleading reference to Jews—at least to the kind of Jews inhabiting the town's shadowy black market economy—who have lived in this borderland "for thousands of years" (30). But elsewhere, Roth's portrait is accurate and detailed in its depiction of interwar Łódź, where the author himself stayed after his release from army service and time spent, as he told it, as a prisoner of war. Upon arrival at the Hotel Savoy, Roth's narrator luxuriates in the fact that he is "standing once again at the gates of Europe." The town of his relatives offers an escape from the war-torn east, and an entranceway to the cosmopolitan west: "It promises water, soap, English-style toilet, a lift, maids in white caps, chamber pots . . . and real beds with eiderdown quilts billowing . . ." (3).

During his stay at the Hotel Savoy, Roth's alter ego meets up with a cast of locals, hotel guests and staff. Among them is the lift-boy Ignatz, whose domain is one of the hotel's most pleasing accoutrements:

> I am taken up by a lift, mirrors adorning every side of it; the lift-boy, a man already advanced in years, lets the rope slip through his hands, the compartment rises, and I sway with it—I think to myself, I could so easily fly aloft like this for a good long time. I love this swaying, and reckon how many wearying steps I'd have to clamber up if I weren't able to sit in this splendid lift; and I hurl back down all my bitterness, and my hardship and wandering and homelessness, my beggar's life now in the past . . . (4–5)

Today, if you stride down Łódź's main drag, Piotrkowska, turn onto Traugutta, and enter the Hotel Savoy, you will discover that a "lift-boy" remains

on staff, even very late at night, to spare guests the "wearying steps" to the sixth floor, the height from which Roth's narrator gazed out at the view of his unnamed town. Like Ignatz, this contemporary master of the elevator is no boy, but, rather, a lean, grey-haired man of courtly manner. The lift is not original. But the winding stairs that circle its cavernous drop no doubt are, and if there were occasions when Roth avoided Ignatz in favour of six floors of exercise, there is a chance that a contemporary visitor to the Hotel Savoy can set her foot just as the author did, nearly slipping over the worn rounded edge of marble stairway.

Łódź is terra incognita to North Americans. Even for North American Jews, including those who have visited Poland, or, at least, studied up on it to recover a sense of their ancestry, the city remains off the radar. They have likely seen iconic photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto, but Łódź's own German-made catastrophe is mostly a mystery to them. This reflects an overall ignorance about Poland—even in light of great interest in the Holocaust—among those who feel they have, via their ancestral connections, some stake in the place. This phenomenon represents, from the perspective of North American Jewish culture and identity, a massive problem, which underwrites ongoing efforts by descendants of Polish Jews to understand a Polish past.



By way of certain coincidences, friendships, as well as overlapping interests shared by Polish and Canadian academics, the goals of a recent Łódź-based conference called *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture/Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes* included an exploration of Canadian Jewish identity and its Polish links (the conference took place at the University of Łódź, Apr. 2–5, 2014). Some of the conference's presenters and its organizers found themselves aloft in the lift at the Hotel Savoy late one night, as part of their cultural work of discovery in Poland. Among these were Sherry Simon, who had come from Montreal to talk about the unique cultural outpost that existed in Czernowitz between the world wars; Evelyn Tauben, a Toronto-based independent curator and cultural program manager; Justyna Fruzińska, a newly minted Łódź-based Ph.D. whose research examines recent Walt Disney films; John Crust, a Canadian who lived, until recently, in Łódź; Krzysztof Majer, a Canadianist and professor at the University of Łódź; and myself, a writer and descendant of Polish Jews whose borderland town was overrun by the Germans at the outset of World War Two. On the night we took our elevator ride and then strode down the stairway in Roth's footsteps, our organizational efforts had born fruit, in particular, through the gathering of an unusual group of papers focused on Canadian literature, as well as on Canadian Jewish

life more broadly. One goal of such a set of conference papers—echoing a longstanding Canadian Studies project in Poland—was to maintain a dialogue that reflected the state of the art of Canadianist literary and cultural scholarship in eastern Europe.

Canadian studies centres have a long and varied history in Poland, and exist in such varied places as Warsaw, Kraków, Toruń and Sosnowiec. These bear a close relationship with the Polish Association for Canadian Studies, whose roots are traced to Warsaw and the early efforts of the American-born academic and cultural impresario Nancy Burke. *Kanade, di goldene medine?* profited from the established dedication of Polish scholars to the field. Panels included young faculty and graduate students, who represent a new generation of specialists interested in such figures as Mordecai Richler, Régine Robin, Tecia Werbowski, or in representations of Jewishness in the works of non-Jewish authors such as Ann-Marie MacDonald and Thomas King. Holocaust history and Yiddish cultural heritage were addressed in talks by Dagmara Drewniak and Karolina Krasuska. Sephardic and Chasidic identities in Montreal were examined by Annie Ousset-Krief, Renata Jarzębowska-Sadkowska and Jessica Roda. The Polish home institutions of the speakers—Konin, Toruń, Szczecin, among others—made the panels, with their engaged audiences, a true dialogue between Poles and Canadians, with Europeans from further afield providing a third constituency. The latter group included Canadianists Alexander Ramon and Dominic Williams from the United Kingdom; Yvonne Völkl, of Graz; Kathleen Gyssels, of Antwerp; and Petr Kyloušek and Eva Voldřichová Beranková of the Czech Republic. Among the conference's eight panels, three were conducted in French, thanks to organizer Krzysztof Majer's collaborative work with Warsaw-based panellist Józef Kwaterko. Parts of the conference were attended by representatives of the Canadian embassy in Warsaw, which supported conference events and travel, and the conference's bilingual presentations (with discussion in other languages, including Yiddish) reflected the best-case scenario of multicultural developments in Canada. Europeans, so commonly comfortable in two or more languages, found their way to the Canadian language that best suited their scholarly aims. An important part of the audience was a group of Canadian non-academics—mostly Torontonians—who travelled with their academic partners and contributed to the conference from start to finish.

A subset of the conference's talks focused on the work of Régine Robin, a French-born, Quebec-based writer of fiction and critical works who was among the conference's four keynote lecturers. The other three keynotes were given by Sherry Simon from Concordia University, myself, and Goldie Morgentaler of the University of Lethbridge. To these we added

Warsaw-based, Toronto-born curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as a "Special Guest Speaker."

If the panellists' Polish and western European frame of reference conveyed a particular view and set of concerns regarding Canadian literature and culture, the keynote talks presented a group of Canadian voices in response. Among these, the voice and subject matter presented by Goldie Morgentaler and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett offered intimate examinations of questions of Jewish-Polish heritage as it has been worked out by Canadian artists and writers. Morgentaler's talk, entitled "Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life*: Recreating Jewish Poland on Canadian Soil," added to her longstanding translational, editorial, and critical work dedicated to her mother's Yiddish-language *oeuvre*. *The Tree of Life*, first published in Yiddish in 1972, appearing in an English translation by Goldie and her mother in 1985, is arguably Rosenfarb's major work. The novel's introductory chapters offer a detailed portrait of pre-war Łódź—both its down-at-the-heels Jewish quarter and its top-of-the-heap manufacturing class. Rosenfarb's Bałuty is not a zone of covert commerce, but it is, like Roth's zone of Jewish covert economy, a puzzle of decrepit alleyways:



> The majority of the houses on Hockel Street were old wooden cottages, as were most of the houses in Baluty. Here and there stood a fading stucco building with several storeys, constructed in the style of the city. These houses had deep arched entrances leading into dingy backyards walled in by three or four-storeyed apartment boxes. Each of the latter had its own murky entrance with a crooked staircase leading to the upper floors. Each floor had its own dark corridor, and each corridor was filled with strong smells which escaped from beneath the countless doors. (33–34)

The home of Samuel Zuckerman, one of Rosenfarb's Jewish manufacturers, is on Narutowicz Street, which is how the novel's English version spells this address. Zuckerman enters his magnificent home to find that a

> ball was in full swing. All the lights were on in the salon and the lustrous glitter of the crystal chandeliers and candelabras made everything sparkle with a glow of its own. The new mahogany buffet tables, a creation of Woodke, a German and the best carpenter in town, were crowded with vases out of which luscious flowers poked their heads through thin green ferns, so delicate that they looked like the filigree work of a meticulous artist. (14)

Here, Rosenfarb's fiction provides an insider's view of the kind of scenario that Roth offers only glancingly in *Hotel Savoy*, when his narrator visits a relative who has grown fat on his business successes and welcomes his visitor "before a gleaming copper samovar eating scrambled egg and ham and drinking tea with milk" (13).

The experience of listening to Goldie Morgentaler discuss her mother's creative and personal connection with Łódź in *Łódź* offered an unusually rich sense of how readerly possibilities can overlap with actual experience; the still extant neighbourhood of Bałuty, where the Germans created a Jewish ghetto, is a manageable walk from the university buildings that provided our conference venue. The Poznański Palace, repurposed as a museum; the elaborate redbrick factory complex transformed as Manufaktura; the still dilapidated workers' houses across from the slick new andel's Hotel, beckoned too. In the early chapters of Rosenfarb's novel, the decades of Łódź's economic boom are gracefully, lovingly recreated. If Roth's book offers a veiled portrait of these developments, Rosenfarb sketches them in truer and fuller shape. Walks around Łódź today present the possibility of a third layer of recognition, a kind of return, to the sights and scenes presented in these novels.



Our conference group took a number of walks together, in one case to see the impressive old Jewish cemetery, and then the Radegast Station monument, which takes its name from the occupation period when the Germans renamed the platform for its use as the transport point from which many thousands were sent from the ghetto to Chełmno and Auschwitz. This tour was led by the Łódź-based guide Milena Wicepolska, who, among other pursuits associated with the city's Jewish history, organizes volunteers to clear the cemetery's overgrown grounds. Our most substantial city walk as a group led us along Narutowicza to the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation for a Sabbath service and dinner—a remarkable addition to the conference's other forms of boundary crossing, immersion in the local scene and, as it might have been for some, anthropological study of local texture and Jewish reality. Lauder's early investments in post-communist Jewish life are well known, and the philanthropic goals of his organization model themselves on North American ideas and institutional goals, which include a place to pray. At Lauder we did something I have not done on my many visits to Poland: in a room divided by sheer cloth, we were led in prayer by a good old-fashioned-sounding *ba'al tefillah*, who, I was later told, is an evangelical Christian convert to Judaism (the man's background made my corny effort at night's end to address him in Yiddish a kind of Marx Brothers moment, for it would be the last language he was likely to understand, as negligible as my own Polish). The evening at the Lauder

Foundation offered many pleasant surprises: members of our group sang in Yiddish, and these female voices offered a Canadian rejoinder to the Polish males who led after-dinner songs around a maze of tables. But I wonder if others, besides myself, felt that the night's undertakings had unlocked the possibility, sometimes suggested in books, of conjuring real and semi-real places of great majesty. Bruno Schulz points toward this possibility in his *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, when a childhood encounter with a marvellous book conjures faraway places: "Canada, Honduras, Nicaragua, Abracadabra, Hipporabundia. . . ." (34). I floated, I felt, on the fringes of a land called Rosenfarbia, or, a little less fully formed, the terrain of Rothania, where the city's memories heaved themselves up before us, momentarily physically present, along with the racket of trams that passed outside the open windows on Narutowicza.



To be true to Rosenfarb's creative motives, one needed to hear some of her work read in Yiddish. And this was provided by Goldie Morgentaler at an evening event that included readings of Rosenfarb's poems, as well as my own fiction and the creative work of Régine Robin. Yiddish language and literature arose as a compelling motive for discussion at other stages of the conference, including Vivian Felsen's consideration of Chaim Leib Fuks's efforts to create an encyclopaedic history of Canadian Yiddish writers, and in Isa Milman's presentation of her poetry related to Jewish immigrant and farming life on the Canadian prairie.

Readers of Rosenfarb's *Tree of Life* recognize that her writerly project was a form of historical recovery mixed with testimony, asserting the need to reproduce a world that was entirely destroyed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's presentation at the conference centred on the screening of a film devoted to her father's slow but ultimately substantial voyage of return to the Polish city of Apt, or Opatów, where he was a boy before the war. At his daughter's urging, relying on his perfect recall of the pre-war years, Kirshenblatt began to paint the Polish places of his youth. Interest in his paintings led to his return to Opatów on the occasion of an exhibition, overseen by local officials, attended by old-timers and youthful citizens alike. Mayer Kirshenblatt's accomplishments mirror his daughter's, as she completes the curatorial work on exhibits for the newly opened Warsaw Museum of the History of Polish Jews. At the museum, memory and Jewish re-immersion in the Polish contemporary scene are twin goals. The sleek building that houses the museum offers a meeting place between past and present, which includes newly laid out contemplative surroundings, the original Warsaw Uprising monument and a roadway named for Irena Sendler, saviour of children in the Warsaw Ghetto.

One of the exhibits being readied for view is a recreated wooden painted ceiling, after the seventeenth-century synagogue at Gwoździec (Hvizdets), which was destroyed by the Germans. Evelyn Tauben took part in the project to paint the rebuilt facsimile of the ceiling, relying on photographs and descriptions of its pre-war glory. Tauben's presentation to the conference, like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's, offered a portrait of different modes of return, recovery and reconsideration of Polish-Jewish cultural links from a Canadian perspective. This aspect of the conference could be said to be its most idealistic: the prospect of challenging stereotypic, even destructive notions of Poland, and expressing the urge among a new generation of curators, writers and scholars to uncover fresh forms of immersion and dialogue. There were points of resistance to this goal, moments at which expressions of deep personal hurt linked with the shared past made the promise of a change in Polish-Canadian Jewish relations seem unlikely. Regardless of the outcome of these discussions, the depth and level of personal engagement expressed were not what one expects to hear at an academic conference. Such discussion, alongside intellectual challenges, raised ethical, even existential propositions and counter-propositions, which demand attention. Whether one headed home on foot, along Narutowicza, or via air, toward western Europe, Victoria, Toronto or Montreal, the concluding feeling was one that called for further work. Canadians and Poles alike were struck by the need for continued engagement with the questions raised by our panels, talks and readings. Certainly, the Canadian attendees of *Kanade, di goldene medine?* felt a new respect and affection for the once-Jewish streets of Łódź.

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# The Task of Attention


## Sherry Simon (Concordia University) Talks to Krzysztof Majer and Justyna Fruzińska (University of Łódź)


**Krzysztof Majer, Justyna Fruzińska:** Let us begin with a subject that you have written much about, and always passionately: your home city—Montreal, or perhaps Montréal. It has often been portrayed as a cosmopolitan metropolis, similar to New York or London, but you have chosen more striking analogies. In your book *Translating Montreal*, you describe it as a "divided city," and you propose reading it via turn-of-the-century Trieste or Prague, colonial Calcutta, or even contemporary Mostar, evidently challenging the comfortable image of the Canadian mosaic. In these cities, encounters with difference would have been associated with unease or danger. However, barring the October Crisis of 1970, Montreal is not associated, in the global imagination, with violence or peril.

**Sherry Simon:** It was not only the October Crisis itself—a period of months—which brought violence into the city but the decade preceding and following. Those who lived through the difficult years of the 1960s and 1970s remember a very fraught atmosphere, not only in the political arena but in the sphere of daily life, too, as Québécois nationalism penetrated every area of cultural life, making the time very exciting but also full of antagonism across language lines. Montreal was for much of the twentieth century a colonial city, one dominated by a minority English-language bourgeoisie. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s progressively changed this situation, so that today the city is largely French-speaking, and English has only a minority role. There is less a sense of division today because the hierarchies of the colonial situation no longer obtain. Yet Montreal shares with many postcolonial cities a shape and a sensibility that has to do with a past of stark divisions—the spatial divisions of colonial Calcutta or of German-Czech Prague.

**KM, JF:** In your book, you map various "translational" journeys and passages across the divided city which have occurred over the last sixty years or so, with different outcomes. Translation is here understood very broadly, that is including diverse forms of language contact and interference. These may occur spontaneously, but may also be

variously motivated: from the linguistic violence of superimposition practised by the authorities to unprompted, sincere, grass-roots voyages of individuals curious to "see how the other half lives." But you conclude that "the identity of the city is to be understood as the sum total of the passages that define its evolution, each testifying to changing conditions of reception." This is a very dynamic portrait of Montreal, which points to the impossibility of producing a final, complete vision. The Montreal of today seems very far removed from Hugh MacLennan's notion of "two solitudes," which was still current, or perhaps fashionable, until very recently. Have there been any major shifts over the eight years since the book was published? Are we able to speculate about the city's future shape?

**SS:** The "two solitudes" image long outlived its accuracy as a description of Montreal's social dynamics. And as you say, today's Montreal has a much more diverse and complex cultural landscape. I think that the ways in which young people identify with language continue to change. You don't necessarily choose one language identity and stick to it. There is a lot more fluidity. The historical English-language community is dwindling, but English continues to be an important player—as an international language rather than as the historic colonial enemy. More and more languages of immigration are important today as third languages. Montreal will, however, remain a French-language city and it is important to defend the language laws that allow French to be protected in the public realm. It will be interesting to watch how French itself becomes more diversified, even as it remains the dominant language of the city.

**KM, JF:** Speaking of linguistic diversification, how do the Francophone inhabitants of Montreal, or indeed of Quebec, see their language vis-à-vis French as spoken in Europe, *dans l'Hexagone*? Historically, the ties to the language and culture have been very strong, also as far as supporting the idea of sovereignty—one thinks, for instance, of Charles de Gaulle shouting "*Vive le Québec libre!*" from the balcony of Montreal City Hall in 1967. But how have the Quebecois negotiated their position with regard to the other colonial mantle, i.e., that of *l'Hexagone* itself?

**SS:** After decades of very intense debate, there is now a clear consensus that Quebec French is a separate variety of French, neither better nor worse than the Hexagonal, and distinguished by accent, vocabulary and—to some extent—syntax. Influence from English is still considered to be detrimental to Quebec French, and in fact Quebecers are much more attentive to interference from English than are the

French, who don't seem to mind if their language is increasingly Anglicized. It is no longer France which is considered the absolute arbiter of correctness as far as expression is concerned—Quebec French is, like North African French or Caribbean French, an equal contributor to the culture of *la Francophonie*. Language consciousness in Quebec extends to the recognition of the gendered nature of language, and while France still declares the Rights of Man, Quebec is attuned to the rights of Humans, and feminizes the professions (including *la Première ministre*).

**KM, JF:** Among the many encounters between the various cultures of Montreal described in your book there are, of course, instances of translation in the strict sense. One of the most fascinating examples is the rendering in other languages of a Quebecois theatre classic, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-sœurs* (1965), originally written in *joual*, i.e., the language of Montreal's Francophone working class. *Joual* was then considered an impure, déclassé idiom, and Tremblay's decision was—as you remind us—a fervent political gesture. For almost thirty years, Tremblay expressly forbade productions of his piece in Montreal in a language other than French. However, he finally made an allowance for two translations into languages themselves considered impure and déclassé, i.e., Glaswegian Scots (Bill Findlay's and Martin Bowman's 1989 translation as *The Guid Sisters*) and Yiddish (Goldie Morgentaler's 1992 translation as *Di Shvegerins*). Especially the second was significant, when staged in Montreal: a dialogue between—as director Dora Wasserman put it—"two threatened cultures," relations between which had historically been based either on hostility or obliviousness. You discuss this production in the context of other, often surprising connections being forged between the Francophone culture and the traditionally Anglophone Jewish community in Montreal, principally through the work of historian / translator Pierre Anctil. Would you say that *Di Shvegerins* has had a lasting effect?



**SS:** You are right to point to the cultural significance of these translations, particularly of *joual* into Yiddish. What are their lasting effects? *Di Shvegerins* was produced under the auspices of the Yiddish Theatre company founded by Dora Wasserman, and then directed by Bryna Wasserman and others. The goal of the company was to keep Yiddish theatre culture alive, and the translation was just one of the many projects which the company undertook. This long-term project has had invaluable effects, both for the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. *Di Shvegerins* should also be placed in the context of the many translations recently undertaken by Pierre

Anctil from Yiddish into French, again a long-term project whose payoffs have been immense. All these efforts have contributed to the diversification of Francophone culture in Montreal, and to the creation of a new understanding of the history of the city. Montreal is about to celebrate its 375th birthday [in 2017], and hopefully the events surrounding this anniversary will build on the huge efforts in the last 25 years to construct a new and more inclusive understanding of the history of the city.

**KM, JF:** To continue on the subject of Jewishness: in the first half of the twentieth century, Montreal was, after New York, the second most important centre of Jewish (particularly Yiddish) culture, "the Jerusalem of the North." Various factors have contributed to the gradual decline of this cultural status quo—the influx of immigrants from the Pale of Settlement and other parts of Europe was obviously cut short by the Holocaust; in Montreal itself, the older generations died out, while the younger loosened or lost their connection to Yiddish. More recently, in the 80s and 90s, both separatist referenda in Quebec and the fear of Francization also led large numbers of Jews to abandon the province for Ontario, chiefly Toronto, which now has the largest Jewish population in Canada (160,000 to Montreal's 90,000). However, efforts are being made nowadays—not least by your own scholarly work—to reclaim the traces of Jewish past in the city both for the Anglophone and the Francophone world. Could you describe what they are and how successful they have been so far?

**SS:** Well, you're right to underline the fact that Toronto is now Canada's major Jewish city, with Montreal falling very significantly behind. It is important to mention, however, the important Sephardic Jewish population of Montreal which was attracted to it as a French-speaking city, and which has become increasingly present as a cultural force. The specifically Yiddish past of Montreal has now become the subject of historical research, and in connection with this I would like to call attention to the work of Rebecca Margolis, professor at the University of Ottawa, who has contributed significantly to our knowledge of Yiddish Montreal, in particular by her book *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil* (2011). It is impossible to overestimate the work of Pierre Anctil, as a translator and scholar of Yiddish Montreal, in his efforts to redefine relations between Francophones and Jews. Other scholars, like Esther Trépanier (for visual culture) and Jean-Marc Larrue (for the history of theatre), have also been active in making the Yiddish Montreal past part of a common Quebec history. And a significant amount of research has been done within the Francophone literary world to

reconnect these histories. So altogether I think that the scholarly efforts within the Francophone world in particular have been immensely significant—signalling a sea-change in perceptions of the past and understanding of the present.

**KM, JF:** One of the goals of our conference, in which you kindly participated as keynote speaker,[1] has been to strengthen, or perhaps forge anew, the connection between Łódź and Montreal. A general connection, or even mirroring, exists here: in pre-war Poland, Łódź had the second largest Jewish population after Warsaw, and saw the development of a very vibrant modern culture centred around Yiddish (e.g., the influential "Jung Jidysz" collective). And then there are, of course, individual writers: chiefly Chava Rosenfarb, whose Yiddish masterpiece *Der boim fun lebn (The Tree of Life)* is a fictionalized account of the Łódź Ghetto, but also, for instance, Yehuda Elberg, who was born in the nearby Zgierz. As conference organizers, we felt that, in that respect, the presence of Goldie Morgentaler—Rosenfarb's daughter, translator and commentator—was key to what we were trying to achieve. Rosenfarb's monumental novel is still virtually unknown in Poland, mostly due to a lack of translations; it is a glaring absence, for the time being filled up by Polish versions of vastly inferior works such as Steve Sem-Sandberg's *Emperor of Lies*. But to the point: we would appreciate your thoughts on, and impressions of this first visit to Łódź, and of its potential for strengthening the ties with Montreal.



**SS:** I lament with you the fact that Chava Rosenfarb's amazing trilogy, *The Tree of Life*, is not better known. I was also struck by the lack of attention to her novel in the reactions to Steve Sem-Sandberg's *Emperor of Lies*. Rosenfarb's novel is a much more textured and wide-ranging account of life in the Łódź Ghetto, a testament to the powers both of memory and the imagination. As Goldie Morgentaler has explained, Łódź is a living figure in Rosenfarb's work—and the city takes on immense importance. In this sense, I could say that visiting Łódź for me was something of an uncanny experience, because I was trying to bring together what I saw with what I had read. (Another literary presence is, of course, Joseph Roth's *Hotel Savoy*). The industrial past of Łódź as the "Manchester of the East" enhances the sense of the uncanny—because the red-brick industrial architecture of the city is so similar to the red-brick factories of the

[1] *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture / Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes*, Łódź, April 2–5, 2014. The other keynote and guest speakers were Régine Robin, Goldie Morgentaler, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Norman Ravvin.

north-east corner of North America. Montreal's factories in Saint-Henri seem to be replicas of the ones we see here. My stay in Łódź was far too short for me to come up with any substantive impressions for possibilities of links between the two cities, but I am sure that there is ample potential. The fact that so many important figures from Łódź have had an impact on the Yiddish-language literature of Montreal is a promising beginning.

**KM, JF:** To return to the subject of translation: you describe a remarkable development within Anglophone writing since the 1980s, chiefly among women writers, i.e., to either consciously adopt French as the language in which to write (e.g., Agnes Whitfield), or to deliberately allow French structures and vocabularies to interpenetrate English, so that the outcome is designed to read like a translation (e.g., Gail Scott). Somewhere along that spectrum we also find the creatively playful translations (or "transelations") and "appropriations" of Erin Mouré, who works, among others, with texts by Nicole Brossard. Brossard herself often problematizes translation, or else her texts appear to enact a translation which does not in fact take place (*Le désert mauve* is a case in point). Of all the "contact zones" which you describe, this seems to be the one most promising, productive and open, because it seems to deny, or at least challenge, the existence of a privileged original, or in fact, a privileged language.

**SS:** Yes, it is interesting that women writers have been particularly active in promoting forms of "translational writing." These are forms of experimental writing, and the figures you point to have been active in avant-garde experiments. Translation remains an important area for such experiments (another figure is Anne Carson), and, of course, Montreal is a particularly apt place for such cross-language excursions. But this writing does remain marginal.

**KM, JF:** Since we are already discussing privileged languages, perhaps you won't mind talking straightforward politics. Recent weeks have seen a staggering defeat of Parti Québécois in the local election, and a victory of the Liberal Party under the slogan *Ensemble*. Since its inception in 1968, Parti Quebecois have had a separatist agenda; whenever they came to power, they proposed a referendum to gauge the society's attitude to the province's independence. Both the 1980 and the 1995 referenda failed, but in the second the outcome was incredibly close. This time the incumbent Premier of Quebec, Pauline Marois, hoped for a majority government and it seems that another referendum was in the offing, but these dreams were cut short by surprisingly low results (the Liberals under Philippe Couillard won 70 seats to PQ's 30). This

seems to have been caused at least in part by the controversial Charter of Values which Marois had been championing, and which would forbid civil servants to wear traditional headgear (e.g., hijabs, burkas, kippas). Is it possible, however, that we are seeing a more general shift in the province, where PQ's nationalist agenda has more or less run out of steam, and the younger generations cannot be rallied to the cause of *le Québec libre* the way their parents and grandparents could? Or do you think that this is only a temporary lull?

**SS:** You are asking questions that all the political analysts in Quebec were asking on the days following the surprising election results. For most of us, we were simply elated that the Quebec population had not been taken in by what looked for a while like successful electoralist tactics. For me, it is hard to separate the issues from the particularly sleazy way in which Pauline Marois and her henchmen set about trying to win this election. The Charter from the start was a dishonest manoeuvre, meant only to win votes and not to prove any particular point. And so I was thrilled to see this particular team of politicians bite the dust. About the real issues in the long term? I am sure that independence will remain on the political horizon, but it will only have meaning when it carries with it some sort of progressive political project. Independence for its own sake has no meaning, and that is what the electorate so resoundingly said a few weeks ago.

**KM, JF:** Why is Quebecois separatism still attractive enough to serve as a constituent of a political programme? There is a trend in analyzing nationalisms springing up in many European countries as a response to the marginalization of certain groups due to an economic consensus blurring any real distinctions between left- and right-wing parties. Thus, populist sentiments in Central Europe are often interpreted as expressing the frustration of those who feel they have no serious political representation. What fuels separatism / nationalism in Quebec? Is it a mere vent for political disappointments, or can it be seen as a realistic proposition, in social and economic terms?

**SS:** This is a particularly interesting question in light of the results of the elections of last April. There is a sense in which supporters of nationalism feel that the clock is ticking and that globalization will rob them of the numbers they need to ensure a majority in the case of a referendum. This is true. It is difficult for the nationalists to enrol the support of immigrants for their cause—especially as the huge economic disparities which once separated the English (perceived as the colonizer) against the French have

to a large extent disappeared. In fact, it is more and more difficult to determine who is English and who is French when so many individuals are bilingual and where immigrants now increasingly assimilate to the French language (largely because of the success of Bill 101 [The Charter of the French Language]). Is it only the older generation which clings to the idea of a majority "us" against "them"? This is what some commentators are saying.

**KM, JF:** An interesting response to the notion of Quebec sovereignty recently came from the well-regarded 25-year-old Francophone film director Xavier Dolan, who made two comments, in Cannes, that may have seemed contradictory at first: "Whatever my political views are or standpoints, I feel like my movie [*Mommy*, 2014] is very Québécois" and "For me, it's not about a country or a province or old dilemmas or wars—that, my generation doesn't associate with or relate with anymore." Speaking for an entire generation, he seemed to single-handedly detach the idea of sovereignty from Quebecois identity, the existence of which he did not, however, deny. Would you see this as a young man's flippancy or part of a legitimate stance which the Francophone 20-somethings are taking in Quebec today?

**SS:** Yes, absolutely. Quebec is a distinct society with a very distinctive culture. This remains true, whether Quebec is politically separate or not. The existence of a strong Quebec government within Canada is essential, for many reasons, including the promotion of the arts. The Harper government is destroying a great deal of what allowed Canadian culture to flourish, and so it is important that the provincial governments, and especially Quebec, continue to act as a counter-weight.

**KM, JF:** If we may end on a more personal note: you yourself are perfectly fluent and at home in both English and French, to the extent that you pronounce your name differently in each language. In the preface to *Translating Montreal*, you acknowledge both the sense of adventure and of disorientation that had accompanied your early ventures into Francophone territory, while in the last pages of your book you turn this into something of an ethical injunction, which you call "the task of attention" and which may perhaps be applied more broadly, to living within an agglomeration: "[a]ttention to differences—those that are fleeting, those that endure—is central to the lessons of city life. To be alert to diversity is both task and reward." Do you see the "New Montrealer" as embodying this attitude, or is this still a project, a hope for the future?

**SS:** The daily encounter with difference is, I think, the most com-

pelling aspect of urban life. All cities offer this experience, but some cities offer more intense doses or varieties of diversity. Montreal's language situation strikes me as a particularly rich kind of daily confrontation with difference. Perhaps this is because I was born into this city and am fascinated by the evolution of its language relations, and by the kind of attention it obliges each of us to maintain. This is a very mundane kind of attention on the one hand (what language does my interlocutor speak? how can I be sure that the language I speak is appropriate, and correct—that is untouched by the influence of the other tongue?) and also an attention that has metaphysical and ethical dimensions (how does the presence of other languages and other systems of values affect my own sense of what is right?). In both cases, I am talking about an ongoing project which is both the privilege and the obligation of the city-dweller.

# American Studies in Poland: A Collective Enterprise

## An Interview with Agnieszka Salska by Jadwiga Maszewska and Zbigniew Maszewski (University of Łódź)

**Jadwiga Maszewska, Zbigniew Maszewski:** How did you become interested in American literature? In the 1960s a preference for things American could be considered as a form of protest against what we had and what we were experiencing here in Poland. Do you remember it that way?

**Agnieszka Salska:** No, I don't remember my interest in American literature as a conscious political choice. My entering the newly opened English Department at Łódź University (it was reopened in 1957 following the political thaw in the wake of the "Polish October" of 1956) was influenced by my high school teacher of Polish who kept pointing out that studying English (I was thinking of studying in the Polish Department) will more effectively open the world for me. Special interest in American literature came only later and quite spontaneously. After our third year of studies, we were required to attend a summer course where instructors were native speakers provided by the British Council and the Cultural Section of American Embassy in Warsaw. One of our American instructors, I think, it was the poet, Peter Viereck (much later I found out that he taught history at Mount Holyoke, the college Dickinson attended, called in her time Mount Holyoke Seminary) brought a recording of poems by Emily Dickinson read by an actress whose name I no longer remember. I'm sure my English at that point was not adequate to the task of actually understanding the poems. Still, they made a tremendous impression, probably because the folk rhythms of the stanzaic forms Dickinson relies on are quite universal and worked for me above (or beneath) the semantic level of her clipped sentences. As a result, confirmed in my first reaction to Dickinson by Charles Anderson's admirable study *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (1960), I produced an MA thesis on Dickinson's idea of poetry. My supervisor was doctor Róża Jabłkowska of Warsaw University, a Conrad scholar, who however was tolerant enough to accept my non-British and non-novelistic interest.

**JM, ZM:** How did your interests in American literature evolve? Could you say a few words about your itinerary as a scholar of American literature?

**AS:** The evolution of my scholarly itinerary since then was a combination of luck and negotiations between personal interests and the needs of the Department which I joined in 1964 as a young assistant, having for a year taught English in a high school in Łódź. Professor Witold Ostrowski, the then Department Chair, a Victorian scholar, admirer of the English realist novel and something of an anti-romantic, was nevertheless aware of the need to include courses in American literature in the curriculum of English studies. And Polish Americanists had yet to be educated. Thus my Ph.D. dissertation, motivated perhaps by the orderly desire "to begin at the beginning," was focused on Puritan and colonial poetry; more specifically—on the issue of its relation to the evolution of political and aesthetic concepts of independence. As a Kościuszko Foundation Fellow, I worked on large parts of the dissertation at the University of Virginia, in its wonderful Clifton Waller Barrett Library and its rich Alderman Library. My academic advisor was Floyd Stovall, a noted Poe and Whitman scholar. So, in a way, I brought back from Virginia not only materials and drafts of my Ph.D. dissertation but also foundations of my interest in Whitman. They surfaced in the book on Dickinson and Whitman largely conceived while in the early seventies I was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Yale University on scholarship from the Polish Ministry of Higher Education. The book came out first in Łódź as my *Habilitationsschrift*. The final (colloquium) part of the procedure took place early in 1982 in somewhat dramatic circumstances since martial law was introduced in Poland in December of 1981. I am grateful to the then Dean of the Faculty, the late Professor Maria Kamińska, and the University of Łódź for pushing on with the formalities despite the political uncertainties of the time. A year later, in response to the proposal I submitted of revising and developing my Dickinson-Whitman book, the American Council of Learned Societies offered me a Fellowship. I was very fortunate to be able to take advantage of the award, travel to Philadelphia and continue working on the project. Although initially the authorities denied me a passport, the Rector of Łódź University, Professor Leszek Wojtczak, successfully intervened on my behalf and, somewhat belatedly, in November 1983 I began my stay as Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Pennsylvania. I was even more fortunate to be able to leave Philadelphia in July of 1984 with a contract signed for the publication by University of Pennsylvania Press of *Walt Whitman and Emily*

*Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness*. When the book came out in 1985 to reasonably favorable reviews, I became invited to lectures and conferences, asked for reviews and contributions to specialist publications such as, for example, *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. The practical help and moral support I received in Philadelphia from American scholars, especially Daniel Hoffman and Everett Emerson but also others, have remained for me a model which I have tried to follow of the relationship between older and younger generations in the profession.

In the fall of 1984 I became Director of the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, and in 1988 the Department of American Literature was finally created within the Institute with myself as Chair. This added so much administrative work that I remember the period as mostly struggling with bureaucracy and fighting to make time for my students. When the pressures of administration eased, towards the end of the 1990s, there came the proposal of writing a history of twentieth-century American literature for Polish readers with the idea of, in some way, summing up American literary achievement in "the American century." I could think of such a huge undertaking only as a collective enterprise supported by a grant from the national source. KBN (Komitet Badań Naukowych—Committee for Scholarly Research) responded favorably to the application and, for all the tensions of deadlines and differences in temperament of several co-authors, the two-volume project was brought to a successful completion in 2003 with all the participants still talking to one another. It certainly was a project in which my past experience as President of Polish Association for American Studies served me well. I can only wish that a similar spirit of collegial cooperation continues among Polish Americanists bringing scholarly results.

Thinking back on my work as an American Studies scholar and teacher, I must also say that I feel proud of the work of several of my former students, by now colleagues in full career at various Polish institutions of higher education. I wish them every success. There is nothing better in the experience of a scholar-teacher nearing the end of her/his career than to be able to think that one was professionally surpassed by one's students.

**JM, ZM:** Who were your most memorable teachers? With whom did you share your interest in American literature in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s? At that time, did you have contacts with other Americanists in Western or Eastern Europe?

**AS:** From my student days at Łódź University I vividly remember the British instructor and writer in his own right, Mr. Derwent May, and

a young American lecturer Victor Contosky, a poet. Victor used to bring his guitar to class and sing American folk ballads, as part of the survey of American literature course. Derwent May gave occasional parties for his students. On the whole, with native speakers there was a noticeable difference in the teacher-student relation in comparison to what we were used to in our relations with Polish faculty. Years later my own students were telling me that in their opinion relations between students and instructors in the English Institute were much less hierarchic than in other Departments of the University or in other Polish schools. Qualified native speakers, on whose employment in the Department I have always insisted as Chair, convey not only knowledge; equally importantly, they pass on vital elements of their culture(s).

From my student days I also remember long seminars with doctor Jabłkowska who every other week traveled from Warsaw to Łódź. And so every other week we sat through a double portion of classes with her. Well, five or six hours of the course in "The English Novel" can be quite trying to young bottoms, no matter how competent the instructor. Our MA program included then a mandatory course in logic which I still recall with pleasure because Professor Tadeusz Pawłowski was such an excellent lecturer. More generally, let me add that the elimination of courses in logic and Latin from the present curriculum of language studies has seriously eroded humanistic education.

The first American Literature Department in Poland was established in Poznań where Professor Jacek Fisiak brought doctor Andrzej Kopcewicz, his colleague from Warsaw University, and Marta Sienicka, a graduate of our university who soon completed her degree. Erudite and kind, Professor Kopcewicz for a long time served as external reader and supervisor of dissertations in American literature in practically all Departments of English in Poland. In Warsaw there was doctor and then Professor Zbigniew Lewicki but not until the mid-eighties to early nineties can we talk of the growth of some significant Americanist milieu in Poland.

Still, few as we were in the late 60s and 70s, we were eager to keep in touch with European Americanists of roughly our own generation while they, in turn, seemed willing to come over and contribute to the seminars and conferences organized in Poland. My acquaintance with, for example, Marc Chénetier or Heinz Ickstadt, both of whom later acted as Presidents of European Association for American Studies, dates back to that time. In the mid-seventies the English Institute at Łódź hosted a conference of European Association for the Study of English (which included an American section) and developed its own

network of scholarly contacts and exchanges. Some of them, like the one with Justus Liebig University at Giessen, are still effectively continued. At the time, largely through the energetic efforts of Professor Janicka-Świderska, we established institutional contacts with University of York, University of Sheffield and University of Lyon II. Professor Maurice Gonnaud of l'Institute d'Anglaise at Lyon, an authority on Emerson, was especially helpful and kind to me, eventually acting as one of the external readers of my *Habilitationsschrift*. There were then no regulations sanctioning transnational cooperation on the level of formal degree procedures but the good will of many European colleagues and our determination to make the best use of whatever possibilities we saw allowed to make at least some openings in the official intransigence of the political division of Europe. And the European Association for American Studies cooperated. By its statutory rules the Association only accepts members via national organizations; however, in view of the practical/political impossibility at the time of establishing national American Studies Associations in communist countries, individual members from those countries were admitted. And, if I remember correctly, even the payment of dues was waived in their case while the Cultural Section of the American Embassy in Warsaw contributed to our conference expenses if the applicant's paper was accepted in the program. American Studies became the field of humanities where, though not without difficulties, European scholars could meet, learn from one another, and cooperate, as if above the divisive issues of European history and current political reality.

Ironically, before the political change of 1989, contacts with scholars from Eastern Europe were quite weak partly because they were less eagerly sought after by us and by colleagues from the Eastern bloc. The bureaucracy and political surveillance had to be negotiated by both potential partners and both sides undoubtedly felt that they must not squander their energies on applications for passports and visas within the block when success of such applications seemed even more dubious than in the case of invitations from the West. Thus, we met colleagues mostly from the Eastern side on the Western side of Europe. For example, in the summer of 1973 at one of the sessions of Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, I met colleagues not only from England, West Germany, Turkey or Italy but also from Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. With some of them I still keep in touch.

**JM, ZM:** If we remember correctly, in the 1970s and 1980s the United States, via the American Embassy in Warsaw, supported American Studies in Poland quite generously.

Could you talk about that? What were the forms of their support? Did they bring significant writers and critics to Poland?

**AS:** The Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization (later in American Studies), established in 1947 in war-devastated Europe, aimed at bringing together scholars, artists and intellectuals from all European countries and facilitating their contacts with American scholars, artists, translators, journalists, theater people, critics, and intellectuals in general. In 1947 among the faculty of the first seminar there were such luminaries of the American intellectual scene as Professor of Literature and History at Harvard, author of the now classic *The American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen, Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University Margaret Mead, and the literary critic Alfred Kazin. The Salzburg Seminar at Schloss Leopoldskron (formerly Max Reinhardt's residence), founded largely by private sponsorship and effort, was also supported in its mission by the State Department. By now the Seminar, renamed as "Salzburg Global Seminar," has broadened its reach with the aim of bringing together educators, potential community leaders and opinion makers from all over the world.

Within the former Eastern Bloc, Poland was the only country where the Fulbright foundation had maintained, since 1959, a working program of scholarly exchange. Thus Fulbright lecturers and visiting professors were brought to Polish institutions of higher education, and a number of Fellowships to American Universities were offered each year to Polish scholars in different disciplines, some Americanists among them. In addition to the Fulbright Program, the Cultural Section of American Embassy in Warsaw ran a consistent program of funding acquisition of language teaching materials, dictionaries, American literature and linguistics books, subscriptions of periodicals, etc. In view of the currency restrictions, this indeed was invaluable help. For many years the person responsible for the program was the Embassy's English Teaching Officer, Ms. Anna (we all referred to her informally as "pani Ania," or simply "Ania") Wilbik, with whom it was a pleasure to cooperate. The Cultural Section of American Embassy in Warsaw supported various teacher training programs, teacher exchanges and summer courses for Polish teachers of English. For some time in the first decade of this century, it also created, in cooperation with Departments of American Literature and Culture at some Polish universities, a regional program of summer seminars for doctoral students from ex-communist countries. For three consecutive years the American Department at Łódź hosted such a seminar relying on the help of our current and past Fulbright instructors and

exchange contacts. Running our own graduate programs we could, moreover, benefit from the shorter visits of American scholars under the auspices of Fulbright specialist program. Such three to six weeks stays, if planned carefully and well ahead of time, allowed for offering intensive graduate courses oriented towards the interests of a particular group of advanced students.

Visits of noted authors and critics organized and sponsored by the Cultural Section in cooperation with various, not necessarily academic, institutions in Poland have always been the highlights of the American Embassy's support not only for American Studies but more broadly, for translators, critics, writers and the general public interested in American literature. Thus, when John Updike, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, William Styron and other important American writers came to Poland, they usually traveled to several Polish cities, met with Polish critics, writers and readers as well as lectured at Universities. You must yourself remember a conference that we held in Łódź in early 1990, in which the writer Mary Gordon and the critic Mark Schechner participated. Apart from unorthodox catering experience (in the difficult time of the early years of Polish transformation we were preparing our own breakfasts and lunches), the nightly performance of nightingales in the bushy surroundings of the then modest University Conference Center near Łagiewniki provided a memorable experience for the American guests. And when Jerzy Kosiński, a graduate of our university, came to Łódź, the biggest lecture hall of our Faculty of Languages could not hold the crowding public.

The Polish Association for American Studies could also rely on the patronage of the Cultural Section of American Embassy. The local organizers of the annual PAAS conference were usually able to invite one or, in good years, even two plenary speakers from the United States whose travel was sponsored from the budget of the Cultural Section. Thus Barton Levi St. Armand or Marjorie Perloff came to Łódź when it was our Department's turn to host the annual meeting.

**JM, ZM:** The Polish Association for American Studies is a well-established organization today. For over two decades it has been meeting annually and it has a fair number of members. It is associated with the EAAS. Could you tell us about the beginnings of PAAS in Poland? When and where exactly was it established? You were the organization's president for many years. How did you see your mission?

**AS:** As I have already said, several Polish Americanists became members of EAAS individually before 1989. In the late fall of that year a group of us met at the American

Studies Center in Warsaw to discuss the initiative of forming a national American Studies Association so that Poland could be officially represented in EAAS and Polish Americanists could have a recognized professional forum within the country. The Association was formally called into being at the beginning of 1990. Its first meeting elected the Board with President and Vice-President. History Professor Michał Rozbicki of the American Studies Center in Warsaw became President and myself Vice-President. Very soon, though, Professor Rozbicki went to the United States where he was offered a position and so resigned his Presidency of PAAS. As Vice-President, I naturally took over and was later elected President. The beginnings felt somewhat shaky; the first official annual conference of PAAS was held in Skierniewice, where through family connections and the offices of Professor Zagaja, we found hospitality in the facilities of the Research Institute of Horticulture. It was a very modest affair leading to a slim post-conference volume called *The American Dream, Past and Present*, published by Łódź University Press. My second term as President ended in 1996. By then I felt that the Association was well established, secure in its membership, scholarly activity, and representation in EAAS.

I considered the consolidation of the Association my main task as President. To that end, the Association needed to establish a tradition, not to say a routine, of annual meetings together with the practice of different American Departments and the American Studies Center in Warsaw taking turn with conference organization and editorial/publishing work. Local organizers needed support in bringing interesting speakers from outside Poland, thus formal cooperation and possibly financial support of the Fulbright Commission in Poland and of the Cultural Section of the American Embassy had to be secured. Informal contacts with Americanists from the United States and Europe needed to be activated. Since each conference would lead to the publication of a selection of papers presented, we started to have a kind of Yearbook of American Studies in Poland. The idea was for PAAS to create a platform for professional exchanges, contacts and mutual support for Americanists from different Polish institutions as well as a venue for publication of the research results, especially for younger colleagues. When Professor Jerzy Durczak was taking over as President of the Association, I felt that the organization attracted sizable membership and developed procedures and ways of functioning. Taking further steps in that direction, with the help of the Polish-American Fulbright Commission, Professor Durczak as President initiated *Polish Journal of American Studies*, another regular form of publication under PAAS

auspices. Moreover, looking at the programs of EAAS conferences for the past decade or so, one may see that members of PAAS have been contributing quite solidly and consistently reading papers, giving invited lectures, and coordinating workshops.

During my second term in office, the Polish Association of American Studies began the practice of extending invitations to colleagues from beyond the Eastern Border offering to host at our annual conferences one or two Belorussian and Ukrainian colleagues free of cost. As far as I know, the practice is still continued and we have developed contacts with Americanists in Minsk, Kiev, Lviv and other universities beyond Poland's eastern border.

**JM, ZM:** What is the situation of American Studies in Poland today? Is there anything that worries you and that you would like to see changed? What do you think should be the organization's objectives?

**AS:** That's a tricky question, for while on the one hand the number of Polish Institutions of higher education offering courses and degrees in American Studies has been growing, on the other hand the interest in the discipline seems no longer as lively as it used to be. The reasons, I think, are complex. First of all, since Poland has become a member of the EU, Europe and things European feel to our students closer and their knowledge more immediately applicable in future careers. Not only is America geographically farther away but since about the mid-nineties, the United States has limited its interest in Europe and, especially, in our region. American Studies has always been a politically sensitive discipline so changes of political weather significantly influence its condition.

From the point of view of someone trained as literature specialist, another important factor is the change of orientation within the discipline, in itself—the corollary of a larger cultural change. The years following World War II were the period of intense popularity of American literature in Europe and the heyday of literary criticism. One may even say that American Studies initially developed somewhat in opposition to the new critical ideas of literary studies with their stress on autonomy of the literary work as leading achievement of any culture. American Studies aspired to a more interdisciplinary perspective and to greater awareness of the various contexts of artistic creation. The research energies pushed not only beyond the work itself but also beyond its national background expanding the horizon of American Studies into Cultural, Multicultural, and Global Studies. The change of name from Salzburg Seminar in American Studies to Salzburg Global Seminar reflects the shift. Removed from its leading position, American Studies has become but

an element of a much larger field. Consequently, the discipline has lost the focal interest it used to enjoy. Thus, to some extent American Studies has become the victim of its own success. Promoting interest in and absorption of American culture helped to equate the notion of "American" with notions such as "modern," "global," "transnational," "multicultural," and took off the stress from "American." I do not know whether this is good or bad. But it is a fact that Americanists have to confront and cope with.

Naturally, as a literature scholar, I cannot help regretting the withdrawal of literature from its dominant role in the culture. It seems that in cultural studies, sociology and politics prevailed over the domain of literature with its focus on individual experience. I am afraid that with such a shift, sensitivity to the aesthetic and emotional functions of language as a subtle system capable of expressing and ordering nuances of complicated experience has significantly diminished. To the majority of our students language is simply a practical instrument of communication.

Especially in view of the situation, I would like to see greater involvement of mature Polish scholars in the activities of the Polish Association for American Studies. It seems that over recent years, its annual conferences have been mostly attended by doctoral students and scholars in the beginning stages of their career. I believe they need to feel greater solidarity and support of the professionally established colleagues. Humanities do not enjoy attention, not to mention concern, of the powers that be and so we'd better develop a stronger sense of collegial loyalty. I'd like to see the Association as a firm organization voicing professional concerns and promoting professional achievements. It also seems vitally important that, as a professional organization, we continue contacts and offer support to colleagues in the Ukraine, Belorussia and other countries east of the Polish border. I would especially encourage Polish Americanists to take part in the conferences organized by scholars working at the universities east of our border and try to involve them in our activities. We need to make a serious effort to counter the isolationist pressures within our region.



**JM, ZM:** Please, tell us what you are working on at the moment. What are the questions about American literature and American Studies in general that you would like to address today?

**AS:** My interest in American literature started with poetry but in the past decade or so, without betraying poetry, I have devoted more and more attention to the short story. The genre seems characteristically American. Perhaps, with the possible exception of Russian

literature, no other national literature has produced such abundance of excellent, self-consciously artful and sophisticated stories. The artistic short story, as opposed to folk-tale or myth, is the youngest, eminently modern narrative genre. It is also the form of prose in which language in its economy and intense aestheticization comes closest to poetry. Moreover, in practical terms, the short story seems at the moment the most teachable form of literature. Students today seem frightened of both the novel (too long!) and poetry (too difficult!). The short story feels to them more reader friendly. On the instructor's side, its compact form allows exposing design and showing how form suggests, intensifies, even creates meaning. So while on the one hand I have been working with the poetry of James Schuyler and going back to the work of Galway Kinnell to look at his ties with the heritage of modernism, on the other I have followed developments in the contemporary American short story and thought in particular about Alice Munro and her affinities to Southern American women authors, accomplished practitioners of the story genre like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

As to the broader perspective on American Studies, one of the most interesting issues today seems to me the return and popularity of historical writing: historical novels, fictionalized histories, popular historical thrillers, memoirs, biographies, and local histories in which solid research and factual material is being crossed with fictional form. Especially in the American context, in the context of the country and nation so ostensibly oriented toward the future, the intensified concern with history seems puzzling. Yet, to quote Adam Garfinkle, the editor of *The American Interest*: "what interests us about the past is at least partly a function of what bothers us or makes us curious in the present." Questions can be asked from different perspectives of American Studies: by literary scholars investigating forms and manners of revitalization and transformations of the historical novel, by sociologists enquiring what present social and cultural anxieties or attitudes trigger the rise of historical interest, by historians looking at how the past is being (re)shaped by present historical writers and so on. The field seems large and inviting though it may be that it seems especially attractive to me under the influence of my own, increasingly back-looking perspective, to which even this conversation testifies.

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Printed directly from camera-ready materials provided to the Łódź University Press
by Faculty of Philology



Published by Łódź University Press
First Edition. W.07108.15.0.C

ISSN 2083-2931

Łódź University Press
90-131 Łódź, 8 Lindleya St
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