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Prof. Dorota Filipczak (1963–2021)

Founder and editor-in-chief of
Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture

 **Alison Jasper**

University of Stirling

Professor Dorota Filipczak In Memoriam

The plan had been that we would meet in Autumn 2020 at the biennial conference of the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture¹ in Chester, close to the English/Welsh border. I was excited because Dorota had promised to present a paper on Ariana Grande and her 2018 music video, “God Is a Woman.”²

Of course, the conference was then postponed because of COVID-19, and, sadly, we never met in person again. And yet, as an academic, she has given me the means to “keep company” with her, through memories of course but also, wonderfully, through her scholarly publications. In 2019, when we first spoke about Ariana Grande, Dorota was at work on another article for the *Text Matters* journal (“Made to Connive”), addressing the influence of popular culture on women, adding to her existing work on the theme. She had long been interested in the impact of popular cultural forms and, particularly, the impact of western tropes in post-Soviet Poland. Growing up in Poland under a communist government, she welcomed new possibilities when they came—not least, the personal and professional rewards of building friendship networks and travelling across former boundaries. At the same time, she was also aware of the potential for sexism and misogyny to insinuate their way back into seemingly liberated lives, “now that we are inundated with the icons of American mass culture, and Polish glossies for ladies are marketing the woman as a product” (“Autonomy and Female Spirituality” 213). As she said:

Oppressive gender stereotypes did not disappear with the communist regime. On the contrary, they are alive and well in hundreds of TV advertisements. For instance, there is the ad which shows a smiling,

¹ See <https://isrlc.org/> (*Transmutations and Transgressions*, 2022).

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHLHSlEXFis> (2018).

sexy housewife in the company of the latest scouring powder, while her husband is enjoying his beer in the male camaraderie of a pub. Unfortunately the attitude of the church adds to this image of the new capitalist family. The Catholic church emphasizes the woman's maternal role (generally bypassing men's commitments as fathers) to the lesser or greater exclusion of her political role and intellectual potential. (213)

And whilst the leaders of the Solidarity movement continue to be celebrated in the west as champions of democracy, she commented drily, that, for all that, the movement had given little evidence of solidarity with women's rights.

10 One reason I was looking forward to hearing Dorota discuss Ariana Grande's music video was that whilst it engaged with the problematic influence of popular culture on women—this very familiar theme in Dorota's work—Ariana Grande's music video itself appeared to take a more positive approach towards women, and especially women of colour, and to the possibilities of expressing themselves as women within a context that, previously, had been so dominated by men and patriarchal values. The paper she was writing for *Text Matters*, concerning contemporary versions of the fairy tale, *Cinderella* ("Made to Connive"), was still predominantly focussed on identifying the problems of popular culture. She was drawing on Michèle Le Dœuff's notion of "regulatory myths" (27) that frame and police female conduct and aspirations. Le Dœuff had pointed out that Christian myths tended in a general sense to align with "a vague and ponderous prohibition on knowledge" (27). The original sin in western society, she suggested, had always been the sin of wanting to know (28), intensified in the case of women. Dorota's reading of *Cinderella* was picking up on the regulatory myth—more difficult to see in a "secular" society—of the Virgin Mary ("Made to Connive" 71); the feminine as virginal, unknown and unknowing, and compliant. She drew a connecting line back from princess videos for little girls, to these older but still impactful Christian idealizations of passively consenting, incurious female figures who abrogated their autonomy in favour of an active male principle—with the crystal slipper an all too obvious symbol of her coveted virginity.

At an early stage of this conversation, Dorota had sent me the link to a subversive parody of Kenneth Branagh's 2015 version of the Cinderella story, taking the form of a Russian music video, entitled "Зацепила," directed by Arthur Pirozkhov and Denis Kovalsky.³ The video starred Aleksandr

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQYNUwYHV1c> (2019). Available in English as "Dancing All Through the Night" since March this year: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iLszfjZLg0 (2021).

Reva (Arthur Pirozkhov's stage name), an actor from what Dorota referred to as "the troubled area of Donetsk claimed by Russia and the Ukraine" (72). (Perhaps, with her interest in marginalized peoples and spaces, this had also attracted her attention.) She told me that the title of the video literally means, in an unambiguously active mood, "She accosted me," but this was later translated into English as "Caught,"⁴ once again, shifting the focus away from a potentially active—if transgressive—female figure and back onto the male. For Dorota, the Pirozkhov and Kovalsky music video had catalyzed a more general unease about the persistent Disneyfication of key stories within western cultural contexts. It was grist to the mill of her concerns about regulatory myths still infiltrating societies that often boldly claimed to have moved beyond gender injustice. She was disappointed by Kenneth Branagh's efforts, in his 2015 version, to produce something more progressive (75). The sparkling Russian music video, full of wit and mischief, had caught her attention precisely because it so obviously parodied Branagh's "safe" alternative (75). But if it initially seemed to acknowledge the transitory nature of youthful beauty, pushing back against the conventions of fairy tales in a way that might have served the critical feminist viewer, it quickly became obvious that it was drawing its sharpness and sauce from assumptions about women that were scarcely less problematic. When the clock strikes twelve, and the prince kisses his mysterious dancing partner, the alluring young woman suddenly takes on a homely appearance. In the prince's imagination, she and her children become monstrous, eating and drinking gluttonously and laughing immoderately, an enormous weight in a tiny carriage in which the—still handsome—prince is squashed into a corner. As Dorota noted, Le Dœuff had observed that one way in which the regulatory myth operates is by making certain claims ("women will grow older," "women have a desire for knowledge") appear "vaguely indecent" (27). In a vision clearly intended to evince a response of disgust, the Cinderella figure in the Pirozkhov and Kovalsky video throws the crystal slipper out of the carriage window where it smashes to pieces. In his imagination, however, putting the reassembled slipper back on the woman's foot has the effect of restoring the beautiful illusion. The video then drives a (pumpkin?) coach and horses through any critical sense of reality. To secure or fix this illusion, the prince glues the slippers to his dancing partner's feet and binds them on with bright blue, industrial-grade sticky tape. Dorota sees the attractions of Pirozkhov and Kovalsky's clever twists and their "jubilant" conclusion. We all love to dance and we want to avoid looking "po-faced." As women, particularly, we are so often put down with the claim that we "can't take a joke." But

⁴ See "Made to Connive" (72).

she warns us not to be fooled. The truth of the matter is that regulatory myths “relentlessly reassert their sway in patriarchal culture” (“Made to Connive” 75).

We talked a little about whether it might be worth looking at the Princesses of *Frozen* or some other more recent Disney movies to see how far the Disney corporation—as an important vector of cultural (and gender) values in the west—had shifted, or was attempting to shift, away from egregious gender stereotyping. But Dorota rightly wanted to put her critical efforts into an analysis of Ariana Grande’s music video. It was perfect as a case study for investigating popular culture as a possible medium for more woman- and race-positive ideas and values. The video grasped the intersectional issue that it is never just about gender but about overlapping forms of social disadvantage; however, it also tapped into her interest in the powerful patriarchal language, myths and symbols of European Christianity. Ariana Grande’s “God Is a Woman” video couldn’t be more different to Pirozkhov and Kovalsky’s piece. Of course, in looking at the video, Dorota would still need to make a serious and critical point about the deep and persistent effects of popular culture on how women are seen and valued. In her abstract for the conference, she explained that she would use the work of her friend and colleague Pamela Sue Anderson as a key theoretical source or intertext. She would focus her attention on the way in which, in Anderson’s *Feminist Philosophy of Religion*,

[she] draws the readers’ attention to Luce Irigaray’s comments about the way in which men have a habit of stealing woman’s light to illuminate their path. The theft of female potential which is made to serve male needs is exposed by Anderson who seeks to restore reason to women who have been placed on the side of irrationality, desire and death. (Unpublished abstract)

Her main concern would be

to explore the way this particular music video brings together a quotation from Ezekiel 25:17, refracted through its made up version from Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* and reinterpreted from a sexually different perspective in the above-mentioned scene, and the famous creation of Adam by Michelangelo on the vault of the Sistine Chapel refigured by Harmonia Rosales and other feminist artists (e.g., in the project called “Sister Chapel”), who set out to reclaim the stolen light of female creativity (*Feminist Philosophy of Religion* 99). (Unpublished abstract)

Although we did not have time to talk about the paper very much, it was clear that Dorota was excited by the prospect of addressing a popular music

video in which a female figure, and a representation of the divine, presented herself in contrast to the Cinderellas of Disney, Branagh or indeed, Pirozkhov and Denis Kovalsky, as not only beautiful but dynamic, dancing for her own pleasure as much as for that of her audience. In the video, a monumental Grande smashes St Peter's Basilica in Rome—a symbolically significant, and here, an unmistakably patriarchal, structure—with a hammer. The action encompasses a range of forceful possibilities—from an attack on a toxic set of values or beliefs, to the destruction of a “glass ceiling.” This is a music video with an authentically feminist message that serves to illustrate what Dorota referred to in her abstract as reclaiming the stolen light of women's creativity. Dorota's feminist work had emerged alongside her critical appreciation of literature and particularly literature created by or within marginalized communities. So it makes sense that she was so interested in an artist whose work has raised questions of gender and race justice to people's attention in a popular idiom, even or perhaps especially given the accusations of cultural appropriation that have sometimes been levelled against Grande.⁵ In this video, “God Is a Woman,” Grande's highly provocative references challenged stereotypically white, male and masculine forms of representation that have dominated the visual, as well as the invisible, structures of Christianity from the United States to Eastern Europe for many centuries. And, as feminists have long argued, the metaphors of the masculine, Father “God” of Christianity represent, perhaps, one of the most powerful “regulatory myths” of all time.

It is hard to accept that Dorota will not be presenting this work at the conference in 2022, or starting to move on to new and exciting projects, showing the kind of academic leadership that she has personified for more than thirty years. But her thinking and writing remain; she is still our conversation partner in this sense. Her integrity, insight and courage are still in evidence to warn and encourage and it is wonderful to know that the *Music Video* project she started in 2020 will be continuing.

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LITERATURE AND SECURITY

 **Liam Francis Gearon**

University of Oxford

Editorial: Literature and Security

Literature is a lie which seeks to tell a truth. Espionage is a trade dependent on deceit. Where the two professions meet, the dissembling knows no limit (Gearon, “A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters”). John le Carré, the nom-de-plume of the late David Cornwell (1931–2020), reflected more than any novelist of our time on the interface of literature and security. In his case, that was a life lived in service, to the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, and the Security Services, MI5, and a life lived, too, in the service of literature. The author stated: “I’m a liar, born to lying, bred to it, trained to it by an industry that lies for a living, practised in it as a novelist” (Sisman 1). In *The Pigeon Tunnel*, le Carré aptly characterizes his autobiography as “stories from my life,” the subtitle of his work. It is a narrative in which the dual worlds of security and secret intelligence are inseparable from his love of and dedication to writing; there is little or no separation from his life and his art.

Born in 1931 and educated in the English public-school system he was a patriotic schoolboy during the Second World War. Skilled at languages and loving literature, he left England, as he himself admits, to escape a difficult relationship with his father, and to study modern languages at the University of Bern in Switzerland. It was there, as his autobiography details, that a dedicated patriot developed an intense love of all literatures, especially German. David Cornwell’s national service as part of the British Army’s Intelligence Corps was put to good use in the interrogation of those who crossed from the other side of what was now called the Iron Curtain to where he was stationed in Allied-occupied Austria. Vienna, in the early period of the Cold War, was the crossroads of intelligence. Look simply to the novels of the time by Graham Greene above all to see the spies on those streets.

Completing his National Service, David Cornwell returned to England, and Oxford, in 1952, at an age when today he would be called a mature student, at Lincoln College. His unofficial and covert duties

for MI5 including informal reporting on left-wing, Soviet-sympathizing students, covertly on the look-out on those post-War Oxford streets for enemies of the State. After an interruption in studies, Cornwell taught at a major public school in Somerset, Millfield, close to where I, too, was once a schoolteacher at the nearby country town of Glastonbury. Returning to Lincoln College, Oxford, he would graduate with a first-class degree in 1956. Two years later, in 1958, his role in MI5 was formalized as an Officer of Security Services. In 1961, under the cover of an administrative role in the British Embassy at Bonn he transferred—a move as uncommon, though not unknown, then as it is today—to the foreign service, MI6, whose renown already had a growing aura and mystique through the novels of one Ian Fleming, and the creation of a character called James Bond. It was Lord Clanmorris, who himself was to write espionage fiction as John Bingham, who encouraged Cornwell to write. His first novel was *Call for the Dead*, and the iconic, intellectual spy-master, George Smiley was born. So, too, in many a sense was John le Carré. From then on le Carré comes to the ascendancy of literary espionage fiction, a nuanced world of ideological conflict and conflicted loyalties that contrasts in unassuming ways with the exploits of James Bond, whose self-reflection is there in the pages of Fleming's fiction but never to the fore. In 1963, *The Spy Who Came in the Cold* was published, just as James Bond was beginning to take hold of cinema screens, as the character has done ever since. *The Spy Who Came in the Cold* became the foundation, economic and literary, for le Carré to dedicate his life to fiction, most of which reflected the world of spying which he was soon, formally at least, to leave, though in his imagination, literary and autobiographical, it was a world from which he would never entirely extricate himself.

The curiously entangled relationship between literature, security and intelligence is, then, unsurprisingly replete with twists and turns of plot and an odd array of dual-facing characters. As I have long detailed (Gearon, “A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters”), in the complex interplay of spy fact and spy fiction, many practitioners of the former have engaged in writing the latter. Eric Ambler, John Bingham, John Buchan, Ian Fleming, Graham Greene, John le Carré, Eliza Manningham Buller, Somerset Maugham and Arthur Ransome are among the well-known names on this list. And for writers of spy fiction who—except perhaps in their authorial dreams—were never spies, the real and imagined adventures and misadventures of actual spooks by necessity provide the storyline (Gearon, “A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters”).

The relationship between the literary imagination and the actual world of security and intelligence is not merely an historical curiosity. In 2017, Sir Alex Younger, then Chief of the UK's Secret Intelligence

Service, specifically discussed “the merits of what he considered to be appropriate characters in fiction” (MacAskill). He distinguishes between the portrayals of the late John le Carré and Ian Fleming, speaking in terms of real influence about characters who are, of course, entirely fictional: “I should make it clear that, despite bridling at the implication of a moral equivalence between us and our opponents that runs through novels, I’ll take the quiet courage and integrity of George Smiley over the brash antics of 007, any day” (Younger qtd. in MacAskill). Younger goes on to remark about the prominence of writing within and beyond the Service:

We have attracted some great writers; some have become famous, many more have set aside their vocation and remained in the service. Some of the operational correspondence I have seen during my career would grace many an anthology were it not for its classification. Spy fiction here seems to have some, if qualified, uses in the real world of espionage: despite inevitable tensions between the secret and published world, the relationship has generally been of mutual benefit. Literature gains an edgy genre. We are painted in the minds of a global audience as some form of ubiquitous intelligence presence. This can be quite a force multiplier, even if it means we are blamed for an astonishing range of phenomena in which we have no involvement at all. (qtd. in MacAskill)

As I have previously detailed, if we look glancingly at the relationships between the factual worlds of the security and intelligence agencies—the spies—and their fictional representations, numerous ironies can be perceived. Perhaps the most curious is that few seem wholeheartedly to believe governments who employ secret bands of men and women in the security agencies to uncover the truth, so that politicians can act on their intelligence, while many seem enthral to—and are willing to suspend disbelief when—reading novelists who are paid to lie.

Some spy writers have worked consciously to highlight actual, as well as imagined security and intelligence concerns. A good example of where the real and the imagined are themselves blended is in “the narrative threat of nations,” such as in classic stories of foreign invaders by Erskine Childers (*The Riddle of the Sands*) and William Le Queux (*The Invasion of 1910*). Others such as Ian Fleming create characters like James Bond who single-handedly save the free world from jeopardy, written by an author who had known active secret service in wartime naval intelligence.

Such authors, in turn, impact the world they represent. Le Queux, in particular, might be said to have been responsible for enhancing the milieu of threat which led to the formation of MI5 (Andrew). Others are by turns alarmed or flattered to see their own worlds of secrecy in the lie of fiction. The KGB and Politburo had strong views about the anti-Soviet

propaganda of 007, strong enough to create a series of Soviet counter-fictions (Connick). Ian Fleming allegedly provided the bedside reading for both John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald on the evening before the President's assassination, part of a sphere of influence and intrigue that unites the reading public and political elites (Gearon, "A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters").

More systematic consideration of these and related themes is evident in a chapter which Svetlana Lokhova contributed to my edited collection, *Universities, Security and Intelligence Studies*, on "Stalin's Library." There is here a sense in which literature is an intellectual subset of the broader and historically deeper relationship between espionage and the Academy (Gearon, *Universities, Security and Intelligence Studies*). I think often of these matters on the streets of Oxford, where I enter my twelfth year of service, and particularly when I pass Lincoln College; though the University City itself is replete with espionage associations, from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century foundations of the Bodleian Library in the figure of Thomas Bodley, or, some centuries later, a mere hundred or so yards from my own Department of Education, Lady Margaret Hall, where a former Director General of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller read, of all subjects of course, English literature (Gearon, "A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters").

From whatever perspective we look, the interface between literature, security and intelligence is rarely incidental. In many cases, books, like other forms of media, have been used as a direct part of ideological and intelligence apparatus, particularly in the history of propaganda, and it is the literary collective as much as particular literary and academic authors who are subjects of security interest, whether the protection of states or political doctrine (Wilkinson). Books and their authors are often therefore an integral part of the targeted action as a perceived physical or ideological threat. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Maoist China are important cases here. Indeed, dictatorial regimes all over the world have long targeted authors alongside intellectuals who are the first threats to be eliminated or undermined, either through cultural and social exclusion, censorship and imprisonment, or the expedients of execution (Power). Read, for instance, the chilling double-entendre of Bytwerk's *Bending Spines* for an account of how a synthesis of books and brutality were at the root of Nazi and other forms of totalitarianism.

To a lesser extent and often more subtly (or covertly), such methods of cultural influence have not been unknown in western democratic states too (Miller Harris; Reisch; Risso; Rockhill; Stonor Saunders; Whitney; Wilford). Propaganda has often been a weapon of war, books and bombshells engage in similar or opposing ideological trajectories

(Bernays; Cooke; Welch). It is in this way that Philip M. Taylor defines propaganda as “munitions of the mind,” and O’Shaughnessy describes the phenomenon as a “weapon of mass seduction.” In “A Landscape of Lies in the Land of Letters: The Literary Cartography of Security and Intelligence” I detail much of this framing for the interface of literature, security and intelligence, while with Marion Wynne-Davies I write on “Literature and Security: CIA Engagement in the Arts.”

There is more, however, to the interface of literature and security than the spy story. In the modern era, the art of total war provides the ultimate societal justifications for warfare. In so doing, the art of total war brings all the artifice of culture and society to the battlefield. In the art of total war, the arts and literature themselves become integral to the art of war.

Few military strategists would then have predicted how important the broader societal context would become in the twentieth century. Authors such as H. G. Wells had envisaged this development a year before the First World War. In a work published in the year the War began, *The World Set Free*, Wells foresaw in the new invention of manned flight the possibility of war being brought to unarmed civilian populations (Wells). More prescient still were Wells’s predictions of the new atomic knowledge being used as weaponry: “Nothing could have been more obvious to the people of the early twentieth century than the rapidity with which war was becoming impossible. And as certainly they did not see it. They did not see it until the atomic bombs burst in their fumbling hands” (Wells).

Michael Frayn’s 1998 play *Copenhagen* remains here the single most important dramatic reconstruction at the wartime meeting place of literature and existential security. A recent review of a new theatre production states the centrepiece of the drama succinctly, describing it as the story of “the ruptured friendship between the German atomic physicist Werner Heisenberg, and his former mentor, Niels Bohr, after their meeting in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen in 1941”:

Frayn offers us several alternative versions of what might have happened when the two men met under the watchful eye of Bohr’s wife, Margrethe. But one of the beauties of the play is that, reinforcing a rule of quantum mechanics, it seems to change depending on how it is observed. At different times, it has seemed to me about the moral dilemma of the nuclear physicist, and the motives for Heisenberg’s visit—whether he was seeking absolution or information from his spiritual father. (Billington)

The atom bomb would see the rise of its own apocalyptic art form, particularly in film and literature (Brians; Torry).

The evolution of mass death through new technologies would seem to trivialize developments in the arts. But the arts, literary and cine-visual, are there to take note, and to convey the horror, the prospect of worse to come. Thus if civilian populations would not suffer the full extent of aerial bombing until the Second World War, the preceding years showed this prospect on a late afternoon of 26 April 1937 with the German bombing during the Spanish Civil War of the Basque town of Guernica. So memorably represented by the modernist distortions of human death represented by Picasso in the same year, it is an iconic art work contemporaneously commemorating the death and destruction of the bombing itself, and considered decades later to prefigure Nazi mass annihilation (Tharoor).

The years that followed Guernica *would* witness worse. 1939–45 showed the deathly potential of new war technology further realized: from the Luftwaffe Blitz raids and V2 rocket attacks over England to the Allied carpet bombing of Germany (Crang and Addison; Friedrich; F. Taylor, *Dresden*). In 1947 “Bomber” Harris provided his own autobiographical account of the shift in war tactics (Harris). Condemned at Nuremberg, and sentenced to imprisonment at Spandau Prison, Albert Speer presents an interesting case of the interface of literature and security. Released from Spandau since 1966, in 1970, Albert Speer, the most senior ranking member of the Third Reich, Hitler’s architect and Minister for Armaments and War Production would tell his own story. The writing of *Inside the Third Reich* would take place after his release, but inside Spandau, formally denied writing paper he would find sources of his own, even in defeat and incarceration, literature would find its outlet in *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*. Post-war moral debate would intensify, arguments around Allied and Axis targeting of densely populated cities alongside military and strategic targets. The 1943 Hamburg bombing might be justified as an industrial-military complex, but other cities, particularly the firestorm of Dresden in February 1945, could not (Overy). Postmodernist fiction such as that of Kurt Vonnegut is there decades later to represent the symbolic epicentre of Dresden. The close of the Second World War was the zenith of this through new atomic and nuclear weaponry, the devastating aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recorded in the modern journalism which accounted for the impact on ordinary lives of war strategy by the noted figures of world history (Hersey).

When the full extent of the Nazi concentration and death camps became evident we were, as Wyschogrod writes, at the zenith of man-made mass death. It had started of course, in at least symbolic terms, with the burning of books. Always worth restating are Heinrich Heine’s oft-quoted prophetic lines from his 1820 play *Almansor*: “Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people” (USHMM). Literature may

have served its historic and contemporary role as a weapon of war, but the flames lit by German professors and their students, with little prompting by the Nazi hierarchy across the heart of the European Enlightenment, conjoining book burning and bombshells, an ideological and military synthesis which was at the heart of what Goebbels would define later as “total war.” Without the Nazi narrative the war effort would have long before faltered (Bachrach).

The literature of the Holocaust provides survivor narratives in diary, fiction, poetry and drama, and distinctively terrible chapter in a longer history of anti-Semitic oppression (USHMM). Some of the most noted accounts are seemingly semi-detached attempts to give autobiographical and fictional sense to the concentration camps of Europe into the stuff of chemistry, no other work achieving the same profundity here as the Nobel-Prize-winning work of Primo Levi’s *Periodic Table*.

To others, none of this was especially new. If the means of civilian population death were more dramatic than they might once have been, to Talmon the history of totalitarianism can be traced not simply to the twentieth century but the eighteenth: Talmon’s *History of Totalitarian Democracy* paralleling the Terror of the French Revolution with that of the terror that would follow across Europe two centuries later.

It is Raymond Aron in *The Opium of the Intellectuals* who notes totalitarianism’s rise from the technocratic rationalism of post-Enlightenment modernity. Totalitarianism provided a new political lexicon and spawned its own critical literature. Foundational Second World War works such as Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* more than any other set the heart of this seemingly new political phenomenon in the cultural heritage of the West going back not centuries but millennia. The cultural and literary framings were as important in Friedrich and Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*; in David D. Roberts’s *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics*; in James A. Gregor’s *Marxism, Fascism, and Totalitarianism: Chapters in the Intellectual History of Radicalism*; and in Schapiro’s *Totalitarianism*. For Hannah Arendt, though, the textual heartlands of totalitarianism were already presaged in long centuries of European cultural colonialism and anti-Semitism.

The political critics of totalitarianism form a long line (Isaac), as do those who place totalitarianism into the cultural milieu of the literary and artistic modernism of its time (Adamson). Santiáñez thus portrays the critical influence of literature in the art of war, in victory and defeat; his *The Literature of Absolute War: Transnationalism and World War II* is a particularly important critical summation. For Santiáñez absolute

or total war has its own semantic clusters and genres—“traditional realism,” “traumatic realism,” “the fantastic” or “catastrophic modernism”—conjoined with an unholy trinity of “horror,” “terror” and “spectre.” For Griffin, too, fascism is a “socio-political modernism” where fascist regimes harnessed the arts “to produce a new culture, a new order, a new man, and a new civilization,” these “modernist states . . . seeking regeneration and palingenesis in every aspect of cultural, social, economic, military, imperialist, and in the case of the *Third Reich*, racial policies” (Griffin 125).

The lexicon of totalitarianism was a cultural-political conceptual nexus coined most influentially by Giovanni Gentile and put to use for Mussolini (Roberts, “Myth”). Yet it was Josef Goebbels who might be placed at the embodied epicentre of totalitarianism’s efforts to incorporate national culture into the collective war effort. Illustrating this in cultural-political terms is Goebbels’s conjoint ministerial roles in the Third Reich as both Minister of Armaments and Propaganda. In the light of significant setbacks in the east, Goebbels’s Sportpalast speech of February 1943 called for “total war”:

The tragic battle of Stalingrad is a symbol of heroic, manly resistance to the revolt of the steppes. It has not only a military, but also an intellectual and spiritual significance for the German people. Here for the first time our eyes have been opened to the true nature of the war. We want no more false hopes and illusions. We want bravely to look the facts in the face, however hard and dreadful they may be. The history of our party and our state has proven that a danger recognized is a danger defeated. Our coming hard battles in the East will be under the sign of this heroic resistance. It will require previously undreamed of efforts by our soldiers and our weapons. A merciless war is raging in the East. The Führer was right when he said that in the end there will not be winners and losers, but the living and the dead. (Goebbels)

So, Goebbels reasons:

Total war is the demand of the hour. . . . It bothers us not in the least that our enemies abroad claim that our total war measures resemble those of Bolshevism. They claim hypocritically that that means there is no need to fight Bolshevism. The question here is not one of method, but of the goal, namely eliminating the danger. (Goebbels)

Goebbels had learnt the oratorical power of political passion from his master (Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches*). Aside from the Nazi-rousing rhetoric of Adolf Hitler’s own speeches, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had stated that the “power which has always started the greatest religious and political avalanches in history rolling has from time immemorial been the

magic power of the spoken word” (Levy et al. 307). For Goebbels himself, thwarted literary ambitions did not mean an end to his ambitions for literature in the theatre of war (Longerich; Thacker).

Yet it was not only the Axis powers that recognized the power of words. In terms of the relationship between literature and war few tower higher than the figure of Winston Churchill, whose literary talents were barely thwarted, indeed were enhanced, by his role as a war Prime Minister. In 1953 he was, unique to any political leader, the winner of the 1953 Nobel Prize for Literature, the award given in recognition for Churchill’s “mastery of historical and biographical description, as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values” (Siwertz). The curiously awkward-sounding award ceremony speech, at which Lady Churchill was there to collect her husband’s prize, by a member of the Swedish Academy, acutely states this point. Siwertz, if anything, goes into hyperbolic overdrive—and for our purposes near completes the circular link to the classical age—when he states:

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Very seldom have great statesmen and warriors also been great writers. One thinks of Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and even Napoleon, whose letters to Josephine during the first Italian campaign certainly have passion and splendour. . . . Churchill’s political and literary achievements are of such magnitude that one is tempted to resort to portray him as a Caesar who also has the gift of Cicero’s pen. Never before has one of history’s leading figures been so close to us by virtue of such an outstanding combination. In his great work about his ancestor, Marlborough, Churchill writes, “Words are easy and many, while great deeds are difficult and rare.” Yes, but great, living, and persuasive words are also difficult and rare. And Churchill has shown that they too can take on the character of great deeds.

Listing the number of multiple literary works which mark Churchill’s accomplishment, Siwertz, though, highlights Churchill’s wartime speeches: “With his great speeches he has, perhaps, himself erected his most enduring monument.”

As to this interconnectedness between writing and political life in Churchill’s life, there is no better guide than Peter Clarke’s “Mr Churchill’s Profession.” In a subsequent address to the International Churchill Society, Clarke gives a succinct summary of this inextricable relationship. “For Churchill,” he writes, “there was never a clean break between fighting and writing”:

The tension between writing history and making history is surely relevant to our broad theme of fighting and writing. Thus we can make a distinction between what I will call “fighting as writing,” as opposed

to “writing as fighting,” and categorise Churchill’s books on that basis. Under the first head, “fighting as writing,” we can include all the books that he retrospectively made out of his own experience of war. (Clarke)

These would include Churchill’s six volume history of the Second World War. For Clarke, under the second heading,

“writing as fighting,” we can see the significance of his profession as a writer, in equipping him with a literary arsenal: enabling him to deploy the weapons of rhetoric as a war leader. As Churchill said himself, when he assumed power in 1940, “I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.” Now these well-known words reflect a view of his political career. But perhaps his other career—as a writer—had also prepared him. For when we read Churchill’s great oratory of the wartime years, we are reading the words of an author who had just finished his own draft of his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. (Clarke)

It is easy to see the divide between Allies and Axis, victors and defeated.

Kempowski’s *Swansong 1945* brings them together, chronicling in montage—a blend of “civilians fleeing on foot to the west, British and American POWs dreaming of home, concentration camp survivors, loyal soldiers from both sides of the conflict and national leaders including Churchill, Hitler and Mussolini,” as Granta, the publisher, states—four significant days in World War Two’s final weeks: with a curious starting point of 20 April, Hitler’s birthday; through the meeting of US and Soviet troops at the Elbe on 25 April; the day of Hitler’s suicide in the Berlin bunker on 30 April; to the German surrender on 8 May. “Kempowski’s War” (Santiáñez) is an analysis of these and other accounts of Germany in defeat. In *All for Nothing*, Kempowski’s fiction of defeat has all the force of documentary. In the east, the War had also mobilized imperial Japanese culture as the Third Reich had utilized its “Aryan” heritage; in its defeat the political management of an essentially occupied Japan by US forces were as culturally-educating as all efforts at denazification in post-War German (Taylor, *Exorcising Hitler*). And the literature of post-World War II Japan reflects the far from glorious new cultural legacy:

When the war ended in 1945, Japanese literature was at an extremely low ebb. The pressure exerted on writers by the military to write in support of the war had on the whole been successful. Many wrote stories and poems that they refused to have included in postwar collections of their writings. Only those who could count on receiving royalties from old works were able to refuse to support the ideals of the “Greater East Asia War.” (Keene)

The legacy was not, however, born simply with the advent of WWII. Just as Trotsky, despite busy duties as the head of the Red Army, had taken time in to publish *Literature and Revolution*, so, too, Heather Bowen-Struyk and Norma Field show the interconnectedness of cultural warfare in Japan which dates to the revolutionary politics of 1917, from which time they date the use of “art as a weapon.”

In the decades after the Second World War the story of literature and security intensifies. As that war drew to a close in Europe on VE day in May 1945, a scheduled meeting of the nascent United Nations would be in preparation for a gathering in San Francisco that June, and a matter of only several weeks later, the war with Imperial Japan would end, a matter of days after Hiroshima, and the decisive second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. The revolutionary war in China, though, led by a now middle-aged Mao Tse-tung, was not yet ended. Mao Tse-tung wrote a number of treatises on military strategy, most notable among them being *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, *Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War Against Japan*, *On Protracted War* and *Problems of War and Strategy*. Mao Tse-tung would continue this tradition of total war in the Cultural Revolution. His main writings on warfare have recently been collected under the title of *The Art of War* to establish, as the publisher suggests, “a direct lineage of culture and genius spanning twenty-five centuries.” In power, nascent only with the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China, Chairman Mao would consolidate communist doctrine in ways distinctive to but derivative of the Marxist-Leninist neighbour in the north. A strong internal security apparatus went hand-in-hand with control of Party doctrine over all aspects of Chinese society, whatever its consequences for the populace. Just as rapid economic development had tragic impacts, including mass starvation, of millions in the Soviet Union, famine came, too, to China with the Great Leap Forward. The apparent openness to critique which followed, allowing “a thousand flowers to bloom,” was merely a ruse to expose opponents of the regime.

The Cultural Revolution which followed—1967, the same year in which the West, in America especially, was seeing the height of its own revolutionary “counter-culture”—saw the decimation of dissent, a systematic purging of reactionaries. What was ostensibly a security assault on counter-revolutionary ideology as a threat to the security of the State targeted people as much as ideas. Heinrich Heine's prescient nineteenth century commentary on cultural repression—“Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people”—was no less true in China than it had been in Nazi Germany. As a young revolutionary hardened by insurgency against the legacy of the Imperial China into which he was born in 1893, Mao's struggles against Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist

Party, the Kuomintang, were also a struggle against the colonialism of the West—the legacy of Hong Kong is hardly ended today—and against China’s aggressively imperial neighbour Japan. Slavoj Žižek’s introduction to Mao’s revolutionary doctrine highlights a strong anti-intellectual strand in Maoism, seemingly manifest by the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s *On Practice and Contradiction* is the assertive doctrine of the Communist leader openly focusing on “doing” rather than “knowing.” Written with full knowledge of Hiroshima, Mao dedicates a whole chapter to why “The Chinese People Cannot be Cowed by the Atom Bomb.” Mao also writes on why the people “Oppose Book Worship.” The irony of course here is that Mao’s books themselves became the centrepiece of the cult of the man himself. Just as Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* became a bestseller in Nazi Germany, Chairman Mao’s *Little Red Book* was in its time ubiquitous; and like *Mein Kampf*, the sayings of Chairman Mao became the epicentre of Chinese culture and politics. Conflict and watchfulness against known and as yet unknown enemies constituted a war on all fronts, without time limits or restraints, no beginning and no end. Total war by any other name.

I elaborate on the still-broader notions of literature and its role in the maintenance of states and political systems in a number of other papers, particularly “Engineers of the Human Soul: Readers, Writers, and Their Political Education,” where, drawing on Stalin’s diktat that artists should be “engineers of the human soul,” I argue for a closer look at the interface of literature and security. And here, it is in the era of mass communications, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, that authors become, in increasingly intensified ways, integral elements of the security apparatus of the state. From Britain’s secret Propaganda Bureau in the First World War, for which many notable British novelists worked, to Stalin’s designation of artists as being “engineers of the human soul” through to the CIA’s involvement with the literary and visual arts, or Mao’s Cultural Revolution, literature, amongst all the arts, is a critical chapter in the art of war (Gearon, “Engineers”). This issue of *Text Matters* represents a call for scholars from a range of literary backgrounds with interests in the political, security and intelligence dimensions of literature to contribute to furthering academic consideration of this intersection of literature and security.

The contributing authors here have certainly expanded these horizons of literature and security. Grzegorz Czemiel’s “‘Brought up to Live Double Lives’: Intelligence and Espionage as Literary and Philosophical Figures in Ciaran Carson’s *Exchange Place* and *For All We Know*” examines the figure of the spy, alongside themes related to espionage, as employed in two books by the Northern Irish writer Ciaran Carson (1948–2019): the volume of poems *For All We Know* (2008) and the novel *Exchange Place*

(2012). In what came to be known as the era of the “Troubles,” as Czemieli asserts, Carson, along with other writers, was important in conveying the experience of living in a modern surveillance state. Wit Pietrzak’s “Shibboleths of Grief” examines Paul Muldoon’s “The Triumph,” itself an elegy for Ciaran Carson—the subject of the first essay—evoking “a ground where political, cultural and religious polarities are destabilized” and the literary takes poetic and musical form as points of cultural identity in a city which was the epicentre of the Troubles: Belfast. Ryszard Bartnik retains the focus on Northern Ireland, but post-Troubles, through literary analysis of “Anna Burns’s Depiction of a (Post)-Troubles State of (In)security,” but where “the Troubles’ toxic legacy has indeed woven an unbroken thread in the social fabric of the region.”

Vincent Pacheco and Jeremy De Chavez’s treatment of Randy Ribay’s *Patron Saints of Nothing* brings an important broadening of interpretation of modern security. Detailing with powerful literary intent and analysis the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs, in which by any account the death toll is in the thousands, the authors examine the recently published *Patron Saints of Nothing* to see this tragic narrative through the ideas and interpretive lens of a Filipino-American who returns to the Philippines to uncover the truth behind the death of a cousin. This is where the novel brings to life the emotional reality behind the numbers of the dead.

Minu Susan Koshy’s locus is also in Asia, and draws, too, like the wars on drugs, on terrorism as a dominating theme in modern-day security, here examining populist and fictional notions of the migrant as “terrorist” in Kabir Khan’s *New York* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* as a way of illustrating the fiction/reality-mirroring conceptions of “normative” and “non-threatening mainstream” in terror narratives.

If these analyses deal with the real-world, historical and contemporary interfaces of literature and shifting notions of the security, Anna Reglińska-Jemioł takes us to the dystopian, post-apocalyptic world of *Mad Max* and *Fury Road*. Drawing on feminist motifs, Reglińska-Jemioł narrates “the evolution of this post-apocalyptic vision from the male-dominated world with civilization collapsing into chaotic violence visualized in the previous series to a more hopeful future created by women in the last part of the [*Mad Max*] saga”.

Lech Zdunkiewicz draws us back into history but also into the internal psychological notion of security in “Aligning with Sociopaths,” developing a most original interpretation of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). Drawing on Highsmith’s motivations for writing—“to see if she could elicit empathetic engagement for her immoral protagonist Tom Ripley”—Zdunkiewicz contrasts this with Anthony Minghella’s film

version of *Ripley*, which, leaving more interpretative leeway, allows for the protagonist's transformation. Here we are thus in the interpretative realm of existential and psychological security and insecurity.

And on the not unrelated theme of emotion, I write, in closing, with much sadness at the passing of Professor Dorota Filipczak. We had never actually met in person. We had over the years been in many communications over scholarly issues and research—we had both published books on the British-Irish-Canadian novelist Brian Moore, I in 2002, and Dorota a decade or so later. This connection had flourished into a collaboration with her wonderful *Text Matters* journal in which I was privileged last year to publish an article on Bob Dylan. And more directly Dorota and I were working together on this current issue of *Text Matters* on literature and security. We were looking forward to a launch in Łódź. And then came the sad and shocking news of her passing. Under such circumstances, special thanks are due, sincerely and wholeheartedly, to Agata Handley and Tomasz Fisiak who have done so much work in enabling the journal's issue to come to publication. This issue will be a touching legacy to and for the lamented Dorota.

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“Brought up to Live Double Lives”: Intelligence and Espionage as Literary and Philosophical Figures in Ciaran Carson’s *Exchange Place* and *For All We Know*

ABSTRACT

The article examines the figure of the spy—alongside themes related to espionage—as employed in two books by the Northern Irish writer Ciaran Carson (1948–2019): the volume of poems *For All We Know* (2008) and the novel *Exchange Place* (2012). Carson’s oeuvre is permeated with the Troubles and he has been hailed one of key writers to convey the experience of living in a modern surveillance state. His depiction of Belfast thematizes questions of terrorism, the insecurity and anxiety it causes in everyday life, as well as the unceasing games of appearances and the different ways of verifying or revising identities. In Carson’s later work, however, these aspects acquire greater philosophical depth as the author uses the themes of doubles, spies, and makeshift identities to discuss writing itself, the construction of subjectivity, and the dialogic relationship with the other. Taking a cue from Paul Ricoeur’s and Julia Kristeva’s conceptions of “oneself as another,” the article examines how Carson’s spy-figures can be read as metaphors for processes of self-discovery and identity-formation, tied to the notion of “self-othering.” Carson employs the figure of the spy—who juggles identities by “donning” different clothes or languages—to scrutinize how one ventures into the dangerous territory of writing, translation and love, as well as to reconsider notions of originality and self-mastery. Ultimately, Carson conceptualizes literature as specially marked by deceptions and metamorphoses, defining in these terms the human condition.

Keywords: surveillance, espionage, otherness, identity, translation.

INTRODUCTION

The revelation that Julia Kristeva—a globally recognized philosopher and psychoanalyst—was registered by the Bulgarian secret police as a collaborator in the 1970s sparked a lot of controversy, eliciting commentaries ranging from condemnation to exoneration. However, when the dust settled and those taking the moral high ground finished expressing their disdain for French intellectual circles and their leftist politics it became possible to identify aspects of the issue that might not have been apparent at first glance. These certainly include larger questions regarding the credibility of bureaucratic records in totalitarian regimes and the production of subjectivity under conditions of far-reaching surveillance. Still, what continues to baffle and fascinate is the literary aspect of such cases, namely the role of fiction in shaping one's identity or, in fact, multiple identities.

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Kristeva outright rejected the allegations, claiming that she had never been part of any secret service agency, and dismissing the revelations in the article “It’s Just Not My Life” as an instance of fiction. It is certainly not the point here to assess the truthfulness of either Kristeva’s account or the hefty dossier that was made available online. Anyone with even cursory knowledge about the intricacies of the “game of files” played in the former Eastern bloc would have to concur that these cases are difficult to disentangle and certainly cannot be resolved by applying simplified criteria. The release of such documents always entails a number of ethical issues, especially with regard to the credibility of accounts produced by the secret police and the susceptibility of these materials to becoming part of local power struggles. What this reveals is not a clear-cut reality populated by heroes and villains, but a vast apparatus of power infiltrating the society and colonizing the human psyche, occurring as it were “behind official history” (Seed 117) or in the unconscious.

The mental pressures entailed by living in a police state or one marked by extensive application of surveillance techniques—both social and industrial—have been scrutinized in the context of the Eastern bloc, but are not exclusive to this part of Europe. In fact, one of the more pertinent cases in the West is that of Northern Ireland, where the effects of sectarian violence and the efforts of the state apparatus to thwart it have imbued themselves deeply in the minds of people living there. Among the first-hand witnesses of these intense transformations was Ciaran Carson, a Belfast-born poet (1948–2019), who considers in his works some of the far-reaching consequences of living under the shadow of violence. As a literary chronicler of the Troubles, he focused primarily on the transformative effect that violence—direct and indirect, verbal and physical, guerrilla and

military—has had on the psyche of those living in Belfast during the three decades marked by conflict. Notably, however, Carson did not assume the duties of a reporter but used the Troubles as a springboard for broader considerations of identity, social bonds, and their relationship with literary fiction. Specifically, he would develop the idea that spying and surveillance reveal something very important about both the nature of writing and human subjectivity, namely that they are both dependent on the process of self-othering. Taking a cue from works by Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur—*Strangers to Ourselves* and *Oneself as Another*, respectively—it can be argued that identity formation is an essentially narrative process of fictionalizing oneself. However, this process is not regarded as private; on the contrary, as Carson demonstrates in his literary works, narrative identity is a nexus of various centrifugal forces that set the self in motion, decentralizing it. From this perspective, we all lead double lives insofar as we are subjects under scrutiny, our identities dispersed in a vast network of social relations, state records and material objects, and simultaneously make our own espionage-like forays into the unknown by becoming others in literature, translation, and love.

SPYCRAFT AS HUMAN CONDITION

Before directly engaging with Carson’s works, it is necessary to sketch a rough theoretical model of spycraft as an existential paradigm. As it emerges in the case of Kristeva, an archaeology of surveillance requires care since it provokes intense self-questioning. This has been aptly demonstrated by Katherine Verdery, who undertook the arduous task of reconstructing the social ramifications of living under the watchful eye of Romania’s Securitate, beginning in 1973 when she first travelled there as a researcher and was subsequently suspected to be an American spy. Although this was not the case, it did not prevent the secret police from amassing a three-thousand-page dossier about her. “There’s nothing like reading your secret police file,” Verdery writes in the preface to *My Life As a Spy*, “to make you wonder who you really are” (xi). What appeared particularly striking to her was the unique angle of the narrative emerging from the dossier—“an alien position embodied in a logic different from anything you recognize” (xi). A distorting mirror or prism, the dossier would redefine the importance of specific events in her life and various aspects of her identity. In the end, as she has come to recognize, her virtual alter ego “Vera” would teach her a unique lesson: “these doubles,” she acknowledges, “echo experiences all of us have” (294). Although the “real” Katherine would find “this multiplication of identities disconcerting,” Vera

actually “knew from the outset that Katherine was mistaken in her belief in a singular self with a stable, unique identity”; and to complicate things further, “she took pleasure in how life in Romania gradually subverted Katherine’s perspective” (294).

Kristeva strikes a similar note when she addresses her experience of moving to France in the above response, denying that she was “strategically” playing officials in an attempt to tread a fine line between a Bulgarian past and a French future. However, as she openly admits, her actual position was in fact much less a political stand-off than an existential quandary regarding her perpetual foreignness, which she has referred to since as “my destiny.” In this context she asks “Is it not the major condition of being able to think, which means thinking from another point of view, from the point of view of the other?” This question carries special significance when posed in the situation of being neither fully here nor there, and is further exacerbated by the fact that the issue turns out to be not only private but also public: political and involving surveillance. Such destabilization of identity would thus appear highly ambiguous—“a challenge and an opportunity,” as Kristeva notes with psychoanalytic acumen—because it simultaneously enables thinking and undercuts it.

As Neal Ascherson observes in his review of Verdery’s book, “the recent fuss about Julia Kristeva boils down to nothing much, although it has suited some to inflate it into a fearful scandal.” However, what these stories do imply is that being a spy—wittingly or not—can be understood as expressive of modern identity, as developed at the intersection between the public and the private. Clive Bloom has identified these two axes as key coordinates of spy fiction, arguing that this genre “constantly veers towards a paranoid vision of ‘violation by *outside* agencies’ and ‘violation of individual autonomy by *internal* agencies” (qtd. in Seed 115; emphasis in the original). Even when divorced from its immediate context of intelligence and released from clichéd narratives of combating evil masterminds, spycraft proves to be an eloquent metaphor of the human condition. It reveals the multifarious and reflexive character of identity, as well as the vast machinery of identity-formation that surreptitiously permeates our minds, especially when augmented by new technologies. The productive character of espionage as metaphor consists in the way it demonstrates the broad distribution of identity, which is no longer a stable, self-contained kernel that one carries around in the privacy of an individual soul. Identity emerges rather as an intersection of the public and the private, truth and fiction, entailing constant effort to both secure the continuity of the self and embrace its inevitable change. This is further corroborated in psychology, where the concept of narrative identity is also argued to reveal that “any person’s particular narrative identity is a co-

authored, psychosocial construction, a joint product of the person . . . and the culture” (McAdams 112), thereby destabilizing the notion of a stable and enclosed self.

Certainly, this can be both terrifying and liberating as it reveals two significant truths: first, to quote Colette’s words recalled by Kristeva, that “to be born again . . . has never been beyond my capabilities,” and second, in the words of Ascherson, who concludes his meditation on the politics of secret dossiers by turning away from the Cold War and looking towards the cyber-age, arguing that “we had never walked alone” and only now “begin to see that we never will” insofar as we are “shadowed by invisible robots, by doppelgängers fitted together by algorithms.”

Importantly, these two axes of identity are also the staple of literary works by Ciaran Carson. Although any such reductions are inherently limited, one of the crucial tensions identifiable in his oeuvre is the one between individual autonomy and outside agency. The two are usually cast in more concrete terms, for example as the relationship between orality and textuality and, more specifically, as the tension between two languages: Irish and English. As Clíona Ní Ríordáin aptly observes (1), Carson addresses his bilingual heritage by dedicating his 1989 volume of poems *Belfast Confetti* to his father in both Irish and English: “*do m’athair, Liam Mac Carráin / to my father, William Carson*” (Carson, *Collected Poems* 124; henceforth *CP*). According to the critic, this testifies to Carson’s fundamentally bilingual, dual identity, although he would also embrace the fact that “an equilibrium between the two languages is impossible” due to linguistic, religious, social and political reasons (1). Indeed, this imbalance has enabled the poet to switch between the two languages to assume different perspectives and even disguise himself in language, using it as “a cloak in which one can wrap oneself to become Other” (1). As Ríordáin points out by invoking interviews with Carson, his bilingual upbringing made him acutely aware of the intimate differences between languages, the political import of speaking a specific idiom, and the fascination with otherness expressed by immersing oneself in a foreign speech that ultimately reveals something uncannily familiar. In the private dimension, Carson’s parents apparently met during Irish classes, causing them to fall “in love with each other and the language” (qtd. in Ríordáin 2), which introduces a crucial link between affection and engagement with linguistic otherness. On the other hand, Ciaran Carson’s very name—the first name Catholic Irish and the last name Ulster Protestant—embodies his “double-dealing,” an “ambiguity” he has come to “relish” (qtd. in Ríordáin 2). Indeed, this nexus of problems introduces key themes that recur in his work and are organized around the theme of a “double agent” who inhabits the twilight zone of the “in-between,” undertaking perilous excursions into

foreignness, in terms of which Carson redefines questions of identity and the self, as well as the functions of literary fiction and translation. What he establishes in the course of such “intelligence operations” is an account of the self as inherently plural, polymorphic and multilingual, hence governed by the rules of fiction and mobilized by processes of translation in which every move is a step into the unknown of otherness and a betrayal of what formerly appeared to be the stable nucleus of a seemingly mastered self and mother tongue.

CARSON'S CHRONICLE OF THE TROUBLES

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Before Carson developed these philosophical questions in his later works, the immediate impulse for considerations focusing on espionage and spycraft was the Troubles, a crucial influence on his life and poetry. In *The Irish for No* (1987), his first volume to directly address the situation in Northern Ireland, he meditates on the impact that the conflict has had on Belfast not only in terms of the physical violence that ripped the city and its social fabric apart, but also acknowledging the conflict's discursive dimension of “legislation, the media, and local stories along with virtual powers of surveillance technology” (Houen 270). If we hope to develop effective ways of coping and healing, Carson points out, it is crucial to ask how violence is mediated by fiction, technology and everyday practices. “By charting this type of dynamic,” Houen claims, “Carson offers new ways of thinking about the Troubles in terms of the relation of violence to textuality” (272). In this sense, he makes language the stage of rampant conflict, diagnosing how the city and the self are unstitched and unravelled, while violence and suspicion ingrain themselves in the way we conceive of ourselves and other people. In doing this, Carson demonstrates what spy fiction fleshes out so well, namely how we “internalize security as a constant state of domestic and psychological surveillance” (Seed 124). In the oft-cited poem “Belfast Confetti,” the exploded bomb (“an asterisk on the map”) and shots fired (“hyphenated line”) make it impossible to “complete a sentence in my head,” with “the side streets blocked with stops and colons” (CP 93). Because “every move is punctuated,” the poem concludes, a “fusillade of question marks” descends, undermining all coordinates and points of reference, leaving the speaking persona stunted and “polymorphically mute” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 16): “What is / my name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?” Perplexed and traumatized witnesses to the Troubles are shown by Carson as living in a psychotic reality characterized by distrust and never-ending games of appearances. In “Last Orders,” entering a bar and ordering drinks is fraught with

suspicion, with awkwardly cast glances measuring up everyone, amounting to a "Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who's who, or what / You're walking into" (*CP* 154). "I, for instance," the speaker observes, "could be anybody. . . . See me, would *I* trust appearances?" (154; emphasis in the original). Just as the city's fabric is torn, while its inhabitants' minds are infected with what David Seed identified in William Burroughs's spy-fiction prose as "surreal conspiracies before which no area of the self remains intact" (130), Carson responds by developing a "new urban poetics" that involves "creation of new maps, the formulation of new concepts of identity and place, and the relationship between them" (Kennedy-Andrews, "Ciaran Carson" 145). To piece such new maps together, Carson draws on images and ideas derived from the shadowy world of intelligence.

In the prose poem "Intelligence," he observes that everyone is "being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car phones, Pye Pocketphones" (*CP* 184). This has become the condition of urban life, exacerbated by distrust and speculation induced by the Troubles. "Everyone is watching someone, everyone wants to know what's coming next," Carson notes, and as we are being constantly kept under the watchful eye of others and surveillance devices, the systems of observation stack up on top of each other, forming "panopticons within panopticons" (185). John Goodby refers to this dystopia as "an ultimate nightmare," with "the slightest slip of the tongue" potentially "provoking lethal displays of intolerance" and technological forms of control turning the city into a "prison made totally transparent, and accessible, to power" (78–79). This kind of oppression, however, can be countered, though not by replacing the "oppressor's map with your own mirror-image of it" (78), Goodby concurs, drawing inspiration from Michel de Certeau, but by building up resistance through investment in narratives "relying on walking, local observation, the intimate, ground-level view" (80). The mutability of both city and subjectivity is traumatizing but simultaneously suggests ways of defying and eluding the surveillance machine as "glitches and gremlins and bugs keep fouling-up, seething out from the hardware, the dense entangled circuitry of backstreets, backplanes" (*CP* 184). "Intelligence" concludes with an exercise in counter-mapping that acknowledges the volatility of the "demolition city," working through trauma and loss by recollecting and spinning stories. Father and son look down at the city from the Black Mountain, trying to discern their home in the distance, identifying Belfast's landmarks and "homing in through the terraces and corner shops and spires and urinals . . . while my father tells me a story" (187). Surveillance is thus balanced in the act of reclaiming the city through an alternative cartography of imagination that revolves around

change, surprise and wilful disorientation, ultimately facilitating a “re-composition” along the lines of “a utopian spatial politics” (Alexander 88). In order to counteract the “edgy paranoia” developed as the default reflex among citizens of Belfast—a “Twilight Zone” regulated by “Special Powers” (qtd. in Alexander 102)—it becomes necessary for Carson to embrace a stealth mode of self-othering. This is achieved by abandoning the desire to exercise complete self-mastery through specific techniques: losing oneself in the city, following the impulses of involuntary memory, foraging into foreign languages, writing, or otherwise moving into the shadowy world of the in-between and embracing its potential for developing forms of counter-intelligence. These themes are further explored in his later works, specifically in the poetry volume *For All We Know* (2008) and the novel *Exchange Place* (2012).

FOR ALL WE KNOW

The above trajectories, surfacing already in the context of the Troubles in the late eighties, converge in the most intricate fashion in Carson’s volume of poetry *For All We Know*. The book is unique among his works due to its dialogic construction. Split into two parts containing mirroring poems under the same titles, it focuses on Nina and Gabriel, two lovers whose “affair unfolds in an atmosphere of constant surveillance, fear, and paranoia” (Kennedy-Andrews, “Carson, Heaney” 240). The redoubling of the poems makes interpretation invariably suspended between the two parts, never actually allowing one to resolve all the echoes and variations. As Kennedy-Andrews observes, the structure of the volume makes it impossible to treat any of the two parts as “the original”—in a way, the original is always already lost, leaving the reader only with the two lovers’ mutual “mis-translations” as they are locked in their “double-lives” (240). Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, as well as utilizing an array of *noir* tropes, the book uses its intricate architecture to render the uncertainty and mistrust that mark the lives of spies. Part psychological thriller and part *noir* parody, the book makes its own “facts . . . take on a metaphorical turn” (Delattre, “Forest” 13). A “hall of mirrors,” as Carson himself called it, *For All We Know* “seemed to generate its own energy” when being written due to the multiplication and intertwining of motifs, as well as the ceaseless work of variation and recurrence (“*For all I know*” 22).

The book’s polyphonic character is closely connected with the art of the fugue, which figures prominently the volume, a motto from Glenn Gould offering vital insight into this matter: “Fugue must

perform its frequently stealthy work with continuously shifting melodic fragments that remain, in the ‘tune’ sense, perpetually unfinished” (CP 490). Obsessed with the irreducible multiplicity of meanings, Carson also explores another sense of the word “fugue,” which can refer to a medical condition: a rare dissociative disorder that can cause amnesia accompanied by an urge to travel or wander off, even for longer periods, in extreme cases leading to the formation of another identity. The two meanings of “fugue” dovetail in Carson’s book insofar as he makes the two lovers continually strangers to themselves and to each other—“perpetually unfinished.” Both of them bilingual, it appears they were “brought up to live double lives” (“On the Contrary,” CP 542) and thus find it easier to slip in and out of specific roles and identities, always becoming somebody else by adopting certain turns of phrase, changing clothes, or wearing different perfume, in short: “self-transforming” (Alexander 138). At the same time, their “doubled progeny,” as Baltasi put it, continuously “erodes their sense of coherent unity” and reveals it to be strictly “language-bound” (170–71).

The pair’s dance is traced back to the second-hand clothes shop where they met, already from the start sizing each other up and probing their identities: “You’re not from around here, I said. No, from elsewhere, you said. / As from another language, I might have said, but did not” (“Pas de Deux,” CP 503). Their own fugue develops in a dialogic manner, “one side revolving the other’s words for other meanings” (503), following an elaborate ballet that involves words, gestures, displays of affection and, importantly, clothes and other material objects to which we delegate our self-expression, e.g., watches. Their “double lives,” as Alexander points out, concern not only their linguistic background but also their actions as they move between Belfast, Paris and Dresden, questioning themselves, each other and others in a world where no identity seems fixed and every encounter is rife with potential for duplicity and misrecognition (137). Carson captures, as he pointed it out himself, how Nina and Gabriel “wonder who they might be, what they are to each other, and how they remember each other” or—to put it differently—explores “the translations they make of each other” (qtd. in Moi and Larsen 85). The lovers learn that even though they have some power over how they appear before others, they are also defined by how others see them. Learning how to “renegotiate themselves”—as when staying “in another country” (“Redoubt,” CP 498)—they also have to master the art of “putting yourself into someone else’s shoes” in order to reclaim or invent “that which me might have been had we been born as another” (“Treaty,” CP 497); in this way, it appears paramount “to encompass the other’s territory” (497) if one wants to discover what they can still become.

What Carson suggests is that fiction permeates our lives to a far greater degree than is usually acknowledged. The domain of language is oftentimes likened in the book to a forest, one that we enter to find out that “trees have ears and mouths that listen and respond / to every passerby” (“Before,” *CP* 527). Alive and reciprocal, this forest is interrogating us, contributing to our self-formation. “What is it in us,” Carson asks in “To,” “that makes us / see another in another?” (*CP* 523). His answer seems to be literary fiction since it offers a way out of solipsism at the cost of accepting the fictive structure of self and memory. In order to think myself, I have to be able to engage in some kind of self-othering in the sense of developing a split within myself that opens a window onto another. For Carson, literature plays this role insofar as language structures the third-person self-narrative that keeps our myriad selves together. The poem “Zugzwang,” which closes the first part, ends thus: “so I write these words to find out what will become of you, / whether you and I will be together in the future” (*CP* 537), while its counterpart from the second part concludes: “so I return to the question of those staggered repeats / as my memories of you recede into the future” (*CP* 587). In light of the above, Carson’s writing project is an inquiry into how writing operates as a mode of discovering one’s own past and shaping the future self. On the one hand, it offers a mode of retelling the past again and again, always slightly differently because “[t]he lie is memorized, the truth remembered” (“The Shadow,” *CP* 508), piecing the patchwork identity together to establish narrative continuity. On the other, it provides a tool for becoming and moving forward. Writing is posed here as a fundamental act of “gathering intelligence,” which grants access to the past and the future, defining the basic parameters of human experience. Thus, one can only reiterate the claim that *For All We Know* indeed constitutes “an intelligence operation in the truest sense” (Starnino 161). In this sense, the book uses the theme of espionage to develop the idea that all thought and writing are inherently mediated through otherness. This in turn makes translation the paradigm of such encounters with foreignness, as suggested by Paul Ricoeur in *On Translation*, where linguistic pluralism and translation are situated at the heart of subjectivity as its precondition. Translation shares much with espionage, as Mark Polizzotti argues in *Sympathy for the Traitor. A Translation Manifesto*. “In some ways,” he notes, “translation and spying are natural bedfellows: both involve double allegiances, parallel modes of expression,” as well as the necessity to “jump, like a seasoned performer, from one role to another, one voice to another, one persona to another,” making it impossible to presuppose unequivocal loyalty (33). Indeed, Carson’s complex relationship with English hinges on excursions into the Irish of *The Táin* and Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche*,

the Romanian of Stefan Agustin Doinas, the French of Jean Follain, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as the Italian of Dante. His writing project is largely driven by encounters with foreignness, which have enabled him to discover new potential in English itself, revitalizing its energies and harnessing them to his own poetic ends. A spy-writer who looks to other cultures and languages for inspiration, Carson kept changing his literary identity in the course of metamorphoses inspired by numerous translations, versions, adaptations and internalizations of foreign texts.

EXCHANGE PLACE

In the novel *Exchange Place* Carson plays with genre boundaries, further exploring popular “pulp noir” and turning it into a vehicle for his own philosophical musings on subjectivity, as well as reflections on the Troubles. Carson’s non-hierarchical bricolage approach has made him a “double-agent” or “sophisticated primitive” who moves freely between popular convention and philosophical discourse, defying conventions (Hancock 152). The book investigates double-talk, deception and spycraft as vehicles for observations about the nature of human subjectivity, using the theme of “stepping into someone else’s shoes” as both a “learning process” and an “enquiry into being” (Carson, *Exchange Place* 62). Interpreting the dictum “*Le style, c’est homme*” as a philosophical statement (113), Carson embraces “self-othering”—which notably manifests in his trying on various vintage second-hand clothes—as “a kind of method writing” that facilitates living in a “parallel world” (27). In fact, to illustrate this, he develops his own multiverse theory, which is sketched in the book along the lines of a musical fugue: “a universe of infinite worlds and endlessly repeated variations, endlessly doubled lives” (43). Except that this is also something that plays out in the most common situations, forming the nucleus of sociality. The façade of the spy-novel underscores the right notes in order to display this more efficiently: “Eyes staring at one’s back. Meeting of glances. We are others in the eyes of others. I am many John Kilfeathers” (128). As John Kilpatrick, the other protagonist whose path slowly converges with that of Kilfeather, reads from his notebook in the Rimbaudian chapter “*Je Est un Autre*”: “in our walk through life we change . . . and are altered by the glance of others . . . and our bodies are altered by those negotiations whether we know it or not” (142). As he concludes, “we are not one but many, we are the sum of all we are to others” (142). This implies—as Kristeva elaborates in *Strangers to Ourselves*, taking a cue from Freud’s concept of the uncanny (regarding the immanence of the strange in the familiar)—

that our own psychological depth is matched by what is external and inaccessible, dissolving any notion of a “solid” self (192). If in the end we are all “foreigners to ourselves” (170), then “the other is my own, proper unconscious” (183). This, she argues, also forms the ethical injunction to open up to otherness because closing it off would mean eliminating a vital part of ourselves, most notably foreclosing the potential to meaningfully engage with other people and their stories, ultimately thwarting self-development. Lastly, the dialogic relation between myself and the other is likened by Kristeva to a fugue, which never “solidifies” the other but acknowledges radical foreignness as the precondition of subjectivity (3).

The musical “*fugere*” or the endless, non-conclusive flight of the fugue is therefore rendered similar to the medical condition of fugue as “mad travel” (as Ian Hacking called it) because it dramatizes the radical character of becoming someone else, a process in which identity is destabilized, characterized by “negation of any notion of linear and intentional lived experience” (Baker 6). As Alan Gillis remarks in the context of Carson’s novel $X+Y=K$ (an unpublished shadow version of *Exchange Place*), fugue in the medical sense provides access to “the matrix” defined by Carson as “a realm of traces in which ‘any and all information about any person, place or thing might be obtained’” (255). This parapsychic dimension—itsself the shadow or other of real-life surveillance—is presented in *Exchange Place* as “the Other Side,” who are “in the business of knowing” and “look at everything” (174). Akin to the “Great Game” of spy fiction (Seed 119), this theme can suggest a vast network of interconnections, interdependencies and interrelations, forming a dense palimpsest of traces readable only if one develops the ability to assume different perspectives, yet impossible to grasp by any single actor. To glimpse this realm, the protagonist must visit the “Cave of Changes” and then step through a mirror, both of these tropes standing for self-transformation and self-othering.

Finally, the work of fugue can be also observed in terms of the book’s composition. Full of “extracts from books, fictional or otherwise,” as Carson explains in a meta-commentary (152), *Exchange Place* is in fact also a “montage” (Delattre, “Déjà vu” 158) that strategically deploys numerous quotations and foreign expressions, foregrounding insurmountable language differences. Moreover, all writers “mirror” others, Carson observes, “whether consciously or unconsciously” (152), which brings them closer to translators rather than self-sufficient, “original” and “natural” geniuses of the Romantic or post-Romantic vein. This serves as a commentary on the creative process itself, which is cast here as essentially relational and occurring at the crossroads of one’s own words and those of others, using them to open windows that afford glimpses of a larger reality.

CONCLUSION

Towards the end of *Still Life*, Carson’s last poetry book, written and published in 2019 when he was terminally ill, he ponders *Windows*, a series of paintings by Basil Blackshaw. In the first part of the poem he notes that “to write about the windows or indeed around them” means attempting “not so much to delineate / As to allow a little leeway as to what they mean that must include the shifting memories” (57). In the last part of the poem it is revealed that *Windows* are important for him due to his memory of seeing them together with his wife Deirdre (61). In the collection’s last poem, devoted to James Allen’s *The House with the Palm Trees*, Carson concludes the ekphrastic series by using the painting to open a window onto a memory of a house he once lived in, ending the poem (as well as the volume) by referring to windows: “And I loved the big windows and whatever I could see through them, be it cloudy or clear, / And the way they trembled and thrilled to the sound of the world beyond” (73). This appears particularly ambiguous as we also learn from the book that these “trembles” could have been caused by a bomb going off at a nearby bar. The political and social context of the Troubles and the ensuing policing, including heavy surveillance, enforces itself here traumatically, but the ability to be affected—both in positive and negative terms—appears to depend on leaving that window open: sensitive to the larger reality and not boarded up out of fear.

If Carson is right to claim that every “human being is a story-telling machine, and the self is a centre of narrative gravity” (*Exchange Place* 161), we are all translators who try to make sense of the world by spinning stories that venture into foreign and sometimes dangerous territory. It is in this sense that Julia Kristeva tries to bring together the figures of foreigner, translator and writer in the essay “The Love of Another Language.” Carson’s own travels into the perilous realms of music, love, self-enquiry, political violence, state surveillance, foreign idioms and literatures, art forms, and various modes of writing, including genre-bending, adaptation, translation and quotation, appear driven by what Kristeva calls “a lucid yet passionate love” for new languages, which offer “a pretext for rebirth: new identity, new hope” (241). Though he lived in Belfast all his life, Carson could be called, to invoke Kristeva, a “migrant writer” or “hybrid monster”—the kind who inhabits “the crossroads of languages,” practicing a type of speech that acts as a vehicle for strangeness (244), which is both the task of writer (as translator and foreigner), as well as the “minimum and primary condition for being alive” (254). And although neither Carson nor Kristeva were real spies (for all we know), their work provides guidelines for perceiving this trade as expressive of

human subjectivity, demonstrating its precarious plurality held together by fiction, and the dependence on the other for its constitution. Finally, they both indicate how surveillance has become an important aspect of identity production, gesturing towards the new, global systems of large-scale data manipulation that encroach on our becomings today.

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Shibboleths of Grief: Paul Muldoon’s “The Triumph”

ABSTRACT

The essay explores Paul Muldoon’s elegy for the fellow Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson with a view to showing that “The Triumph” seeks to evoke a ground where political, cultural and religious polarities are destabilized. As the various intertextual allusions in the poem are traced, it is argued that Muldoon seeks to revise the notion of the Irish shibboleths that, as the poem puts it, “are meant to trip you up.” In lieu of this linguistic and political slipperiness, “The Triumph” situates Carson’s protean invocations of Belfast and traditional Irish music as the new shibboleths of collectivity.

Keywords: Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, elegy, contemporary Irish poetry.

“The Triumph,” Paul Muldoon’s uncollected elegy for Ciaran Carson, sets out to explore the role of music and poetry in shaping the communal co-existence of the polarized Northern Irish society. On the one hand, the poem tries to evoke the presence of the deceased by evoking the life the speaker shared with Carson in a way that parallels Muldoon’s earlier elegies “Incantata” (in memory of the graphic artist Mary Farl Powers) and “Sillyhow Stride” (in memory of the rock musician Warren Zevon) but also “Cuthbert and the Otters” (Muldoon’s elegy for Seamus Heaney). Whereas the attempt to recreate the world in which Carson is still a living presence points to the former two elegies, the adoption of Carson’s characteristic diction and line length is in tune with the technique Muldoon employs in the elegy for Heaney. On the other hand, though, the issues of politics and the Northern Irish Troubles are addressed as directly as in the early “Anseo” or the more recent “Dirty Data.” However, what distinguishes “The Triumph” from Muldoon’s earlier elegies and politically-inclined poems is its evocation of a ground where the essence of political, cultural and religious dissensions is challenged so that the co-existence of the divided community can be achieved.

Even though Muldoon has stressed that no poem is meant to endorse any political agendas but rather constitutes “a little world in itself” (Haffenden 141), his work has elusively responded to the Troubles, as well as, throughout volumes like *Horse Latitudes* and *Frolic and Detour*, the US’s erratic policies under the presidencies of George W. Bush and Donald Trump. Muldoon’s poems from the 1970s and the early 1980s such as “Anseo,” “Boundary Commission” and “A Trifle” have been subjects of dispute as to their treatment of politics. One side of the debate is implicit in Clair Wills’s observation in regard to “Anseo” that in lieu of endorsing agendas, “the poet’s task is to disturb and disorder” (83). Similarly, Tim Kendall emphasizes Muldoon’s ambiguous treatment of the violence in Northern Ireland in a poem like “A Trifle” that is neither scrupled over nor condemned in any outright fashion (Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* 92). By contrast, Michael Parker concludes his reading of “Anseo” by stating that its aim “is to expose the lineaments of oppression within his own natal culture and their subsequent ‘whip-lash’ effects, acknowledging that art can function as an effective form of social critique” (90–91). In a similar vein, Sean O’Brien questions Kendall’s reading of “A Trifle”: “[I]he poem would be merely a stylish display of sang-froid without the historical and political dimensions,” which must be taken into account if the poem is to reveal its depth (171; for Kendall’s response, see “Paul Muldoon’s Twins” 72–74). In an oblique response to claims such as O’Brien’s, Muldoon has suggested that a directly political reading of a poem like “Anseo” is not “as fruitful an avenue” as what he calls a “simple, fairly,

one-dimensional . . . reading" ("Paul Muldoon in Conversation" 172). The one-dimensional reading seems tongue-in-cheek, given how even short poems like "Anseo" or "A Trifle" maintain their equivocal status with regard to the subject matter. In her reading of "Cows," which in its last part addresses issues of art's relevance in a way that recalls the much earlier "Lunch with Pancho Villa," Julia C. Obert zeroes in on some of those equivocations and argues that by "turning binaries into 'twins, entwined'" Muldoon manages, though not without a residue of irony, to "deconstruct the dualisms underpinning Northern Ireland's identity politics" (163). Such challenging of the Northern Irish polarities is also undertaken in "The Triumph," which engages the work and life of Ciaran Carson in order to imagine a ground where dualisms are not so much absent as untenable. Suggesting that the community-building legacy of the deceased poet may well be the only solace after his demise, Muldoon transposes what in elegiac poetry is conventionally a matter of the individual attempt at dealing with personal grief onto a social plane: whereas there Carson's death is inconsolable for Muldoon, what succour there is remains available to the Northern Irish community.

"The Triumph" is structured around a memory of the poet and Carson driving through Belfast in a Triumph Herald Convertible to get the latter a packet of cigarettes. The light-hearted tone of that trip, however, is undercut by the realization that Carson would eventually be diagnosed as suffering from cancer caused, the poem suggests, by his addiction to smoking. It is in the Royal Victoria Hospital that Carson, nonchalantly recounting his treatment, is evoked at the start of the poem. By beginning at the end, "The Triumph" confronts death, although similarly to "Yarrow" the speaker knows that no amount of imaginary flourishes can delay the inevitable: "the bone marrow // aches for more and more cancer cells. Nor would you shrink / from piling on, alas, / your tales of Captain Chemo."¹ And yet, just as in "Yarrow" the unfolding of memory seeks to defer the moment "All would be swept away"; the "tales of Captain Chemo" soon turn to evocations of Carson's dreams that intertwine with tales of the two men's shared moments: in pubs talking about anything from French New Wave cinema to contemporary politics and poetry but most importantly Irish music, in the process undermining a dichotomous world view.

Carson regularly spoke of his dreams (even shortly before his death, as his publisher Neil Belton recalls, "he was dreaming aloud, seeing writing on the walls" [xiv-xv]), noting that the Belfast of his poems might owe its labyrinthine quality to his "dream version of Belfast which in many ways

¹ All the quotes from "The Triumph" come from the version published online on *The Times Literary Supplement* website.

I can negotiate more successfully than the real [city]" (Carson, "Out of the Pub" 16). And yet, the imaginary Belfast is not only a place of familiar multiplicity but also of "nightmares, sometimes, or dreams of containment, repression, anxiety and claustrophobia . . . often, I'm lost in an ambiguous labyrinth between the Falls and the Shankill; at other times, the city is idealized and takes on a Gothic industrial beauty" (Carson, Interviewed 5). Whatever their nature, the imaginary peregrinations across Belfast, beginning with *The Irish for No*, embody "something of the constant disintegration and reintegration of the city" (Carson, Interviewing 19). The speaker in "33333" captures some of this perpetual flux and ties it to an evocation of violence: "I know this place like the back of my hand, except / My hand is cut off at the wrist" (Carson, *Collected Poems* 101). Among many suggestions of physical threats and bodily mutilations, the volume keeps reminding us that the fluidity of Belfast is caused by the ceaseless cycle of oppression and retaliation. And yet, while Carson has denied any immediate political goals in his poetry, his consistent challenging of dichotomous constructs of thought in his 1980s and 1990s collections represents an all-out assault on sectarianism, which imagines the city both as the site of violence and, through its malleability, as a means to "resist [ing] and rebuk[ing] the idea that the spatial, social, and historical multiplicity of the city can be reduced to a polarized sectarian grid of forces and crass binary oppositions" (Alexander 25).

Carson's Belfast, "built on *sleech*—alluvial or tidal muck," as well as "of *sleech*, metamorphosed into brick" (*Collected Poems* 179, emphasis in the original), is a heterotopic place simultaneously full of familiar localities and alienating spaces, secret pathways and cul-de-sacs. Commenting on what Carson calls "one of my current recurrent dreams of Belfast" that "focuses on streets dominated by a church, St Peter's Pro-Cathedral in the Lower Falls" (*The Star Factory* 198), as they begin to resemble locales from all over the world, Neal Alexander observes that the city becomes "the navel of the world," a "reworking of the idea of the Aleph" (48, 49). Carson was attracted to the notion, which he borrowed from Borges, explaining that "aleph is one of the points in space which contains all other points" (*Fishing for Amber* 266). In the "current recurrent" dream, Belfast becomes such a pivot of the universe, though elsewhere Carson uses Aleph to evoke the idea of connectivity beyond the reference to the city. In "J," from the "Letters from the Alphabet" section of *Opera Et Cetera*, the poet sums up his contingent allusions to apparently discordant facts by observing that one thing leads to another "the way that Aleph leads to Beth" (*Collected Poems* 293). This arbitrary relatedness, which echoes Muldoon's "Something Else," represents both the freedom to imagine one's world as one pleases and a nightmarish imprisonment in

a labyrinthine, panopticon-like city in which oppressive forces exercise control over the stranded, powerless residents.

In "The Triumph," this dual meaning of Aleph underlies the oneiric representation of Belfast past and present: "The idea implicit / in 'The Aleph' / is that the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is a return to a long list / of shibboleths / meant to trip you up." In "Serial," Carson points up that "the shibboleths are a *lingua franca*" (*Collected Poems* 113) and one such shibboleth is thematized in "H,"² in which the speaker wonders "Is the H in H-Block *aitch* or *haitch*?" and adds "Every thing is in the ways / You say them. Like, the prison that we call Long Kesh is to the Powers-that-Be *The Maze*" (*Collected Poems* 291). In *Judges* 12:6, the Gileadites use the word shibboleth to find out which people that are trying to pass the river Jordan were Ephraimites, who "could not frame to pronounce *it* right" (*The Bible*). In the Northern Irish context, the aitches and haitches serve a similar function, pronunciation determining matters of life and death. "H" thus problematizes the idea that language can be a space of security and a token of belonging as in Heaney's "Broagh." Instead, as David Wheatley has shown, "strategies of evasion, codes, shibboleths and other language games" have come to feature in Northern Irish poetry as indicators of the sectarian divide and its attendant linguistic codes (3).

However, in addition to evoking the contested nature of language, "H" also challenges poetic double entendre, which Muldoon has celebrated in his early poetry. In claiming that "Every thing is in the ways / You say them," "H" alludes to Muldoon's "The Country Club" and its quotation from Robert Frost's "The Mountain" in the opening stanzas that end with the whimsical declaration "But all the fun's in how you say a thing" (Muldoon, *Poems* 64; Frost 48). Muldoon has admitted that at university, so at a time when the ride in the Triumph Convertible recounted in the elegy would have taken place, "the most important thing for me in Frost was his mischievous, sly, multi-layered quality" (Haffenden 134). While "Frost provides a model of 'crooked straightness' that becomes what Muldoon calls 'singleminded swervings'" (McCurry 81), "The Country Club" suggests that no slyness can oppose brutality, as eventually it turns out Ella Stafford, with whom the speaker has had an affair, gets "shot at" by her husband, a fact relayed to the hapless romancer by Lee Pinkerton,

² Another example would be the placement of the stress in the word Belfast. In "Jawbox," the speaker ponders that "the accent / On the *fast*, as if the name was Irish, which it was (or is)" (*Collected Poems* 193). By contrast, stressing the first syllable represents the "educated" pronunciation, as Carson indicates in *The Star Factory* (45). Julia C. Obert observes in passing that in "Jawbox" the two variants of pronunciation highlight "the dangerous distance between these two inflections while making a point about (would-be, should-be) proximity of Catholic and Protestant" (49).

who is a firm believer that “it shouldn’t be true when it’s not” (Muldoon, *Poems* 64). The poem may deride Pinkerton’s sanctimonious adherence to truth but it also remains suspicious of linguistic levity.

With this in mind, “The Triumph” indicates that deception leads not only to clever wordplay but to opacity that helps perpetuate dissension within a community between those who pronounce their haitches and those who do not. However, if Aleph is a way to “trip you up,” the poem also goes on to evoke a counter vision. Canto i calls up various divisions, the Belfast Urban Motorway, “The brainchild of Captain Terence O’Neill” and the conflict-riven Northern Irish people that “don’t need the British troops / to stand between us” but concludes by invoking Carson as a figure in whom those polarities might be fused, his “name combining those of the Abbot of Clonmacnoise and a beater of the drum / for the much-vaunted Unionist veto.” The suggestion that the poet bears the legacy Saint Ciarán and Edward Carson is developed in Canto ii, which remembers “how you’d retire at nine to get a head start on your dreams.” Those prominently feature Sir Edward but unlike in “The Brain of Edward Carson,” that imagines his brain, “an inner topography of the violent world [the politician] represented” (Hufstader 241), built of “two halves” as though obsessed with enforcing divisions (*Collected Poems* 234), in “The Triumph,” he is evoked “presenting each shipyard worker in the Queen’s Island / with an autographed copy of *The Irish for No*” and later “distributing copies of *Last Night’s Fun* / to a populace pretty much inured to water cannons and tear gas.” Although the more accurate image of Edward Carson, “ready to rail / against all those who might favour / a false king,” recurs throughout the poem, the dream figure is merged with Carson the poet and the Saint, as all merge with Louis MacNeice “peeling and portioning a mule” that appears at the start of “The Triumph” being painted by Joan Miró. Thus, in Ciaran Carson’s dreams as invoked in “The Triumph,” Sir Edward, the symbol of Protestant oppression, becomes a bearer of the ecumenical message of peace, so that Muldoon’s speaker can admit that “Not all Orangemen are bigots.”

Just as Saint Ciarán and Edward Carson fuse in Ciaran Carson, Terence O’Neill, the fourth Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, metamorphoses into Captain Francis O’Neill, an Irish-born Superintendent of the Chicago Police Force and an indomitable collector of Irish traditional music praised by Carson in his guide to traditional Irish music (see *Irish Traditional Music* 67). In the dream world of “The Triumph,” he is evoked as recommending that in response to the IRA’s 1956–62 Border Campaign, which saw another outbreak of bloodshed over the partition of Ireland, “a force / comprised mainly of flute players, each armed with a *camán*, // should do the trick.” This suggestion is exposed when the speaker fuses

the two O'Neills: "Along with riot shields, batons, / rubber bullets, and gasmasks, // Captain O'Neill still recommends an auxiliary force of button / accordionists to augment the flute / players already signed up to put down the Border Campaign." Aware of the fact that nothing would ever replace the brute force of the Unionist response, "The Triumph" nonetheless gives credence to musicians' efforts provided "they [were] to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, / like Ezra Pound or Christy Ring, / they'll likely happen on the single point that includes every other point in the universe."³ Whereas for Pound the attention to the music of words can ensure the right meaning is captured, for Carson, bringing poetry closer to the condition of music, rather than cementing the connection between words and reality, allows it to create a link between past and present.

In the concluding paragraphs of *Last Night's Fun*, Carson muses that "as we apprehend the tune, we enter in and out time, and mark its various times" while "ghosts of voices circulate in grooves of dust. Everything is a black gloss: corrigenda and addenda, a thousand couples" reeling in a palimpsest of dance-step patterns, as their feet step past the foot-notes" (198). This formula entwines the immediacy of musical performance—associated with the back rooms of pubs where "art was happening right now, that it was of the split second" (qtd. in Crosson 103)—with the permanence of tradition, creating a unique meeting point between the celebration of cultural legacy and an ongoing revision of this legacy in the fleeting continuity of the present moment. Carson points to that nature of music, and his "genre-defying" poetry, when he says that "since every tune recalls other circumstances in which it has been played . . . [t]he music is always renewable in the light of the now" (Carson, "For All I Know" 15). It is to such infolding of the permanent in the transient and contingent that "The Triumph" alludes in its analogy between traditional Irish music and Aleph as "the single point that includes every other point in the universe."

For Carson, the transtemporal connectivity that lies at the heart of music serves as a means of undermining the sectarian divides in Northern Ireland. Critical of attempts to impose ideologies on music, he argues in *Irish Traditional Music* that "Orange and Green might be mirror images of each other" and cites Hugh Shields, a historian of traditional Irish music that

³ Unlike the other two requirements, "Direct treatment of the thing" and "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the expression" (3), that Pound set out in "A Retrospect," the insistence that poems be "compose[d] in the sequence of the musical phrase" would endure in his appreciation of poetry. When he defines kinds of poetry some sixteen years later, Pound adopts new terms: phanopoeia, or "a casting of images upon the visual imagination" (25) and logopoeia, "the dance of the intellect among words" (25) but continues to stress the musical quality of poetry as determinant of meaning, which he terms melopoeia.

Carson keeps in high esteem: “party songs are culturally complementary: while expressing different allegiances they use similar themes, forms, styles and melodies” (47). In effect, songs of the opposing camp “are sung in a spirit of irony, or a desire to show that one knows the other side, as well as one knows one’s own” or maybe “because they are good songs” (*Irish Traditional Music* 47). In *Last Night’s Fun*, he further objects to the idea of a “party tune,” attributing the political reading of music to the “verbal labels and the perception of the hearer” (185). In a similar vein, Edna Longley has argued that Carson’s poems are “replacements for the communal narratives that a seanachie could once command” and interpret “the way in which more contingent and fluid relations are breaching local, familial, clannish and theocentric horizons” (59). While in his poetry he uses soundscapes of Belfast to ambiguous purposes, evoking the city’s potential dangers (sounds of patrolling helicopters, explosions, constant interrogations), as well as its pub music sessions, Carson’s employment of the musical analogy in prose and interviews to describe his 1980s and 1990s work tends to attack the kind of binary divisions of the Northern Irish community mentioned by Longley.

Attentive to Carson’s keen poetic ear, “The Triumph” deploys what Obert calls the “(non-sectarian) collectivity” of Carson’s “clattery” rhythms and wry wit of the Belfast seanchai” (53–54) in order to imagine an alternative to the Aleph that enables divisive shibboleths. As Muldoon uses the long lines typical of *The Irish for No* and the subsequent volumes up until *Breaking News*, his poem keeps associating everything with everything else. Thus employing the technique that Muldoon singles out in Carson’s ekphrastic poems from his posthumous collection *Still Lives*: “everything, including Carson’s keen sense of impending death from lung cancer, gets into these poems” and “this odd freedom derives largely from Ciaran Carson’s ability to range far and wide while sticking very close to the purview of the painting in hand” (Muldoon, “Final Testimony”). Piling up seeming trivia, “The Triumph” endeavours on the one hand to recapture the presence of the deceased friend and, on the other, to project a porous community in which networks of intellectual and artistic affinity, cooperation and inclusivity stretch beyond political but also temporal borders: “Just as O’Carolan was influenced by Vivaldi so our trademark *tri rínn agus amhrán* / owes something to the Italian sonnet” and “Corkery and Mac Cuarta / might yet make common cause / with Calvino and Kundera.” The characteristically Gaelic form of *tri rínn agus amhrán* is no insular development of Irish verse but is shown to function in an international web of poetic experiment, similarly to how ostensibly local Irish-language poets, Daniel Corkery and Seamus Dall Mac Cuarta, share (antedate, in fact) the boisterous inventiveness and bawdy humour of giants of modern prose.

Mac Cuarta reappears in "The Triumph" to suggest that poetry, specifically in translation, may prove to be a community-building effort on a par with music. Recalling the 1974 "firebombing of your beloved market in Smithfield," the speaker muses: "we tried to translate 'An Lon Dubh Báite,' Seamus Dall's mock-heroic tear-gulper / about a bird belonging to an O'Neill princess that's perished / in a pail of whitewash." The lines imply a feeling of guilt central to part four of Heaney's "Singing School," in which "While the Constabulary covered the mob / Firing into the Falls, I was suffering / Only the bullying sun of Madrid" (132). But whereas Heaney discovers what Yeats called the "befitting emblems of adversity" in Goya's "Shootings of the Third of May" and "that holmgang / Where two berserks club each other to death / For honour's sake," Muldoon underwrites Carson's critique of Heaney's attempt to mythologize, and so offer "sufficient ground for understanding and absolution" of violence in Northern Ireland ("Escaped from the Massacre?" 184). In "The Triumph," the joint translation of Mac Cuarta's poem serves to open the path to a dialogue between languages and cultures, which Carson highlights in his own translations, particularly of Dante's *Inferno*. He has observed that Dante's "Florence was not so far removed from Belfast in its entanglements of politics and language" (Carson, Interviewing 22), which points to a cross-temporal and cross-national connection between himself and the Italian poet, an idea that "The Triumph" inscribes in its evocation of the drive that led Carson and Muldoon "from Notting Hill by way of Illinois, / Dante's Ravenna, and the Tropical Ravine / in which Ireland would later train for the Samoa match." While Notting Hill can be found in Belfast, the state of Illinois cannot (though there is a street of that name in Crete, Illinois), which marks an intercontinental aspect of the trip just as the mention of the Samoa match alludes to its temporal inclusivity, for Ireland "wip[ed] the floor with" Samoa at the Rugby World Cup on 12 October 2019, two days after Carson's funeral. Thus, Carson's life and death, as well as the fates and fortunes of the country (not only at sports) all fuse in the single ride in the Triumph Herald Convertible, as the event is translated into other trips jointly undertaken by the two poets.

One such excursion is implicit in the allusion to Muldoon's "Gathering Mushrooms" by way of mentioning Clannad's song of the same title and Muldoon's concluding image of the poet hallucinating that his "head had grown into the head of a horse" (*Poems* 106). In "Gathering Mushrooms," the speaker goes with a friend, who "The Triumph" suggests is Carson, to gather mushrooms in "Barnett's fair demesne" but in the process they consume the hallucinogenic kind and end up tripping "in some outbuilding" (*Poems* 105). The context of "the fire-bomb / that sent Malone House sky-high / and its priceless collection of linen / sky-high" (*Poems* 105)

introduces an ambiguous parallel to the two friends being sky-high on mushrooms, which precipitates the italicized conclusion spoken by the horse-headed poet: “*Come back to us . . . If sing you must, let your song / tell of treading your own dung, / let straw and dung give a spring to your step*” (*Poems* 106). Muldoon has dismissed the Republican voice in the conclusion of the poem by noting the ironic effect of the fact that “it is spoken by a horse” (“Paul Muldoon in Conversation” 176) but in “The Triumph,” the speaker confesses “The horse’s head / through which I used to speak wasn’t part of some masquerade / but represented who I truly was.” Thus the elegy challenges the former dismissal of the concluding image of “Gathering Mushrooms,” which in Wills’s reading of the poem represents “conformity with the Republican ideals of suffering and sacrifice” that is implied to be “fanatical, deluded, masochistic” (99). What “The Triumph” leans to is a more straightforward vision of reconciliation of “the public and private, the aesthetic and political, the divine and animal” (Holdridge 66).⁴ And yet, what is crucial to how “The Triumph” revises the earlier poem is that the horse-head’s message of peaceable unity, “*Lie down with and us and wait*” (*Poems* 106), is possible within the framework of song, the only other passage in the poem being the quotation, also in italics, from Clannad’s “Gathering Mushrooms.” While Muldoon’s “Gathering Mushrooms,” as Wills rightly shows, remains elusive of any complaisant gestures essentially in tune with the Republican agenda, the attitude of collectivity is implied to be intrinsic to song, and “The Triumph” picks up on that view. Rejecting equivocation, the speaker updates Carson’s belief in traditional music as a means to patching up the fractured Northern Irish community by stressing that this is the function of music of any genre.

As it is revised in “The Triumph,” the Irish Aleph changes from a silent syllable that allows for divisive shibboleths into a point where all dissentions meet. The myriad trivia that Carson’s poems are packed with initiate the transition from the language conceived as “a fusillade of question marks” (Carson, *Collected Poems* 93) to one that seeks to represent some of the fleetingness and immediacy of music as “it’s hitting you from all sides, . . . here in front of your very eyes and ears, right now” (Carson, Interview 81). It is this lesson that the poet of “The Triumph” learns from *an fear níos glíce*, Muldoon’s version of Eliot’s invocation of *il miglior fabbro*: Pound. In the realization that poetry can undermine the “enduring dysfunction underlying the conflict in Northern Ireland,” which derives from “the

⁴ Although he tends to be less attentive to the ironies of the poem than Wills or Tim Kendall, Holdridge does point to the ambiguity in the conclusion of “Gathering Mushrooms” that aspires “to transcend reality, though it remains doubtful whether the ‘soiled grey blanket of Irish rain’ and everything it represents . . . will ever be ‘bleached white’” (66).

problematic conflation of excluding, affiliative, bounded tropes of sectarian sociospatial identity with political organisation" (Stainer 373), the speaker of "The Triumph" comes to understand that taxonomies bespeak no more than a lack of imagination. His initially wistful admission that "The fact you've now been squeezed / into a columbarium in Saint Patrick's might be the first time you've been pigeonholed" by the end of the poem is altered to suggest that the burial place is where singularity and infinity coalesce: "As for the Aleph, the single point in the universe that includes every other point, // that's surely the columbarium / in which your ashes lie." While in Borges's story, the Aleph is located on the nineteenth step in Carlos Argentino's cellar, in "The Triumph" it is in the columbarium where Carson's ashes are laid; in both cases, though, the one point contains the limitless universe, as Borges says, "the *multum in parvo*" (12).

As in Borges, Muldoon's staggering assembly of oneiric images that re-create the world he shared with Carson must seem infinitesimal insofar as the poem seeks to apprehend the here and now of his friendship with the deceased, a task as futile as it is necessary. Throughout "The Triumph," Carson scuds through the congeries of images, simultaneously palpably present in this *omnium gatherum* and completely absent from it. Trying to capture some of what Muldoon has called Carson's "capaciousness," the poet of "The Triumph" partakes in "the rubble and rumpus and riddling of day-to-day life in Belfast" (Edemariam) that Carson evoked in his poems. By the end of its run, though, he can no more than echo Borges's memorable phrase: "I felt infinite wonder, infinite pity" (Borges 14). Where the wondrous lies in the intricate network of connections, in the immediacy of music and poetry that unthread all binaries of Irish sectarianism, the pity, as always in elegy, comes when, having run its course, the poem must end where it began: in the realization of loss, for which poems are a relief for the community if not for the grieving friend.

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Northern Ireland's Interregnum.¹ Anna Burns's Depiction of a (Post)-Troubles State of (In)security

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the main contours of Burns's literary output which, interestingly enough, grows into a personal understanding of the collective mindset of (post)-Troubles Northern Ireland. It is legitimate, I argue, to construe her fiction (*No Bones*, 2001; *Little Constructions*, 2007; *Milkman*, 2018) as a body of work shedding light on certain underlying mechanisms of (post-)sectarian violence. Notwithstanding the lapse of time between 1998 and 2020, the 'Troubles' toxic legacy has indeed woven an unbroken thread in the social fabric of the region. My reading of the novelist's selected works intends to show how the local public have been fed by (or have fed themselves upon) an unjustified—maybe even false—sense of security. Burns, in that regard, has positioned herself amongst the aggregate of writers who feel anxious rather than placated, hence their persistence in returning to the roots of Northern Irish societal divisions. Burns's writing, in the above context, though immersed in the world of the 'Troubles, paradoxically communicates "an idiosyncratic spatiotemporality" (Maureen Ruprecht Fadem's phrase), namely an experience beyond the self-imposing, historical time limits. As such, it gains the ability to provide insightful commentaries on conflict-prone relations, the patterns of which can be repeatedly observed in Northern Ireland's socio-political milieu. Overall, the main idea here is to discuss and present the narrative realm proposed by Burns as (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space, positioning readers between "then" and "now" of the region.

Keywords: divided society, Anna Burns, (post-)Troubles Northern Ireland, society-politics-fiction, a sense of (in)stability/(in)security in contemporary Northern Ireland.

¹ Birte Heidemann's *New Direction in Irish and Irish American Literature* served as the main inspiration to use the above term. Further references to her monograph are to be found in the latter parts of this paper.

In 2018, Anna Burns was awarded the Man Booker Prize for fiction. Her success marks the twenty-year anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. This might serve as a good pretext for presenting the main contours of Burns's literary output which grows into a personal understanding of the collective mindset of (post)-Troubles Northern Ireland. It is legitimate to construe her texts of fiction as shedding light on certain underlying mechanisms of (post-)sectarian violence. Notwithstanding the lapse of time between 1998 and 2020, that toxic legacy has indeed woven an unbroken thread into the social fabric of the region. My reading of the novelist's selected works, set against a backdrop of other critical texts by fellow scholars, intends to show how the local public have been fed by (or have fed themselves upon) an unjustified—maybe even false—sense of security, conveyed most often by the so-called “bipartisan” officials. Burns, in that regard, has positioned herself amongst the aggregate of writers² who feel anxious rather than placated, hence their persistence in returning to the roots of Northern Irish societal divisions. Their narratives, imbued with latent antagonisms or painful rifts, point out a simple fact, namely that the troubled past has been camouflaged, and a single traumatogenic³ incident—like Brexit—sufficed to prove that another resurrection of animosities of the “bygone” conflict is imminent.

Frederick Studemann writes that “leaving Northern Ireland gave [Burns] the necessary distance to write about her homeland,” and that it is rather unlikely that she ever intends to rush back to the country. Moreover, as he implies, the author is reluctant to comment upon the current political climate. Still, extrapolating from what she knows about the past, Burns does acknowledge that a regression to the “violence” is easily imaginable. According to her, even if contemporary Northern Ireland is not being torn apart by paramilitary actions, the peace dividend has not fully compensated for “[t]he barricades of her youth”; in fact, they “have been replaced by ‘lots of [other] walls’” (Studemann). Their presence is ubiquitous, as proven for instance by Aleksandra Łojek who, in 2015, published a text about life in post-Troubles Belfast. The very title of her book *Belfast. 99 Walls of Peace*⁴ carries an implication that the “bygone”

² To name just a few, quite representative of contemporary Northern Irish prose writing, whose literary narratives I analyzed in a 2017 monograph: Lucy Caldwell, Nick Laird, Deirdre Madden, David Park, Glenn Patterson (see Bartnik, *Inscribed*).

³ Piotr Sztompka translates it as a cumulative effect, in other words “a threshold of saturation beyond which . . . a shock of realization about something that was ignored before” occurs (158).

⁴ The book is written in Polish, and its original title is *Belfast. 99 ścian pokoju*. The above translation is mine. Aleksandra Łojek lives and works in Belfast as a journalist and independent researcher. Her main areas of interest are interracial communication and restorative justice.

dynamic, albeit in a different format, still resonates, and the expected dividend for the Good Friday Agreement has been at odds with the updated echoes of former antagonisms⁵ (Łojek 12–15). Reading the quotes from Studemann’s interview with Burns, I argue that the latter’s arguments are founded on and resonate with a genuine concern about Northern Ireland’s (un)resolved conflicts, which may easily turn into another eruption of high-intensity, intercommunal violence. Therefore, it seems legitimate to claim that Burns’s works of fiction, though immersed in the world of the Troubles, communicate an experience beyond the self-imposing, historical time limits. As such, they gain capacity in providing insightful commentaries on conflict-prone relations, the patterns of which can be repeatedly observed in Northern Ireland’s fragile social fabric. Burns’s writing, due to its specific, non-linear dimensionality, frames universal narratives around a series of Northern Irish impasses that extend beyond the convenient frame of the three-decade period of armed confrontation. In the same vein, Beata Piątek underlines that the universality of Burns’s language aptly elucidates the dilemmas of Northern Irishness because its horizon of possibility reaches beyond historical tribalism (112). More relevant yet is Maureen Ruprecht Fadem’s argumentation regarding how the novelist inscribes individual “residents” of the North into “an idiosyncratic spatiotemporality that is materially proliferate” (45). In other words, the narrative realm proposed by Burns is (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space, positioning readers between “then” and “now.”⁶

As noted by Ruprecht Fadem, Burns offers a specific perspective, in fact characteristic of all her works, which evolves as “a perplexing reading space . . . that makes possible history’s reenactment” (158). Nevertheless, “the past” that “conquers” the present is counterbalanced by “a time-space oriented towards the future” (Ruprecht Fadem 48). In a way, as indicated by Leszek Drong, Burns’s narrative is marked by an interesting use of memory and “performativity.” According to him, these two, when combined in realist fiction, validate the aim of creating and solidifying “the illusion of reality,” which eventually becomes a “determinant factor” in outlining past events (*Tropy* 98). However, in the case of Burns’s writing, the goal of mimetic accuracy in representing the real cannot be regarded as ultimate. As stated earlier, the ‘Troubles’ legacy, rather than merely being scanned, has been carefully drawn⁷

⁵ For more extensive elaboration on the issue see Bartnik (*Inscribed* 306).

⁶ As indicated by Piątek (109), Burns’s literary narratives have “a universalizing effect” due to the “neutral” (oblique) designation of geographical locations and temporal dimensions.

⁷ In the above context, it is legitimate to invoke the aforementioned concept of “spatiotemporality.” As Ruprecht Fadem underlines, Burns reaches for such a narrative construct to recapture “the tendencies and processes of political violence” (167).

by the author so as to eventually constitute an important reference point for further divagations into the mechanisms of (in)stability insidiously concealed in (post-) conflict Northern Ireland.

Many would like to believe that the post-conflict reality is devoid of belligerence, yet behind the façade of the 1998 settlement is a present-day Northern Ireland that only appears to indicate a new, utterly changed socio-political realm. Elisabetta Viggiani is one of those scholars who concede that the Agreement opened a diametrically new chapter in the history of Northern Ireland. As she underlined, it “marked a shift from violence to politics as the dominant mechanism of engagement,” of which the natural consequence has been “conflict-related memorialization[s]” (18). By and large, this perspective is not in the least unjustifiable; nevertheless, its underlying implication sounds too sanguine. The consociational structure of governance, as part and parcel of the post-Troubles appeasement policy, implicitly endorsed the “beyond-borders coexistence.” Paddy Hoey,⁸ however, rightly notices that the issue of Brexit demystified the fragility of the “post-nationalist” geography, which enhanced people’s belief in “magical . . . evolution” (178). Has life in post-conflict Northern Ireland changed then? Definitely so, yet making such an affirmation is not tantamount to depicting it in terms of utterly peaceful coexistence,⁹ though some are eager to draw up a new landscape demonstrating the extent to which the region “[has] undergone a process of radical rebuilding and rebranding” (Long 16). The skeptics amongst academics and writers, however, speak of a mirage conjured up to avoid addressing the unrelenting legacy of the Troubles unrest.

In order to gain insight into the actual state of affairs it might be relevant to consider the picture provided by John Barry.¹⁰ His portrayal of contemporary Northern Ireland is far grimmer and more disconcerting as he applies the lens of a “frozen or negative peace.”¹¹ In an analysis of the allocation of votes in successive Northern Irish elections, he notes that people over the last two decades have been inclined to opt for candidates selected through the prism of sectarian affiliations. Accordingly, within

⁸ Dr. Hoey works as a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Edge Hill University. His main areas of research are Northern Ireland’s peace process, Republicanism and the city of Belfast.

⁹ Ruprecht Fadem, in her book *The Literature of Northern Ireland*, describes “the landscape” of Northern Ireland as marked by “the [unending] social and political polarization” (15).

¹⁰ Professor Barry represents Queen’s University Belfast, and his field of expertise includes, *inter alia*, anthropology, philosophy and politics.

¹¹ The idea of “negative peace” implies that what one observes in contemporary Northern Ireland is not a fundamental change but a preservation of the status quo of still-potent socio-political “sympathies.”

such a disposition of political assets, of importance is the negative efficiency that aims at exclusion rather than cooptation. Bluntly put, while casting a ballot, people willingly decide to “keep someone out rather than vote someone in” (Barry 49, 53). Is it legitimate to regard the political choices as in any way informative of the Northern Irish domain¹² and its mental background? Undoubtedly. The post-Troubles period does not differ that much from certain templates of the past, when the warring communities were driven by antipathies, always directed against “the other” group. What has changed comes down to practicing a policy of hushed-up antagonisms. Landon E. Hancock¹³ defines this inclination as a “spectacle” in which communication across barriers is insincere. Thus, regardless of the official declarations, “recognition of the other’s motifs” is questionable.¹⁴

An only slightly different perspective on the legacy of the 1998 Agreement was presented by John Brewer.¹⁵ On the one hand, he underlines the fact that Northern Ireland’s peace time, in spite of its “negative” character, works “relatively” well. On the other hand, however, it is becoming evident that “[s]ocietal healing . . . has witnessed very little progress” (Brewer 278). Even if one cannot speak of actual regression, then a persistent inertia that stalls reconciliation is rather apparent. Whether people want it or not, especially on the more private level of individual consciousness, they have been stuck in a liminal area that resonates with noticeable residues of the Troubles’ culture of violence. In order to grasp the nature of this realm of “(un)reformed politics,” I would invoke Birte Heidemann’s argument that addresses the post-Troubles time as “the state of suspension” or unarticulated “interregnum.” Essentially, that condition

¹² To clarify the above term I would like to refer to two eminent sociologists, i.e. Zygmunt Bauman and Piotr Sztompka. The former underlines how crucial it is to study social changes when seeking “the communication between the public and the private [realms]” (86). In other words, when it comes to studying the Northern Irish domain, a combination of individual and collective perspectives is required. The latter scholar, discussing societal transitions, points out that any serious changes within “the population” have a comprehensive character and relate to various “domains,” for instance: “political, legal, moral, cultural, artistic” (Sztompka 159). These are all matters of public resonance, and as such might have an impact on the local population and institutions.

¹³ Dr. Hancock is a lecturer at the School of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Department of Political Science, Kent State University. His main areas of research relate to the notion of ethnicity/identity in conflict generation/conflict resolution.

¹⁴ As Hancock predicts, the only thing that “the people of Northern Ireland can hope for . . . is a grudging willingness to keep talking rather than return to shooting and bombing over differences” (262).

¹⁵ Professor Brewer works at the School of Social Sciences, Queen’s University Belfast, and his research interests include Northern Ireland, peace processes, the legacy of religious and political conflicts.

should enable the locals to bid farewell to “the bygone” and welcome “the new” (Heidemann 46); nevertheless, though the former was officially proclaimed, the latter appears to have failed to completely materialize.¹⁶ After twenty years of negotiated coexistence many a participant of the local communities admits the presence—under the best scenario—of a seething undercurrent of distrust which retains a strongly divisive potential. As Máire Braniff and Sophie Whiting claim (252),¹⁷ these two decades of transition have not been too effective in rooting out sectarian mentality.¹⁸ There are still “conflict-related issues” which have not been dialogically decommissioned, and the society is rather persistent in performing along the “tribal” lines of reasoning.

From a certain angle, post-Agreement Northern Ireland is characterized by a lack of change. Contrary to common beliefs, the results of the 1998 settlement are not that impressive. The present time is indeed marked by those same patterns of a divided world¹⁹ which were characteristic of socio-political life prior to the Good Friday Agreement. And for this reason, I would argue, Burns throughout her literary output delves into mechanisms of denial, divisive rhetoric and acts of reprisal. In her works one observes a regional “habit” of resorting to violence to settle intergroup differences. Its irreducible character, to use Charles Tilly’s phrase (4), depends on strong “social ties, structures and process” that for decades have had a petrifying effect by breeding animosity against “the other side,” against “not-Us.” Thus, on the one hand, she persistently reiterates her commitment to disclose that detrimental logic of belligerence. On the other hand, by recreating the ghastly past, redrawing the frameworks of the conflicted society, and reformulating the Trouble discourse, Burns in fact cries out for an alternative story/a new narrative. Much in the same vein as the novelist, albeit more from a socio-cultural angle, Long points out the significance of the multi-layered texture of experience required to analyze the Northern Irish public domain. Accordingly, these kinds of

¹⁶ Metaphorically speaking, “instead of dying a slow and silent death, the violent past seems to have hit a cul-de-sac in post-Agreement Northern Ireland” (Heidemann 46).

¹⁷ Dr. Braniff is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Applied Social and Policy Studies, Ulster University. Her research interests relate to peace processes, justice and truth recovery. Dr. Whiting is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Bath. Her main research interests relate to Northern Ireland’s politics, as well as the role of women within post-conflict milieux.

¹⁸ It is Long, among others, who underlined how deep-seated such divisions are. According to his study, there is no doubt that in the Northern Ireland of today one observes “the most disturbing indications of the stubbornly unyielding . . . divisions” (38).

¹⁹ To understand the phenomenon of “divided societies,” not only in the context of Northern Ireland but worldwide, see works of the following authors: Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin (2007), Marie Breen Smyth (2007), Brandon Hamber (2009).

“stories”²⁰ are to be channeled into a “sought-after difference [and] alert us to the irreducible dimension of antagonism which is so often erased within the consensual propagandizing of the ‘peace’ era” (Long 153). Above all, what comes to the fore in both Burns’s fiction and Long’s argumentation is the general need for reconfiguring Northern Ireland’s private and public discourse.²¹

Although they have been diagnosed, the maladies of the local realm appear not to have been completely dealt with. An interesting comment, in this respect, comes from Gladys Ganiel,²² who, speaking of the Northern Irish legacy of violence, brings to the table a pertinent term, namely “culture of militarism.” Even though the purpose of my paper is not to highlight the paramilitarization of the region, it is worth considering how Ganiel elucidates the unrelenting pressures of the (post-)Troubles reality. As in the past, it is the confrontational mindset that continues to operate, and its veiled character causes a sort of vicarious traumatization amongst the local population. As Ganiel points out, the local culture of violence repeatedly releases its dynamic forces, for the past legacy “continues to be reproduced through discourses, images, rituals, and symbols, as well as through institutions and structures” (134). It is necessary to be mindful of Tilly’s opinion, invoked earlier, which indicates that the syndromes of militancy in a conflicted society are derivative of what is lurking inside its structures and ongoing processes. Accordingly, anyone (including writer) whose competence and expertise enables him/her to speak up and shape public opinion, must take it as their objective not to rest on the laurels of the past but rather to look back at it in order to change the present or project a new future.

There is no denying that in the wake of the Agreement, Northern Ireland’s socio-political discourse has been dominated by an official non-sectarian agenda. Even if this is a *bona fide* policy that accentuates how the peaceful plan has paid off for both communities, it seems to have had some

²⁰ These are stories/literary narratives which prove that Burns “holds a mirror to communal policing,” thereby delving into the meaning of Northern Irish “oppressiveness . . . , tribalism, conformism [or] fear” (Kilroy qtd. in Piątek 108). In a similar vein, Ruprecht Fadern highlights Burns’s capacity to “locate readers in a carefully constructed precarious landscape through which history . . . is resurrected and ‘plays’ across the text until a final . . . substantiation of the truth claim” (144).

²¹ In contrast to general expectations, the prefix “post” that demarcates the end of the Troubles might be construed as far-fetched. Suffice to quote Long, who speaking of current “changes,” comes to the conclusion that it is only a semantic formula behind which we find “an estranging extension and intensification of the familiar” (38).

²² Gladys Ganiel is a Research Fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen’s University Belfast. Her main areas of research are conflicts in Northern Ireland and Christian tradition in Ireland.

(un)intended side effects.²³ Certain pressing matters related to the past that should be more thoroughly discussed have been relegated to the margins. This in turn, contrary to the intent, fossilizes miscellaneous scripts of the former conflicts. With the recognition of this view as legitimate, it becomes evident that the role that the literary field has to play cannot be underestimated. As rightly noticed by Drong, the post-Troubles period typifies “a mode of social and political evasion of the past,” which parallels a well-known saying that no good comes from “washing dirty linen in public”; any inconvenient reminiscences are apparently unwelcome, thus “recent history [has been] consigned to cultural discourses, to be explored mostly by (literary and filmic) fiction” (“Doing Justice” 410). Dating back to the end of the Troubles, Northern Irish literature has faced an uphill struggle to expose, and further dismantle, suppressed resentments. So has Burns, who continuously presents herself as a novelist whose writing is dense with the clashing narratives of antipathy, which are evident in the province even twenty years after Northern Ireland—allegedly—brought the strife to its end.²⁴

In this paper, it is Burns's latest novel *Milkman* that serves as the main point of reference. Nevertheless, in order to discuss a certain continuity in her thinking about Northern Ireland's entanglement, some of her earlier works need to be brought to the fore. In an article from 2012,²⁵ I made the claim that it has become absolutely imperative in post-Troubles literature to draw attention to the question of personal wounds and collective healing. A number of writers, including Burns, understood that the violence of the past did constitute a heavy burden that could not be reduced by simply cherishing some future scenarios while editing out the pain and suffering. Contrary to much of the early optimism, the celebrated peace agreement does not eliminate the necessity of confronting earlier conflicts. From the perspective offered by Burns in her first novel *No Bones*, the need to rectify a deficiency in examining the ills of the Troubles was already pressing in the early days of the new political dispensation. The story of Amelia Lovett is fairly characteristic of the post-Agreement referential

²³ The post-conflict space can hardly be depicted in terms of normalcy as former divisions have been “petrified” (Ruprecht Fadem 45), and do “persist” as mental fortifications (Patterson, *Here's Me* 23). Patterson, in fact, questions the foundations of a stable society indicating that “the open-endedness coded into the word [Peace Process] has long since ceased to be enabling and became destabilizing” (*Here's Me* 8).

²⁴ The concluding line of the above paragraph is a paraphrasis of Hancock's claim, namely that “the Northern Irish Troubles that ended two decades ago have not stopped . . . conflicting narratives of fear and enmity [which] continue to characterize relations between both communities” (245).

²⁵ A full-fledged analysis of the novel focuses on interesting parallels between post-Troubles Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa (Bartnik, “No Bones” 159–75).

literature²⁶ as it touches upon the problem of mental escapism practiced by characters trying to erase from memory certain violent scenarios played out prior to the political transition. As suggested by the author, the imprints of conflict cannot be fought off by a form of psychological self-detachment. Nor can any disconcerting truths regarding the Troubles' legacy be coped with through mechanisms of denial. In other words, a cover up of the wrongs and resentments works to no avail. Irrespective of one's pain or guilt, the past must be tackled, both on the individual and collective level, to safeguard everyone against the afore-mentioned culture of violence. Towards the end of the novel, Burns's characters embark upon a trip to an island in order to internalize a simple truth about militancy that leads people astray in the long run. Their psychological peregrination ends there, and they become aware that "[h]atred and revenge thoughts were within their upbringing. . . . So they got down to the boat and . . . they left sad. . . . But what if they hadn't? This was the question all of them now asked. . . . What if they hadn't wanted to leave? What if Rathlin Island had also been their homeland?" (*No Bones* 321). The author's debut novel invited a sober, yet alarming, reflection on the perils of Northern Ireland's position, where former animosities and violence showed every potential to spring up (again) across the communities.

For some, Burns's narrative might sound as if it has been created by an angst-ridden fatalist, who denies the possibility of genuine reconciliation. In contrast to such opinions, I would argue that she merely finds little reason for excessive optimism. Instead, her conviction is that the post-Troubles sense of safety and stability has been resting on shaky ground. In a subsequent book, titled *Little Constructions*,²⁷ we are confronted with Burns's portrayal of an unspecified land dominated by a history of conflict. As I highlighted before, she persistently feels compelled to comment (albeit implicitly) on the "unresolvable" deadlock of post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Interestingly enough, the novel provides no exact coordinates that point to a concrete geographical location. Burns's anonymous characters nevertheless seem—beyond any doubt—to be part and parcel of the district's familiar dialectic of violence. As in the realm of the Troubles, the story presents a community whose representatives participate in, as well as fall victim to, "the old aberration" (*Little* 295). Some of them, overwhelmed by this legacy, prefer to push the boundaries

²⁶ In a nutshell, the referentiality of literary texts comes down to "find[ing] ways of portraying the events there not as existing in a vacuum, but in their historical, political, geographical. . . context"; hence Patterson's acknowledgement of this mode of writing, and his claim that it is rather prevalent within the Northern Irish literary field (*Lapsed* 182).

²⁷ A more comprehensive analysis of the novel can be found in my monograph (*Inscribed* 307–16).

of (un)awareness in the hope of reducing cognitive dissonance. Yet, as one of the characters is informed, a form of denial works to no avail, for one “is having a hard time because something not very nice once happened to [him/her]. It was a big thing, and although it’s supposed to be over, in [their] body and in [their] head and from the way [he/she] now look out on the world, it’s not bloody over, it’s still bloody going on” (20). In general, this is a land where malice runs in the family, where unsympathetic instincts keep coming to light, regardless of the officially declared efforts to build resilience against harbored grievances. Nurtured on feuds, “they get into their fights . . . , when they come later . . . trying to regain their memory whilst sitting bloody in their armchairs, [they] dread the secret, uncontrollable side of their nature that once again took possession of them, and know that sometime in the past, something unspeakable must have gone on” (172).

Seemingly, in this 2007 work, the author underlines that finding a route out of the labyrinth of sectarian violence entails adopting a deliberate strategy to reduce the impact of individual and collective amnesia. Otherwise, as concluded in the novel, people “hide bomb material [or] other . . . buried fantasy [with] warlike things stuffed in every nook and cranny” (288). And although “a new social order” is mentioned in that narrative, with the call to all the “war factions [to be] dispersed and disbanded” (295), in the end no final solution is announced. Arguably, almost a decade after the end of the Troubles, certain negative processes of the “bygone” strife did not cease to have a discernible impact on public safety. This comes as no surprise given the explanation formulated by Daphna Canetti and others.²⁸ Their claim postulates difficult-to-reverse mechanisms of psychological imprinting that characterize such divided societies as that of Northern Ireland. As their study proves, laying down the law to frame an agenda of reconciliation is insufficient since people, after “greater conflict exposure,” have little chance to ease mental anguish and are “less likely to adopt conciliatory attitudes” (Canetti et al. 669). From this perspective, in the middle of Burns’s literary career, another

²⁸ Professor Canetti works at the School of Political Science, University of Haifa. Her main area of research is political psychology. Professor Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler works at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy & Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. Her main areas of expertise include political violence, conflict resolution, security studies. Dr. Carmit Rapaport works at the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Haifa. The main research interest is disaster management. Dr. Robert D. Lowe works at the Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University. His field of expertise relates to the impact of social group memberships in everyday life. Professor Orla T. Muldoon works at the Health Research Institute, University of Limerick. Her main areas of research include social, developmental and health psychology.

semi-referential²⁹ text of fiction, namely *Little Constructions*, reiterates her commitment to pondering the complex “ups and downs” of the post-Troubles psychological background. As in the previous novel, almost ten years after the 1998 political declaration to deescalate the conflict, it would be fair to speak of a sense of individual and public safety only in relative terms.

Another decade had elapsed when Burns published *Milkman*. Given what has been said so far, this novel from 2018, unsurprisingly, sends us back to the Troubles. Nevertheless, by invoking the recognizable mechanisms of radicalism, violence and antipathy, the author does not circumvent some current issues affecting the present-day Northern Irish mindset. It is useful to invoke the aforementioned interview with Burns, in which she advanced a working hypothesis regarding Northern Ireland’s recent processes of re-erecting the old walls of partition. She sounds alarm bells as those “tribal” rifts can regain momentum and start (re)producing mutual distrust, if not hostility. While examining different aspects of the *Milkman* narrative, I see a firm dichotomy³⁰ that might be regarded as pivotal in outlining Burns’s understanding of why the local, yet modern and progressive society, happens to be stalled by regressive [sectarian] sentiments. As the protagonist observes,

“Us” and “them” was second nature: convenient, familiar . . . , and these words were off-the-cuff. . . . It was unanimously understood that when everybody here used the tribal identifiers of “us” and “them,” of “their religion” or “our religion,” not *all* of us and not *all* of them was, it goes without saying, to be taken as read. (*Milkman* 22)

This passage is of utmost importance because, as stated earlier, it provides a lesson on the Northern Ireland of today, a region/district/place still infused with strong echoes of the past. In this context, one must mention Glenn Patterson, who in 2015 openly admitted that, notwithstanding their attempted deconstruction, the well-known “walls” do “persist.” And sadly, at odds with the peace coaching, “‘we’ or ‘they’ (depending on your political sympathies), it seems to say, are not finished yet” (*Here’s Me* 8, 23). Irrespective of the peace dividend, Burns decided to be faithful to her commitment and write another narrative, in which the underlying mechanisms of violence

²⁹ I call the novel semi-referential as it aims not at mimetic copying of the real; nevertheless, it gives an indirect confirmation that the author burdened herself with producing a literary narrative that touched upon the socio-political realm of Northern Ireland.

³⁰ Jonathan Sacks, studying the societies which for decades have been involved in “the process of creating an ‘Us,’” indicates that the only thing they have achieved is a dichotomous outcome, which entails “creating a ‘Them’—the people not like us” (114).

are presented as playing the pivotal role in the region. This collusion of the present and the past suggests that the Troubles' mentality, though officially bid farewell to, nonetheless remains deterministic.

In truth, the literary field in post-Troubles Northern Ireland to a degree orients itself towards non-politicized pathways. Yet this is not tantamount to defining it as devoid of a political dimension. Not only do novelists wade into matters of public resonance, but in fact endorse a form of engaged "storytelling" that aims at "mitigating [an antagonistic] sense of commitment" (Drong, "Doing Justice" 414). Even if there is no armed violence, a sort of enduring legacy of the Troubles persistently happens to be reflected in Northern Irish literary narratives. Burns seems to be one of those authors who, with determination, delves into the individual and collective mindsets of the Troubles to discuss the reasons why the past has its relentless bearing on the present. *Milkman* in this regard diagnoses, *inter alia*, two issues of fundamental importance, namely memory and language. In a similar vein, Heidemann speaks of the post-Agreement socio-political realm in terms of "a pathological syndrome of *memory loss*" (44), whereas Ganiel underlines the fact that "the discourse" revealing politicized affiliations, when read and reused "uncritically . . . , can justify or legitimate present violence" (139). As regards Burns's line of argumentation, it is Northern Ireland's language which endorses ideological agendas and intentional amnesia that comes to the fore as a predominant side-effect of a wrongly-construed politics of memory.

Milkman's storyline revolves around a young female who resorts to a defensive tactic to separate herself from sectarian mayhem. Depicted as a "reading-while-walking" individual, she tends to avert her eyes from "this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, [with] 'their names' and 'our names,' . . . 'our community' and 'their community'" (Burns, *Milkman* 24). Her decision to opt out of the suffocating reality, though understandable, turns out to be hardly effective in the long run. As phrased by Burns, in a world of "aberrations" leading a sane life can be a challenge. Many a person under such circumstances consider mental escapism as an acceptable solution: "the convention was to rub along with, to turn a blind eye, because life was being attempted where you had to cut corners" (59). No matter how much one's life has suffered from actual or symbolic violence, in the end it is essential to confront and internalize³¹

³¹ An apt description of what a process of internalization might denote comes from Geraldine Smyth. In her discussion on the post-Troubles era, she underlines how crucial it is, both on the individual and collective level, to "refus[e] to consign . . . lived lives [or the troubling memories] to 'holes of oblivion' as if they had never existed and were of no consequence" (131).

the harsh lesson from Northern Ireland's antagonistic milieu. Accordingly, as underlined by Brandon Hamber,³² there is no guaranteed compensation for the damage done to the welfare of Northern Irish collectivities or individuals unless the essential condition of building a complete mental (public/personal) integrity is validated. First and foremost, there must be at least a considerable majority ready to embrace the precept of "awareness" because it foregrounds "a successful transition to sustained peace" (Hamber, "Problematizing" 25). To respond adequately to the legacy of sectarianism, and not to place oneself in an alternative (delusional) reality, individuals must remain cognizant of all the textures of local militancy. Hence the character's slow progression towards a deliberate deconstruction of the 'Troubles' idiom, as well as an in-depth study of individually and collectively perceived memory deficits.

As signaled elsewhere, Northern Ireland witnessed various forms of the political instrumentalization of language, so operational amidst the sectarian fighting. *Milkman* in particular seeks to expose the belligerency in inter-personal/inter-group ways of (non-)communication. Burns, addressing the problem, notices its complex character as it starts from the individual dimension of one-to-one relationships to end up at the level of structural interactions between state institutions and private citizens. As regards the former, it is rather symbolic violence that the vernacular idiom favored. Readers are confronted with a similar situation, indicative of the binary variables, when a "vigilant" neighbor hastes to inform the protagonist that

[A]t least [her] lover was a renouncer-of-the-state and not a defender-of-the-state, something to be grateful for, this, of course, a quiet allusion to my second sister who'd brought disgrace upon the family as well as upon the community by marrying-out to some state-forces person then going to live in some country over the water, maybe even *that* country over *that* water. (*Milkman* 48, emphasis in the original)

Bluntly put, the so-called third parties, namely family members, close friends or neighbors, for that matter, usurped the right to encroach upon the domain of one's intimacy. Hence, the above-quoted denouncement of the lover is followed by a clear suggestion about the choice of a proper friend: "Why not . . . take up with one of them nice wee boys from the area, suited to and more consistent with your religion . . .? Ma's understanding of the nice wee boys was that they were the right religion" (50). Unfortunately, the violence can have a more tangible character, which is

³² Professor Hamber works at the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University. His main area of research is transitional justice.

even more tragic when someone's death results from institutionalized enmity. The circumstances of how the pain and suffering came about should be covered up for the sake of the community's future: "[e]ventually the state responded by admitting that yes, it had precision-targeted a few accidental people in pursuance of intended people, that mistake had been made . . . , but that the past should be put behind, that there was no point in dwelling" (303). This sort of anti-conflict rhetoric *prima facie* resembles a mere declaration of intent, behind which, nonetheless, lies the unresolved conflict.³³

As has been observed, the petrification of the old divisions is by and large couched in language; concurrently, due to Burns's subversive semantics, Northern Ireland's culture/discourse of violence is depicted as caricatural. *Milkman* offers a perfect illustration of how warped the local perspective is through one "dialogue" between "a full-time . . . longest friend from primary school" and the leading character. Theirs is a conversation devoted to the question of why wandering around with Semtex might be less detrimental than the habit of text-browsing:

[I]f I cared to look at it in its proper surroundings, then Semtex taking precedence as something normal over reading-while-walking—"which nobody but *you* thinks is normal"—could certainly be construed as the comprehensible interpretation here. "Semtex isn't unusual," she said. "It's not *not* to be expected. It's not incapable of being mentally grasped, of being understood, even if most people here don't carry it, have never seen it, don't know what it looks like and don't want anything to do with it. It fits in—more than your dangerous reading-while-walking fits in." (201, emphasis in the original)

This twisted view of the North seems symptomatic of the unbearable repetitiveness of those mechanisms that rather poorly enabled the opposing identities to bridge the divide. From a certain perspective, it looks as if local inhabitants have been going around in circles and have (in)advertently toed the line drawn by the violent past. Speaking of the present time, Heidemann made an interesting claim that the thirty years of the Troubles "have hit a cul-de-sac in post-Agreement Northern Ireland" (46). The inimical mindset is perceived then as if it has not been adequately reframed but simply forced into the shadows, destined to reveal itself later on—leading to a dead end. Burns outlines this same pattern by juxtaposing the protagonist (shaped by the Northern Irish predicament) and her French teacher (mentally positioned outside the conflict zone). The latter

³³ As Heidemann points out, even in today's Northern Ireland one observes just "the desire for a definite and defined end"; instead, however, there is the region's barely altered status of a place "plagued by a beginning without ending" (47).

insists on personal readiness to turn over a new leaf, whereas the former voices her skepticism about the reversibility of the worn-out ruts of divisive rhetoric:

“*Attempts and repeated attempts*,” teacher had said. “*That’s the way to do it.*” But what if she was wrong about attempts and repeated attempts, about moving on to next chapters? What if the next chapter was the same as this chapter, as had been the last chapter? What if all chapters stayed the same or even, as time went on, got worse? (*Milkman* 101, emphasis in the original)

Certain details in the above exchange lead to another crucial aspect of the narrative: namely, correlations between memory and post-conflict coexistence.

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Contrary to the teacher’s suggestion, a commitment to the future and simultaneous efforts to disregard the past would rather turn Northern Irish transformation into a fiasco. True, as Burns’s writing proves, “that which was” (to use Patterson’s phrase) constitutes a heavy burden that cannot be easily disposed of. It is not uncommon that traumatized individuals and the state itself opt for self-deception by resorting to various forms of denial. Therefore, the patterns of “mental separations” (so named by one of the characters) find their way into a number of dialogic exchanges. And once again, it is the protagonist who is reminded that she happens to be pulled down by a syndrome of selective amnesia:

The things you notice yet don’t notice friend. The disconnect you have going between your brain and what’s out there. This mental misfiring—it’s not normal. It’s abnormal—the recognizing, the not recognizing, the remembering, the not remembering, the refusing to admit to the obvious. . . . you encourage that, these brain-twitches, this memory disordering. (207)

This peril runs parallel to the situation in contemporary Northern Ireland which Long defined as “a post-Troubles moment.” In essence, the idea is that the embers of politicized antagonism have not been entirely put out. Its very nature, as he underlines, has been indeed “contained or marginalized”; most importantly, however, many doubt whether it has been “addressed” at all (Long 17). Taking into account the three novels by Burns, at least two of them delve into the local difficulty with the policy of remembering/forgetting. Initiated in *No Bones*, a similar debate resurfaces in *Milkman*, a book released exactly twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. And it is the latter text in which a commonly-shared mechanism of mental compartmentalization serves as a temporary

antidote to “trauma and the darkness. . . . Impossible then, with all these irreconcilables, to account, not just politically-correctly, but even sensibly for oneself. Hence, the dichotomy, the cauterizing, . . . the blanking-out, the reading-while-walking” (113).

The interplay between memory and language resonates most in the above context, and not only with regard to the past but also in relation to the present. Like other authors of Northern Irish descent, Burns, while narrating the past, draws attention to the discursive framework of the Troubles as adapting the language that operated to erase some disconcerting memory traces or at least withhold information which, otherwise, would insulate neither “them” nor “us” from constructive self-criticism. That said, I think it is worth invoking Brewer’s analysis of the needs that people in Northern Ireland should address in terms of keeping alive “the social peace process.” Among the relevant factors he enumerates are “truth and reconciliation procedures, . . . atonement strategies, policies that encourage compromise,” but also “new forms of memory work [as well as] language act that recognize . . . the reassessment and re-evaluation of [antagonistic/violence-prone] identity” (Brewer 275). The article comes from 2019, and its temporal dimension indicates that Northern Ireland, two decades after the peace agreement, seems to still be seeking adequate forms of self-expression and that the surface of “former” resentments has barely been scratched. Likewise, it is Burns’s latest novel, if not her entire literary output, which strongly resonate with the question regarding a means to (re-)articulate the Northern Irish culture of antagonism and belligerency. And though *Milkman* is placed in the past, some of its conclusions relate to the present: “[I]n a district that thrived on suspicion, supposition and imprecision, where everything was so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could be said here or not said but it was turned into gospel” (229). The protagonist’s experiences are conducive to deliberations over the *sine qua non* of community-building, and as such could become general guidelines shared by a majority of the concerned citizens of present-day Northern Ireland.

Therefore, in order to establish the foundations of long-term coexistence and ensure the public sense of safety, a truly dialogic communication must be worked out. Its core idea should revolve around a revised discourse, in which uncompromised memory work finds its reflection. As the protagonist notes, “old dark things as well as new dark things had to be remembered, had to be acknowledged because otherwise everything that had gone before would have been in vain” (*Milkman* 264). Central to this paradigmatic code of conduct is people’s understanding of how vital to the collective and individual mindset a proper archiving of the past is. On the basis of the acknowledgment of its complex character,

people can ultimately renounce the corrupting influence of sectarianism. In this regard, they may receive access to a new language that disregards the policy of a façade of peacefulness, and communicates due regard for the “other side,” as well as sufficient trust in the state. Thus, any private or institutional voices sympathetic towards “paramilitarized” mentality should be considered detrimental to the public interests of contemporary Northern Ireland. A relevant exemplification of this comes near the end of the book, when the protagonist reminisces about Milkman (known for being a “renouncer of the state”), whose militant poise becomes a threat to her well-being: “after Milkman and his ‘I’m male and you’re female,’ and his ‘you don’t need that running,’ plus his subsoil ‘I’m going to curtail you and isolate you so that soon you’ll do nothing’; after months . . . of stumbling, of legs strangely no longer working to legs soon to be magnificently working, I did feel *safe* again to run on my own” (343, emphasis mine). In a metaphorical way, by reference to the protagonist’s physical training, Burns not only presents a character as enjoying the act of running, but in fact depicts an individual in an unrestrained pursuit of self-agency, beyond any guerrilla-oriented limitations.

Let me conclude in a rather unorthodox way, by briefly referring to the pressing question of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current worldwide disease, caused by a hitherto unknown pathogen, poses a real threat to mankind. Equipped only with certain estimates of the damage, we view further study and investigation as a must. It seems, nevertheless, that the planet resembles the Yeatsian world, “turning and turning in the widening gyre” (“The Second Coming”). On the other hand, there are such geographical locations as Northern Ireland wherein the virus of inter-communal antipathy was identified a long time ago. With a proper diagnosis, the local patients decided, in 1998, to “vaccinate” themselves by signing the peace agreement. After twenty years of its application, the medicine appears to have been effective only to a degree, and the pathogens of sectarian animosity seem to have hibernated rather than been eradicated. One of the writers who notices and describes some hidden symptoms of the Northern Irish predicament is Anna Burns. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, there are three basic refrains that occur repeatedly in her fiction. Firstly, Northern Ireland cannot turn away from the fact that it has been constituted on militancy. Secondly, in order to get from point A, namely a domestic conflict, to point B, that is mutual coexistence centered on trust, respect and reconciliation, a new communication is required. In other words, the language of contemporary Northern Ireland should be free of stale (politicized) clichés linked to the “old” ruts of sectarianism. Thirdly, in its basis the projected discourse needs to be built on genuine memory work and cannot have a superficial character. Fictional representations of

such a multidimensional debate on Northern Irishness, albeit with different intensity and contextualization, are to be found in all the novels mentioned in this paper. *Milkman*, in this regard, is of ultimate significance since it brings to the fore (two decades after the Good Friday Agreement) some mechanisms of belligerence that people in the post-Troubles period would prefer to see as buried deep underground. Burns reframes her general narrative to underline the fact that there is no prospect of ending historical divisions unless some solid foundations of inter-group coexistence are guaranteed. Otherwise, to navigate the treacherous waters of (non-)tribal identity, when a cultural, social or political storm is detected, might become extremely difficult, and the whole project of rebranding Northern Ireland might remain merely a mirage.

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“. . . delivered from the lie of being truth”:¹
The Affective Force of Disinformation,
Stickiness and Dissensus in Randy
Ribay’s *Patron Saints of Nothing*

ABSTRACT

Waged in 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs has claimed over 20,000 lives according to human rights groups. The Duterte administration’s own count is significantly lower: around 6,000. The huge discrepancy between the government’s official count and that of arguably more impartial organizations about something as concretely material as body count is symptomatic of how disinformation is central to the Duterte administration and how it can sustain the approval of the majority of the Philippine electorate. We suggest that Duterte’s populist politics generates what Boler and Davis (2018) call “affective feedback loops,” which create emotional and informational ecosystems that facilitate smooth algorithmic governance. We turn to *Patron Saints of Nothing*, a recently published novel by Randy Ribay about a Filipino-American who goes back to the Philippines to uncover the truth behind the death of his cousin. Jay’s journey into the “heart of darkness” as a “hyphenated” individual (Filipino-American) allows him access to locally networked subjectivities but not its affective entanglements. Throughout the novel, he encounters numerous versions of the circumstances of Jun’s demise and the truth remains elusive at the end of the novel. We argue that despite the constant distortion of fact and fiction in the novel, what remains relatively stable or “sticky” throughout the novel are the letters from Jun Reguero that Jay carries with him back to the Philippines. We suggest that these letters can potentially serve as a form of “dissensus” that challenges the constant redistribution of the sensible in the novel.

Keywords: affective feedback loops, stickiness, dissensus, Randy Ribay, *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

¹ From Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (222).

INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 2020, Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's Head of Security Policy, announced that the platform had deactivated accounts and pages that were responsible for disseminating fake news and slander that conveniently targeted individuals and groups who were perceived to be against the Philippine government (Gleicher).² Facebook found that some of those accounts were linked to the Philippine National Police and the Philippine Army while others were linked to individuals residing in China (Gleicher; Elemia).³ In response, President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to stop Facebook from operating in the Philippines, saying: "We allow you to operate here hoping that you could help us also. Now if the government cannot espouse or advocate something which is for the good of the people, then what is your purpose here in my country?" (qtd. in Tomacruz). Duterte's government has been active in blurring the lines between truth and lies, making it difficult for independent agencies to determine the actual death toll of his violent war on drugs. According to human rights groups, this war has already claimed over 20,000 lives (Human Rights Watch). However, the Duterte administration's own body count is significantly lower: around 6,000 (Lema). This disparity indicates that either the police are underreporting or misrepresenting these cases, or that the opposition is highly inflating these numbers. This discrepancy is symptomatic of how disinformation is central to the Duterte administration and how it can sustain the approval of the people.

It has been argued that this atmosphere of disinformation, created by government-backed internet troll farms, has been present in the Philippines since Duterte was elected in office back in 2016 through his promise to wage a relentless war against criminality, corruption and drugs for the security of the nation (Balod and Hameleers; Ong and Cabañes; Dressel and Bonoan). This is indicative of how disinformation is central to the endurance of Duterte's populist politics, which is compounded by the fact that the country's top intelligence chief is personally spreading fake news (Talabong).⁴ The manifestly political and aesthetic implications of the prevailing atmosphere of disinformation is succinctly represented by Randy Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing*, a novel about Jay Reguerro,

² Nathaniel Gleicher reported that Facebook "removed 155 accounts, 11 Pages, 9 Groups and 6 Instagram accounts" for "coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity."

³ A ranking officer of the Philippine Army was named as an operator of inauthentic accounts.

⁴ Alex Montagudo, the Director General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, was grilled at a congressional budget hearing for "sharing photos that spread false information on his Facebook page" (Talabong).

a hyphenated subject who goes to the Philippines to uncover the truth behind the death of his cousin in the Philippine Drug War. Jay attempts to reconcile the multiple stories of his cousin's circumstances with the police's version that he is a drug addict who deserved to die for the security of the people. Our security concern is that the government institutions who should be upholding the truth are paradoxically the very same thing that endangers it through a propagandistic campaign of disinformation. What is also evident here is that there is a "security and intelligence mechanism" that presupposes the content in certain cultural texts (Gearon and Wynne-Davies 756) through a construction of "certain truths that reproduce social and political evils" (Zembylas 81). The scenario we described above represents what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible," which pertains to an "aesthetic regime" that dictates what is politically visible and invisible (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 7–9).

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Jacques Rancière suggests that art and politics are inseparable, arguing that art is inherently political and that politics in itself is a manifestation of aesthetics. Rancière coins the term "distribution of the sensible" to describe what is politically acceptable to the greater majority in a given "aesthetic regime" (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 18). He argues that most artistic practices in the political sphere shape what the "distribution of the sensible" is in a given political space. For example, the atmosphere of disinformation in the Philippines represents a "distribution of the sensible" where falsehoods are subverted into truths and vice-versa. Jacques Rancière proposes that radical politics and true resistance is possible in a particular "distribution of the sensible" through what he calls "dissensus" which is "the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible" (*Dissensus* 38). That is to say that dissensus is the manifestation of real politics that challenges the idea of consensus in the political sphere (Rancière, *Dissensus* 37–39). Dissensus occurs when forms of resistance do not merely reiterate the distribution of the sensible. When Rancière uses the word sensible, he refers to what is perceived to be acceptable and logical for members of a particular society (Rancière, *Dissensus* 36). In this light, we follow Divya P. Tolia-Kelly who propounds that a redistribution of the sensible is possible by disrupting "affective logics" (126) established by the regime of disinformation as represented in *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

We suggest that the "distribution of the sensible" in Duterte's populist politics operates on what Sara Ahmed calls the "affective politics of fear" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 76). The attachments of these affects and emotions shape how Duterte's disinformation campaign is perceived by the public, allowing it to package falsehoods as truths. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores how "emotions can move

through the movement or circulation of objects” (11). She elaborates that “[s]uch objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (11). As Ahmed would argue, stickiness pertains to how affects such as fear and happiness attach themselves to objects such as images, posters and narratives. Stickiness also points to how the affects that got stuck to an object also stick to other objects by association. The idea of stickiness helps to shape the relationship between objects of fear, and their capacity to affect other objects and bodies by “expand[ing] the mobility of some bodies and contain[ing] others” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 79).

The result is that a certain affective politics of fear is made apparent “on the structural possibility that the terrorist ‘could be anyone and anywhere’” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 79). In other words, certain representations of the other (i.e. a foreigner, criminals and undesirables) have affects attached to them, and in turn, have the capacity to produce affects of fear. In the novel, there are numerous “objects” that stick to Jay, which are letters from Jun, social media accounts, and a sheet of paper that contains a list of suspected drug users and dealers. We argue that the affective stickiness of these objects shapes how a networked subject perceives what is true or not. Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* uses the idea of stickiness to describe how happiness attaches itself to objects, turning these objects into what she calls “happy objects” which are basically things that “affect us in the best way” (22). We argue that the letters from Jun are “happy objects” that prevent Jay from accepting versions of truth that are not compatible with the happy memories the letters represent. The letters are affectively stickier for Jay, and hinder him from accepting that Jun is a mere drug addict in Duterte’s “distribution of the sensible.” Ahmed’s concept of stickiness has recently been used by Diaz-Fernandez and Adrienne Evans as they explore the gendered aspect of university drinking cultures in the UK through affect theory (745–46). They theorize the concept of “sticky atmospheres,” which suggests that some spaces, as a whole, affectively shape the actions of individuals (752). Tanner et al. also use Ahmed’s thought in critiquing the nutritional practices of Australian primary schools. They argue that negative emotions “stick” to food objects (1–2) and this produces “affective collateral realities” that negatively impact children. These scholars generally “stick” Ahmed’s thought to various cultural and social objects. However, our approach differs from these aforementioned scholars; we employ the concept of stickiness beyond its normative applications as we speculate how affectively sticky objects can be a manifestation of radical politics through the thought of Jacques Rancière.

We argue that Randy Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing* represents the affective dimensions of disinformation present in the Age of Duterte. In particular, we look at how a hyphenated individual like Jay Reguero navigates through the overlapping networks of disinformation as a "networked subject" (Boler and Davis 82). Boler and Davis formulate the concept of "networked subjectivity" and the "affective feedback loop" in their article "The Affective Politics of the 'Post-truth' Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity." They examine how affect and emotions were able to polarize both sides of the political spectrum in the US to the point that the notion of truth has become relative and subjective. Boler and Davis suggest that digital media is able to algorithmically and affectively create "networked subjects" (82) through "affective feedback loops" (83). They write that "affective feedback loops describe the emotional and affective circuit of relationality between human and information in computer-mediated environments" (83). Boler and Davis argue that this "affective feedback loop" is integral in "shaping the networked subjectivity fundamental to computational propaganda and algorithmic governance" (82). That is to say that an individual's affective response to a political post on Facebook and Twitter takes primacy over a logical response, thereby shaping how one perceives truth. We draw from Boler and Davis to productively speculate on how a "networked subject" like Jay navigates through an "aesthetic regime" shaped by Duterte's apparatus of algorithmic disinformation. In *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Jay Reguero deals with several versions of "sticky" truths as a "networked subject." In effect, he becomes trapped in numerous "affective feedback loops" during his stay in the Philippines. We also explore how a hyphenated "networked subject" deals with numerous "sticky" encounters and "sticky" truths in Duterte's age of disinformation. We take our cue from Rancière's suggestion that aesthetic representations "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" (*Dissensus* 151). In the succeeding paragraphs, we explore how ideas of dissensus and stickiness might challenge the distribution of the sensible through a "networked subject" such as Jay Reguero.

THE HYPHENATED SUBJECT AND NETWORKED SUBJECTIVITY

Patron Saints of Nothing begins when Jay Reguero, a 17-year-old Filipino-American, finds out that Jun Reguero was killed by the police for using *shabu* or Methamphetamine. Jay then receives a message from an unknown Instagram account, and he is told that Jun did not deserve to die. Jay flies to the Philippines to investigate the circumstances of Jun's death. In

Manila, Jay finds a list of suspected drug dealers and users in the office of his Uncle Maning, a high-ranking member of the Philippine National Police. To Jay's surprise, Jun Reguero's name was included in that list. Jay confronts Uncle Maning who merely reiterates that Jun was killed because he used drugs. Maning tells Jay that he gave Jun a choice: to stop using drugs or else leave their home. He tells Jay that Jun chose drugs over his family. After this confrontation, Maning forces Jay out of his home, leading him to Aunt Chato.

Aunt Chato tells Jay that Maning forced Jun out of their home when he found *marijuana* in Jun's room. Jay discovered that Jun went to live with a woman named Reyna after he left Aunt Chato's home. Jay also finds out that Grace owns the unknown Instagram account that messaged him at the beginning of the novel. Grace tells him that Jun left Reyna because the police found out that he operated an "anti-government" Facebook page. After this, Jay and Grace confront Uncle Maning again and they accuse him of having his own son killed. Maning denies it and tells them that they could ask his brother, Danilo, a priest, about what really happened. Uncle Danilo tells Jay and Grace that Maning bribed someone to remove Jun from the list of suspected drug dealers but that Jun "found his way back onto it" (Ribay 279) and that he was killed by a vigilante. Danilo tells them that Maning called him four months before Jun died to ask him to save Jun from "himself [and] from the drugs" (279). According to Danilo, Jun admitted that he had been using meth and that he sold drugs. At the end of the novel, the family holds a memorial service for Jun.

As a hyphenated subject, Jay Reguero immediately generates feelings of distrust from his paternal relatives. His Uncle Maning would often give condescending remarks such as "This is not America" (97), and he would lament the fact that Jay's father did not teach him *Tagalog*. Maning's resentment of Jay's hyphenated identity is made more apparent after Jay confronts him regarding the death of Jun:

You do not live here. You do not speak any of our languages. You do not know our history. Your mother is a white American. Yet, you presume to speak to me as if you knew anything about me, as if you knew anything about my son, as if you knew anything about this country. (160)

Even relatives such as Aunt Chato and Uncle Danilo, who are sympathetic to Jay, also reiterate that his sense of justice draws from his American sensibilities and that things are different in the Philippines. When Jay suggests that they should fight for justice, Aunt Chato responds by saying "the courts in the Philippines are not like the courts in America. Here you cannot trust them. They are very corrupt" (172), and she adds that "[b]

ecause you do not live here, you fail to see that I am not exaggerating” (173). Uncle Danilo would also remind Jay that “This isn’t America” (283) when Jay questions the idea that Filipinos accept the fact that there are extrajudicial killings. Aunt Chato and Uncle Danilo would actually agree with the spirit of Jay’s opinions and viewpoints regarding social justice and human rights, but these characters, who are not “hyphenated subjects,” are trapped in the idea that things will never change and that they are helpless against the regime. These non-hyphenated subjects have accepted the “regime of the sensible” created by Duterte’s populist politics and they realize that resistance will lead nowhere.

Conversely, as a hyphenated subject, Jay refuses to trust the multiple versions of the ever-shifting truth. Even at the end of the novel, Jay is arguably in a state of denial as he refuses to fully accept the *supposed* fact that Jun became addicted to meth. We argue that for the most part Jay was more convinced and affectively driven by the information he found online. For example, Jay placed far more trust in the “GISING NA PH!” Instagram page and the unknown Instagram account than the multiple versions of the “truth” he encountered through the novel. We make a case that the tension between Jay, a hyphenated subject, and his paternal relatives from the Philippines only serve to make him a “networked subject” who becomes distrustful of the information he does not agree with. What affectively “stuck” to him is the idea that his Uncle Maning ordered his own son killed in the name of Duterte’s populist politics. For the most part, Jay was trapped in a certain “affective feedback loop” induced by his Western sensibilities and the “GISING NA PH!” Instagram page, “which contains post after post of Filipinos holding photographs of their loved ones who the police murdered” (Ribay 31).

THE AFFECTIVE FORCE OF DISINFORMATION AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

One of the central figures of state disinformation in *Patron Saints of Nothing* is Chief Inspector Maning Reguero, a staunch supporter of Rodrigo Duterte’s War on Drugs. Maning believes that Ferdinand Marcos, the former dictator of the Philippines, is a “*tunay na bayani*” or a “true hero” (Ribay 148). However, Maning attests that “President Duterte’s legacy will be greater” (148) and that he is “a great man” (146). Maning has even been awarded a medal for the “excellent work he is doing to protect the people in our region from drugs” (146). Maning’s sense of nationalism is arguably built on the idea that the Marcos and Duterte administration is a necessary counterweight to Western imperialism. Maning would

also dismiss investigations and journalistic accounts of the Drug War as he tells Jay that “[t]hese people—the ones writing these articles you have been reading—they do not care about the Filipino people. They sensationalize the worst of what is happening here and ignore the best in order to sell copies or win awards. It is that simple” (157). We read Chief Inspector Maning, rather appropriately, as an instrument of what Rancière calls the police order in Duterte’s Philippines. His nationalist and anti-western viewpoints, which are the total opposite of Jay’s western and liberal sensibilities, reflect the sensibilities of Duterte’s supporters who have ignored the inhumanity of his regime. Maning’s beliefs also reflect the pro-administration narrative peddled by the pages (which Facebook took down). These pages would usually say that criticism of Duterte is primarily driven by the imperialist West. Maning Reguero would apply the “regime of the sensible” that he represents on a more personal level when he instilled a sort-of-police state within his household; Grace and Angel were not allowed to have cell phones, and it is revealed at the end of the novel that he had ordered men to monitor his own children. Maning was well aware that Grace and Angel continued to meet Jun even after he was forced out of their home.

Of course, Uncle Maning’s beliefs and convictions affectively fail to stick to Jay; instead, they make Jay’s original beliefs “stickier” and further inspire Jay to navigate through the sea of multiple “truths.” Throughout the novel, the supposed truth regarding Jun’s life and the circumstances of his death constantly change in Jay’s perspective. Uncle Maning would have his own version of his son’s life and the manner of his death. Aunt Chato says that Maning lied about Jun’s circumstances and she has her own version of what Jun was like. Jun himself would spread his own version of the truth to different characters as he lied to Aunt Chato and his partner, Reyna. In a sense, as De Chavez and Varadharajan read the *Pietà*, Jay can be seen as dissensus, since he attempts to challenge the atmosphere of disinformation or the “distribution of the sensible” in the novel. However, towards the end of *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Jay realizes that truth will remain elusive as he reflects: “That’s not how stories work, is it? They are shifting things that re-form with each new telling, transform with each new teller. Less a solid, and more a liquid taking the shape of its container” (Ribay 281).

STICKY LETTERS AS DISSENSUS

We take our cues from De Chavez and Varadharajan, who recently used Rancière’s political thought in analyzing the *Pietà*, a popular image of the Philippine Drug War. They argue that “the image is a manifestation of

dissensus” and that “the Pietà is able to disrupt the particular distribution of the sensible that organizes current Philippine socio-politics” (De Chavez and Varadharajan 53–54). In a similar vein, we argue that like the Pietà, Jay’s letters are a form of dissensus which challenges the “regime of the sensible” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 18) in the novel, which has deemed Jun to be a mere inhumane drug addict who deserved to die. While Jay does not uncover the entire truth of Jun’s circumstances, he is able to hold on to a certain truth through Jun’s letters. Six letters from Jun are presented in the novel, each of them describing a moment in Jun’s life. Arguably, Jay is affectively driven to go to the Philippines by Jun’s last letter when he rereads it. Jun’s last letter states that he has not received a reply from Jay in “three months” and that he has already sent “six letters counting this one” (Ribay 17). Jay’s experience is best described by this passage: “Guilt, shame, and sadness swirl in my stomach. Yet I reread it a couple more times, forcing myself to face the sorrow, face the fact that I never tried to find out where he had gone after he ran away from home, never tried to understand why” (19). Jun’s last letter affectively sticks to Jay as he feels guilty for being absent in Jun’s life. Jay seemed to have forgotten about Jun before he died, and Jun’s death became a reminder that he existed through the letters that he had. The letters’ capacity for stickiness becomes literal when they attach themselves to Grace:

She pulls away from me but holds on to my hand, eyes on the stack of letters. “When I went to wake you for dinner that first night, one was on the nightstand next to the bed. I think you were reading it before you went to sleep—so I went through your bag to see if you had any others. You did . . . and so I took them.” (263)

Grace would say that her father, Maning, threw away everything related to Jun (which is arguably an attempt to maintain a certain regime of the sensible). Before Grace saw the letters, she could only hold onto Jun’s online messages and that is “not the same as holding on to something physical, something real. It was like he was alive again in a way” (263).

The letters, in general, reveal certain truths regarding Jun’s character and life that challenge Uncle Maning and Uncle Danilo’s “truth” about Jun. Uncle Maning is convinced that Jun was a drug addict, and says that “[h]e was an enemy of the state” (271). Uncle Danilo’s version of the truth purportedly confirms Uncle Maning’s version; Jun indeed became addicted to meth and became a drug dealer. Uncle Danilo was sympathetic, however, and only wanted to save Jun. But because the letters “stuck” to him, thereby operating as a form of dissensus, Jay would only remember

Jun through the letters even when he struggles against accepting the supposed truth that Jun actually used and sold drugs:

I close my eyes, as if doing so will rewind the story, erasing everything Tito Danilo has just told us. As if it will stop the warping truth. I can't reconcile this version of Jun with the one I had come to know, to love, to admire. Even as I sit still, I feel like I am falling. (281)

Towards the end, the family holds a memorial service for Jun. Even Uncle Maning, who did not allow this when Jun died, attends the service. In a eulogy, Jay writes a letter and reads it as his late "reply" to Jun's last letter:

I don't want to believe there was another side to you. But I don't have any choice, do I? I will try not to judge because I have no idea what you were struggling within your heart, what complicated your soul. None of us is just one thing, I guess. None of us. We all do both throughout our lives. That's the way it is. I suppose we just go on and do the best we can and try to do more good than bad using our time on Earth. I'd like to think your scales tip toward good. (299)

At this point, Jay seems to finally accept the supposed truth regarding Jun's circumstances, but this letter is able to present a truth about Jun's humanity that becomes a form of dissensus as it challenges the accepted fact that Jun needed to be erased from their memories as Uncle Maning would have wanted. Uncle Maning's participation in the memorial service might have "planted a seed" as Jay reflects after the memorial (302). The Jun who lived in these letters as a human being was finally able to "stick" to the family. As dissensus, these letters were able to challenge the constant re-distribution of the sensible, which is represented by the variations of truth presented in the novel. While the truth remains elusive at the end of the novel, what stays relatively stable or "sticky" throughout the narrative are the letters from Jun Reguero that Jay carries with him back to the Philippines. The letters then become the singular "truth" that Jay holds on to despite the constant distortion of fact and fiction in the novel, as entailed by the atmosphere of disinformation in *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

CONCLUSION

The letters serve as happy objects that Jay holds on to as he deals with the horrible truths he encounters. In this sense, the letters reveal a gap in the sensible constructed by the different versions of truth in the novel. The construction of these truths reflects how government institutions in the

Philippines purposefully misinform the general populace as a means to prevent dissent. Jay's journey into the "heart of darkness" as a hyphenated individual and a "networked subject" demonstrates a possibility of dissensus in a regime in which the defenders of the state are precisely the same ones endangering it. Our reading affirms Rancière's assertion that aesthetic representations "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" (*Dissensus* 151). That is to say that the idea of dissensus and stickiness challenges the distribution of the sensible through a "networked subject" such as Jay Reguero. However, the promise of happiness in Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing* is that it shows us a "social order vulnerable to dissensus" (Gündoğdu 205) as it challenges an aesthetic regime built on "computational propaganda and algorithmic governance" (Boler and Davis 82). Current events in the Philippines reveal that normative means of resistance are ineffective in eroding Duterte's populist regime, and in fact, as of this writing, he currently has a 91% approval rating (Pulse Asia Research). Jay's narrative, however, indicates that there is still a way to enunciate a form of radical politics within a political present in which the stability of truth remains elusive.

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Transforming the *Ich-Du* to the *Ich-Es*: The Migrant as “Terrorist” in Kabir Khan’s *New York* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*

ABSTRACT

Terror narratives have been characterized by a dialogism where the “normative” I—i.e. the “non-threatening mainstream”—defines and delineates subjects whose identity is centred on their (actual or presumed) location in the terror network. This is especially so in the case of Asian migrants who settle down in Western countries, as their very identity as Asian locates them at a precarious point in the real or imagined “terror network.” The migrant is no longer the *Du* (Thou), but the *Es* (It), imparting an identity to the *Ich* (I), where the *Ich* denotes the “original” citizens of the country. The transactions of the “I” with the “Thou” and the “It” become significant in the context of Asian immigrants in that, for the dominant mainstream (the “I”), the “terrorist” is an *Es* / “It” that has gradually marked its transition from the *Du* / “Thou.” The person of the “terrorist” finds its ontological properties from the gradual movement away from a “Thou” to an “It.” The hitherto unbounded “Thou” is transformed into a definable “It,” by ascribing to her/him a religion, race, colour, nationality and ethnicity. He/she is not confronted, as every “Thou” is, but is rather “experienced” as a source of terror, as an “It.” The paper attempts to explore the transformation of the figure of the “migrant terrorist” from a confronted “Thou” to an “imagined/experienced” “It” through an analysis of *New York* (2009) by Kabir Khan and *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie.

Keywords: Ich-Du, Ich-Es, Asian migrant, terror narratives, objectification, pathologizing gaze.

“For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou*
is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*.”

(Buber 3)

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Terror narratives have been characterized by a dialogism where the “normative” I—i.e. the “non-threatening mainstream”—defines and delineates subjects whose identity is centred on their (actual or presumed) location in the terror network. The location becomes all the more significant when the subject is an already “othered” entity, marked by her/his status as a migrant in a foreign country. This is especially so in the case of Asian migrants who settle down in Western countries, as their very identity as Asian locates them at a precarious point in the real or imagined “terror network.” The Asian “other,” i.e. the potential terrorist, assumes her/his identity in opposition to that of the “non-threatening” mainstream, i.e. those who “belong” to the country. The migrant is no longer the *Du* (Thou), but the *Es* (It), imparting an identity to the *Ich* (I), where the *Ich* denotes the “original” citizens of the country or the others who conform to the norms of the state.

The transformation of the “Thou” into the “It” is nowhere more evident than in terror narratives featuring Asian migrants in the West, where migrants are often stereotyped as terrorists, especially when they are Muslims. The mainstream identifies itself through its distinction from the now-bounded entity called the “It,” the “migrant,” the “terrorist.” He/she is not confronted, as every “Thou” is, but is rather “experienced” as a source of terror, as an “It.” The paper attempts to explore the transformation of the figure of the “migrant terrorist” from a confronted *Du* / “Thou” to an “imagined/experienced” *Es* / “It” through an analysis of *New York*¹ (2009) by Kabir Khan and *Home Fire*² (2017) by Kamila Shamsie. The works have

¹ A 2009 film directed by Kabir Khan, *New York* portrays the modes in which Asian subjects are pathologized as “terrorists.” Samir, an American-Asian Muslim, is arrested on false charges of terrorism after the 9/11 attacks and the third-degree torture leaves him traumatized. Years later, an FBI team, led by Roshan, another Asian Muslim who had been living in the US for two decades, arrests Samir’s former friend, Omar, who is also a Muslim from India, in order to spy on Samir. Omar stays in Samir’s house and gradually realizes that the latter is involved in terrorist activities in order to take revenge upon the system which had victimized him. Samir and his wife are later killed by the FBI and Omar adopts their son, Danyal.

² Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, published in 2017, engages with the issue of terrorism and the response of the “homeland” towards suspected terrorists who are “outsiders.” The story is set in Britain and the major characters, Isma and her twin siblings, Aneeka and Parvaiz, are naturalized British citizens. As the children of a Pakistani-British jihadist who died while being deported to Guantanamo Bay, they live under surveillance all their lives, under the watchful gaze of the British security forces. However, Parvaiz joins ISIS

been chosen since both engage with an issue that has always haunted and continues to haunt the Western imaginary even today—the “danger” posed by the “Asian Other,” especially a Muslim subject from the “exotic, yet dangerous” East. The conferral of an “extrareal and phenomenologically reduced status . . . to the Orient and Islam” (Said 57) and the exoticization of the two entities acquired a dangerous edge with the 9/11 attacks and the rise of ISIS, with Islamic subjects, especially those from the Orient, being viewed as threats to the “civilized” West. The works challenge the reader to map the modes in which violence is unleashed on the “Other” in order to prevent a violent ideological decolonization as envisaged by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which would enable them to exist as “Thou” to be confronted. The violence inflicted on the Asian Muslim subject, irrespective of their citizenship or loyalty to the “homeland,” transforms her/him into an imagined, “dangerous” entity to be pathologized as an “It.”

Buber’s elaboration of the transactions of the “I” with the “Thou” and the “It” becomes significant in the context of Asian immigrants in that, for the dominant mainstream (the “I”), the “terrorist” is an *Es* / “It” that has gradually marked its transition from the *Du* / “Thou.” In both *New York* and *Home Fire*, the protagonists are immigrants from South Asian countries, who are constantly under state surveillance, and perceived as potential threats to the stability of the social order. The migrant, who has already moved from the status of *Du* to *Es*, by virtue of her/his alienation in the country of settlement, becomes doubly objectified by the pathologizing gaze of the West which perceives Asians as potential terrorists. In both works under consideration, the Islamophobia that followed the 9/11 attacks and the establishment of the ISIS Caliphate led to drastic actions on the part of the state against Muslim citizens, especially Asian Muslims. In *New York*, Samir is arrested and taken to a detention centre owing to his status as a Muslim Indian in America, which made him a suspect. He says: “The FBI had arrested 1200 people like me and put them in different jails. We had just one thing in common . . . our religion.” In *Home Fire* too, a systematic targeting of Muslims and their labelling as “terrorists” is

and Isma reports it to the security forces, which leads to the souring of the relationship between the two sisters. Aneeka’s attempts at saving Parvaiz fail and he is killed in a drive-by shooting near the British consulate in Istanbul, right as he was about to confess his acts and find a way to escape to Britain. Since Karamat Lone, the Home Minister (who was also a Pakistani Muslim who had obtained British citizenship), had implemented policies that led to the denaturalization of Parvaiz, Britain refuses to repatriate his body which is then sent to Pakistan. Aneeka fights to get his body back to his “homeland,” Britain, and meets with fierce opposition from the state. She then goes to Pakistan and sits with his body in a public park, seeking justice. She, along with her lover Eamonn Lone (Karamat Lone’s son), are killed in a bomb blast in the park.

evident in the case of the Pashas. Despite the lack of concrete proof against Adil Pasha, he is taken to Guantanamo and there are no written records of the event. The life of a Muslim subject becomes insignificant, turning him into a *homo sacer*—“life that cannot be sacrificed, yet may be killed” (Agamben 169–70), existing in a state of exception. The transformation of the subject into a *homo sacer* is preceded by his gradual movement from a *Du* to an *Es* from which the person of the “terrorist” finds its ontological properties. The hitherto unbounded “Thou” is transformed into a definable “It,” by ascribing to her/him a religion, race, colour, nationality and ethnicity. Despite identifying themselves as American/British subjects and reiterating the “fact” of their citizenship and loyalty repeatedly, the state perceives Samir, Aneeka and Parvaiz as Asian Muslims lacking loyalty to the country which they claim to be their own. They are not “confronted” as persons, but rather experienced as “objects” of terror.

Citizenship becomes a pivotal point around which the transformation from an *Ich-Du* to *Ich-Es* takes place. In general, citizenship is a contested issue with multiple significations: “citizenship as a legal status, citizenship as a bundle of rights and entitlements, and citizenship as a sense of identity and belonging” (Jayal 2). For Asian migrants in the West, acquiring citizenship in the new country is an act with these and other layers of signification. Most potently, it is an act whereby they can proclaim themselves as “safe” subjects who wish to identify with the state. This act became particularly significant in the wake of the proliferation of terrorism as even second and third generation migrants had to repeatedly proclaim their loyalty to the state in order to gain access to basic rights and dignity. We frequently observe Samir, Parvaiz and Aneeka reiterating their status as American/British citizens when accosted by the FBI or MI5, pointing to how Muslim migrants consider citizenship an imperative for their security. The granting of citizenship is perceived as an act of largesse by the “exalted” Western country. The Home Secretary’s repeated assertion that “Citizenship is a privilege, not a right or birthright” (Shamsie 198), especially with regard to Muslim migrants, and the constant threats of revoking the citizenship of non-normative subjects testifies to the high-handedness of the state in its treatment of migrants. With their citizenship itself under threat, they are denied job opportunities and a dignified life, and are pushed to the margins. Through access to or denial of citizenship, the state enters into an *Ich-Es* relationship with them, marking them as “objects,” as different from the *Du*, i.e. the “pure” citizens who are considered “persons.” Ronald Smith, in his introduction to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1937) asserts:

There is . . . a radical difference between a man’s attitude to other men and his attitude to things. The attitude to other men is a relation

between persons, to things it is a connexion with objects . . . The other person, the *Thou*, is shown to be a reality—that is, it is given to me, but it is not bounded by me . . . The world of objects or things, on the other hand, presupposes a single centre of consciousness, one subject, an *I* which experiences, arranges, and appropriates . . . when a *Thou* is truly confronted, it becomes an *It*. (Buber vii)

The Muslim subject, when transformed from a *Du* to an *Es* by the Islamophobic Western consciousness, becomes an object to be “experienced, arranged and appropriated” (Buber vii) by the normative “pure” subjects. Eamonn’s British friends, when they detect his aloofness, are quick to tease him saying “we may need to alert the authorities” (Shamsie 82), pointing to how a hitherto admired subject can be converted into an object of suspicion that must be “appropriated” and “disciplined.” Similarly, Omar is chosen as the FBI spy owing to his status as a Muslim migrant who aspires to integrate with the American state. Roshan, also an Asian Muslim, is given charge of Samir’s case, owing to his ethnic and religious identity. The state appropriates compliant subjects, who themselves belong to the category of the *Es*, in order to pursue its agenda.

In both works, Muslim migrants are “constructed” as terrorists by the state policies which marginalize the community and by the Islamophobia that came to dominate the Western world in the aftermath of 9/11. Samir is arrested and detained in an undisclosed location much like Guantanamo, with the photos of the World Trade Centre he had taken for a university paper considered the only evidence of his terrorist activity. Mere suspicion is taken as proof of his guilt and third-degree torture is inflicted upon him. The condemnation of the Muslim man as a *homo sacer* who is perpetually in a state of exception, functioning as a body where the state can exercise unlimited power without being questioned, is evident here. In order to ensure that public sentiment does not turn in favour of Parvaiz, the British officials propagate the news that he was about to carry out a terrorist attack on the British Consulate although they had been informed that he was trying to come back “home.” The process becomes easier as the subject is a Muslim immigrant, who the civil society is more than happy to construe as a terrorist to propagate Islamophobia. He is denied dignity even in death as the British government does not allow the cremation of his body in Britain with the Home Secretary taking an adamant stance on the issue of his citizenship. The *Es* is thus created by being made stateless and he becomes an object to be experienced by the “true Englishman” (214).

Buber remarks: “Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others” (4). This sense of being bound takes on multiple

significations with the migrant being bounded in the sense of being restricted and in the sense of being the receptor of an identity proffered by others. The migrant seemingly exists as a foil to the normative “citizen” of the country, perceived as a threat to the latter. Both *New York* and *Home Fire* portray several instances of British/Americans spitting on the protagonists or spewing hatred in a very explicit manner after 9/11. By the same token, Parvaiz’s disappearance is an act which the state supports silently as the intention is to project the migrants as subjects “deserving” punishment for their deviance. The subjects’ identity as Muslims and as Asian immigrants is made conspicuous, making it easier to label them as “terrorists,” thereby providing them a pathologized identity. The restrictions imposed on their movements and the subtle ways in which they are excluded from the politico-jural domain facilitate their movement from the status of the *Du* to that of the *Es*, as in the case of Samir, who is rejected in interviews, and Isma and Aneeka, who are often denied visas and are harassed in interrogation rooms.

The perception of the Muslim as the other is also necessary for the “pure” citizen to assert his/her normativity. The “I” which “experiences” the object separates the latter from itself. It is in this state that the “*I* is properly active” (Buber 23). The human consciousness of the *Ich* perceives the *Es* as an object separated from it and establishes a barrier between the two. This process is visible in the modes in which the Muslim subjects are set apart as mere objects against which the normative American/British citizen asserts his/her identity as a “safe” subject loyal to the state. For instance, in *New York*, Omar unconsciously attempts to mark Samir as having been totally different from him since college. While Omar is a shy, quiet boy, Samir is projected as a smart, macho hero. Despite being an immigrant, Omar attempts to mark himself as different from the “problematic” subject by subtly highlighting their differences, with him being more reserved, “obedient” (implying that he is less prone to deviant activities than Samir) and cautious. Here, he defines himself as an “I” through the act of separation from the object—the Muslim man labelled a terrorist. Isma’s and Karamat Lone’s attempts at integration are also acts meant to separate the “I” from the world of objects/*Es*, constituted by “other” Muslims. Isma denounces Parvaiz to the state in an attempt to create a safe space for herself and Aneeka, and reads a statement saying that neither she nor her sister would go to his funeral in Pakistan in order to draw a clear boundary between themselves and their *jibadi* brother. Lone is ashamed of his Pakistani origins and is embarrassed about his Muslim identity, which propels him to take actions against Muslims in order to prove his impeccability. The Muslim “other” becomes the *Es* against which Isma and Lone define themselves as the *Ich*. The situation here is ironic

in that they themselves belong to the *Es* from which they try to separate themselves. What might have been a *Du*, if they were not migrants, is transformed into an *Es* in order to ensure the survival of the "I."

The *Es*, subjected to the pathologizing gaze of the *Ich*, often resorts to one of two means of reacting—by following the very dangerous trajectory they are often falsely accused of pursuing, or by conforming to the norms laid down by the "I," thankful for the "charity" bestowed upon them by the West by allowing them to be citizens, albeit marginal. Samir coordinates a South Asian sleeper cell in order to take revenge for the injustice perpetrated on him by the US simply because of his Muslim identity. Parvaiz joins the *jihadis* because of the discontent instilled in him by the way Britain treats its Muslims. His curiosity regarding his father was suppressed by his family so that people would not "start to suspect our sympathies" (Shamsie 49). The family is constantly under surveillance and the state perceives the siblings as potential terrorists. They are pathologized, with their visa applications denied, mobile messages and emails monitored and loyalties questioned in interrogation rooms. The possibility of the government "withdrawing all the benefits of the welfare state—including state school and the NHS—from any family suspected of siding with the terrorists" (Shamsie 49) functions as a threat, making Parvaiz suppress his desire to know about his father. When Farooq appears as a source through which his wish could be fulfilled, Parvaiz is naturally drawn to him, finally leading to his joining ISIS. Rather than ensuring that the child of the "terrorist" is provided adequate psychological care and education, the state attempts to suppress him, which ultimately results in rebellion against the state by the body of the *homo sacer*.

The second mode of negotiating with the state takes the form of absolute conformity to the norms, "understanding the position [they] are in . . . accepting the law, even when it's unjust" (Shamsie 196), and lauding the "largesse" of the state. In *New York*, Roshan tells Omar:

I am a Muslim and yet, I have been given responsibility for a sensitive case like this. That is only possible here [America]. You shouldn't forget that you and I came here as immigrants and now we have found a place here, we've got our freedom and it is to protect this freedom that I am doing all this.

The conforming "I" here becomes a tool of the state owing to his gratitude towards the state for its charity. Karamat Lone in Shamsie's novel also works as an agent for the state as he strongly believes that it was Britain which provided him with an identity. Both subjects believe that they must work to serve the state, even at the cost of their own identity, in order to

“remove the hatred towards Muslims” (*New York*). The seeming attempt to protect their community by projecting themselves as one among the *Es* actually functions as a mode of further distancing the Muslim community from them in order to preserve their status as normative subjects.

The presence of the Muslim immigrant is nevertheless necessary for Western states to maintain their status as “inclusive” countries. As Hegel argues in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), “the truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the Bondsman” (qtd. in Ray and Seemin 5). For the normative West to exist as a role model for the world by virtue of its “tolerance” and “inclusiveness,” the bondsman, represented by the South Asian Muslim immigrant, is essential. It is only through an affirmation from and through the *Es* that the *Ich* can exist. As such, through such acts of “charity” as mentioned above and by giving scholarships to migrants because they “tick their ‘inclusive’ and ‘diverse’ boxes” (Shamsie 132), the *Es* is brought into being as a servile bondsman.

Thus, it is often in the encounter between the majority and the minority, the “normative” and the non-normative, that the migrant perceived as a potential terrorist turns into an “It”—an object—to be experienced. The humanity of the Muslim subject is denied and he is transformed into a *homo sacer* who is simultaneously within and outside the juridical domain, always vulnerable to being attacked by the mainstream. They are denied the possibility of even being a *Du* / “Thou” and assigned the status of an *Es* / “It” which the normative subjects “experience” and pathologize. As Bill Brown argues in “Thing Theory” (2001), by being foregrounded from against the White non-Muslim community, South Asian Muslim migrants are turned into ‘things,’ which marks the former as a *Du*, an entity existing in a relational network. As a corollary, the latter are marked as *Es*, existing as “things” to be experienced and pathologized.

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Victim-Warriors and Restorers— Heroines in the Post-Apocalyptic World of *Mad Max: Fury Road*

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the evolving image of female characters in the *Mad Max* saga directed by George Miller, focusing on Furiosa's rebellion in the last film—*Mad Max: Fury Road*. Interestingly, studying Miller's post-apocalyptic action films, we can observe the evolution of this post-apocalyptic vision from the male-dominated world with civilization collapsing into chaotic violence visualized in the previous series to a more hopeful future created by women in the last part of the saga: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). We observe female heroes: the vengeful Furiosa, the protector of oppressed girls and sex slaves, the women of the separatist clan, and the wives of the warlord, who bring down the tyranny and create a new "green place." It is worth emphasizing that the plot casts female solidarity in the central heroic role. In fact, the *Mad Max* saga emerges as a piece of socially engaged cinema preoccupied with the cultural context of gender discourse. Noticeably, media commentators, scholars and activists have suggested that *Fury Road* is a feminist film.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic utopia, *Mad Max* saga, feminism.

Dystopian visions shaped by culture creators referencing undefined futuristic periods (and post-apocalyptic realities) are undoubtedly a reflection of our fears and nightmares rooted in real-world experience. In his works, Northrop Frye clearly indicated that the tendency to create utopias is universal and goes back to the beginnings of the human race. He also suggested that in the near future, there will unquestionably be a revival of utopian imaginations that will no longer pursue the old-style spatial visions: “New utopias would have to derive their form from the shifting and dissolving movement replacing the fixed locations of life” (347). Literature, film, theatre, art are frequently overflowing with images of infernal lands. Umberto Eco in *The Book of Legendary Lands* very clearly establishes why such projections appeal to us so vigorously; what exactly dystopian/utopian concepts reveal about our relationship with surrounding environment; and how they engage our longing to make sense of the world.¹ This connection between the desire for an earthly paradise and the fear of the consequences of achieving that goal, situates utopia not only in the context of literary or film genres, but also in the spectrum of Western cultural discourse from its origins. In his work, Eco looks at literary texts from Homer’s poetry to contemporary science fiction titles. As the author notes, regardless of the time when the legendary fairytale land was created, it is always a reflection of hidden human desires and dreams. And the utopian image created in this way is accompanied by more and more numerous beliefs evolving over the years, focused around these specific projections (Eco 9).

It is debatable whether dystopia as a cultural genre has ever really diverged from visions depicted in literature through the ages since classical antiquity; rather, the readers and audience’s representations of the future are influenced by them. Artists construct powerful visions of the post-apocalyptic lands based on the topos of *locus horridus*—places ruled by an overwhelming fear and violence governed by a nightmarish, although logically justified, internally coherent structure. The new (worse) worlds consist of constant elements: most of them would have as central ingredients outrageous levels of crime—acts of terror and killing, or explicit gender stereotypes set in a highly hierarchical society. Moreover, the acceptance of violence and the desire for survival at any cost develop in scenarios where there might be no future resulting from the lack of vital resources. Scenes of quasi-religious rituals legitimize class and gender domination where religion is used as a tool of oppression. What is worse, dystopia cannot be escaped—it must be fought and defeated.

¹ Krzysztof Maj undermines the traditional triad of utopias, anti-utopias and dystopias, and proposes to replace it with a new category of utopias, or fictional “non-places,” into eutopias (ideal “nonplaces”) and dystopias (bad “non-places”) (153–55).

Original film dystopias have definitely influenced subsequent images of iconic figures of popular culture—Andrew Niccol’s eugenicist nightmare *Gattaca* (1997), Michael Winterbottom’s *Code 46* (2003) and, finally, the survivors in the post-apocalyptic desert in George Miller’s *Mad Max* saga (1979, 1981, 1985, 2015) (Domingo 742). The *Mad Max* tetralogy has been obviously widely reviewed in different contexts. It has been considered a film that initiated and popularized punk aesthetics, “which has become *de rigueur* from MTV to global advertising” (Broderick 614). What is worth emphasizing is that this instalment has been identified as a precursory work incorporating climate change under the theme of famine and drought on the big screen (Svoboda 50). In *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) water is a resource of priceless value. As a result, the cult leader, the dictator—Immortan Joe—exercises his control over the scarce water resource, as a condition to impose his will upon his thirsty subjects. The plot is set in an inhospitable desert landscape—wasteland; the audience is overwhelmed by pictures of dominating sandy colour and dust, where searching for the “Green Place,” an oasis of lush and grassy area, turns out to be a complete failure. The journey has finished in the same place where the main story began.

Obviously, action films have been traditionally and historically considered a man’s genre, in which different means were used to satisfy the male audience’s fantasy. Female characters have definitely been underrepresented in those “male-hero centered” narratives, being marginalized and portrayed as weak or passive figures. This paper examines the issue of feminism in George Miller’s latest production. What makes *Mad Max: Fury Road* so intriguing to study? Firstly, it departs from the male-centred narrative structure of action films. Furthermore, the plot of the film relates to authentic threats and women’s issues, and raises important questions around their fight against the patriarchy. Despite the fact that in many ways the film presents women through the male gaze, *Mad Max: Fury Road* incorporates a feminist agenda. The power of the film comes from taking a brave new leap for the action genre, exposing the underlying feminist foundations to the mass audience.

In his article, Bogusz Malec undertakes an in-depth analysis of the world presented there in the context of the post-apocalyptic issue of the film, clearly pointing to the four levels of construction of the *Mad Max* universe. Firstly, he indicates the negative, antagonistic attitude of an individual towards the social group they are a part of—lack of trust and constant fear for their own existence. The feelings are intensified by the effects of an environmental catastrophe—desertification of the world and radiation-induced diseases. The memory of the old world, irretrievably gone, intensifies the conviction in the necessity of a competitive attitude to life. An individual faces the necessity to rebuild their system of norms

of behaviour and values. Finally, there is the lack of rooting, or grounding, in the community, which is clearly visualized for the viewer in the image of a constant chase—escape in a desert space: unstable, deceptive territory, not leaving any permanent traces of existence (137–39).

As far as the Polish audience is concerned, Marek Haltof's monograph serves as a helpful introduction to understanding the cultural determinants of Australian cinematography, the issues related to stereotypes, or the national mythologization of the Antipodes. When analyzing the directorial achievements of George Miller, the author emphasizes that by setting *Mad Max* in the post-nuclear landscape of a world plagued by chaos, where the engine of all actions is the fight for fuel, the emphasis is put primarily on the universality of the message, while losing the Australian flavour. By using elements of popular culture and road cinema motifs, clearly influenced by Hollywood cinema and Western poetics, *Mad Max* could have been created anywhere (64–67).

Interestingly, studying Miller's dystopian saga, we can observe the evolution of that post-apocalyptic vision (Wierel 368–70; 405). It is transfigured from the male-dominated world with civilization collapsing into chaotic violence, dealing with pollution and overconsumption, to a more hopeful future created by women. That perspective definitely helps us to understand the film, as well as to value the diversity of feminist perspectives and interpretations of the production.²

Moreover, all the films engage to a certain point with primary concepts of femininity and masculinity—that is why writing about the *Mad Max* series is challenging: mostly due to a variety of intentional inconsistencies, including conflicting signals about gender. The postulated message is simple to recognize: women should not be objectified, and the dehumanizing of their image should finally vanish, just like “the male gaze.” However, I have doubts as to whether the creators themselves managed to keep this assumption with regard to the figures of the wives. These five young women are portrayed in the conventional mode of modern standards following fashion journals—slender, with flawless skin, wearing white clothes that show off their bodies. When we see them for

² For an intriguing analysis of the intersection of feminist theory and Anthropocene dystopia, see, for instance, Joanna Zylinska's *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* or Lynn M. Stearney's “Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal” (the article examines the use of the maternal archetype in ecofeminist rhetoric). Moreover, in “Dependence, Independence or Interdependence? Revisiting the Concepts of ‘Care’ and ‘Dependency,’” Michael Fine and Caroline Glendinning briefly review feminist analysis of caregiving and further references—helpful while interpreting the Miss Giddy character: a teacher and mentor for The Five Wives of Immortan Joe who stays in an emotional, caring mother-daughter relationship with them.

the first time in a film setting, the image seems to arise from and satisfy male fantasies. When Max meets the heroines in the desert, they wash themselves using a hose, which is an image evidently identical to a motif frequent in men's magazines (Bampatzimopoulos 209–12). As for the question of the concept behind the creation of the female protagonists of *Mad Max: Fury Road*—it is difficult to say unequivocally whether it was connected with the disturbance and complete negation of the patriarchal order. Although of course this order is being questioned. In accordance with the cultural conditioning that assigns the role of a globetrotter to a man—Max leaves the Citadel to continue his journey, a route into the unknown, taking another adventure. The fearless warrior Furiosa remains where she is, though of course this narrative also gives her a chance to redefine her values and foreshadows the changes to come.

The idea of women healing the world becomes another subtext of the plot. However, the director shapes multi-faceted characters to focus on empowering women and men alike to reject gender stereotypes. In the interactions between the main characters (Max Rockatansky and Emperor Furiosa), we can easily recognize mutual regard. Both Max and Furiosa prove their ability to cooperate in their struggle for survival in the post-apocalyptic world in which the fertility of the earth and human bodies, as well as the access to water sources have become scarce. Furiosa functions as the moral centre of the narrative, while Max supports her efforts, assisting her in the mission to destroy Immortan Joe's tyranny.

Some scholars (Michelle Yates, Taylor Boulware, Keridwen N. Luis), as well as media commentators, have suggested that *Mad Max: Fury Road* can be viewed from a feminist perspective due to its emphasis on the liberation of women from a patriarchal society. In addition, Charlize Theron's Emperor Furiosa is to many viewers the real hero in the fourth part of Miller's saga. Aaron Clarey, writing for a website titled *Return of Kings*, a site known for its anti-feminist coverage, even called for a boycott of the film:

This is the vehicle by which they [Hollywood and the director of *Mad Max: Fury Road*] are guaranteed to force a lecture on feminism down your throat. This is the Trojan Horse feminists and Hollywood leftists will use to (vainly) insist on the trope women are equal to men in all things, including physique, strength, and logic. And this is the subterfuge they will use to blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, further ruining women for men, and men for women.

As Alexis de Coning details, the outrage expressed by the so-called men's rights activists (MRA) after seeing the whole film (not just the film trailer)

began reducing. Having not discussed or even mentioned the uniqueness of the film's portrayal of a masculinity, they tried to downplay the aspect of feminist topics (174–75).³

Moreover, the director George Miller involved women off screen, beginning with the editor Margaret Sixel. In 2016, winning the Academy Award for Best Editing for *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Sixel became the first South African-born editor to win Oscar (Rochlin). Also, Eve Ensler, the feminist author of *The Vagina Monologues*, was invited to work on the film as a consultant. She enthusiastically admitted:

I read the script and was blown away. One out of three women on the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime—it's a central issue of our time, and that violence against women relates to racial and economic injustice. This movie takes those issues head-on. I think George Miller is a feminist, and he made a feminist action film. . . . George was looking to create empowered women, not victims, and I think he accomplished that. I don't remember seeing so many women of all different ages in any movie before. I was really blown away by the older women in the film who were just as good fighters as the men. I'd never seen that before. (Dockterman)

The film elicited much praise, as well as criticism, provoking very different interpretations. Martínez Jiménez, Gálvez Muñoz and Solano Caballero in their article “Neoliberalism Goes Pop and Purple: Postfeminist Empowerment from Beyoncé to *Mad Max*” argue with the thesis about its genuine feminist message. As they observe, behind its success stands the call for ecological awareness and expressing female power, but this call is “channelled through violence, masculinity, and shrillness for the sake of survival in a highly phallic world” (414–16). The article also clearly indicates the social message of the film that legitimizes the neo-liberal social order. In the writers' opinion, Furiosa's strength is based on the construct of displacing stereotypically understood female attributes, and even more, her successes can be attributed to the typically masculine features that she has adopted, and any failures are the result of her inability to break away from what is left of her female nature. The compassion and empathy of Furiosa, an androgynous woman with a cyborg arm, started the events of the film, and her determination allowed for a dangerous escape. However, it is worth paying more attention to the interventional role of Max who, as

³ While characterizing the discourse on martyrdom in Hollywood cinema, Laura Copier studies the representations of gender and the body in female action heroes. The author emphasizes that the debate about *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s feminism is to “expose the sensitivity regarding the role female characters can fulfil in a popular culture that is predominantly targeted at a male, adolescent audience” (286–87).

a hero, appears to be only seemingly overshadowed by such an expressive role of the Empress—after all, it is he who suggests a plan to return and take over the Citadel. Thus, the film seems to carry a simple message—Immortan Joe “killed the world,” but there are still men like Max, who can ensure the survival of the entire community. Furiosa’s ability to be violent and cruel (resulting from the long process of oppression to which she was subjected) is justified by her thirst for revenge, and with the elimination of the torturer (Immortan Joe), it fades away. In the final scenes, Furiosa, the conqueror of the Citadel, regains her composure and is ready to take on the next challenge of healing the society. Here, the creation of her image is radically different from the opening scenes of the film—Furiosa, devoid of the lust for revenge and thus devoid of the apparatus of violence (usually considered an attribute of masculinity), finds redemption in the space of the home—the private sphere, traditionally identified as a woman’s place. She returns in the completely new role of a victorious rebel who brings hope for a better tomorrow into this space.

Jessica Valenti duplicates this objection, pointing out that Furiosa (Theron’s character) expresses as much violence as any other action hero, but in the context of the horror of sexism and the necessity of freedom from patriarchy. She adds: “That is what’s truly terrifying to some men—not that Theron has more lines than actor Tom Hardy” (Valenti). Michael W. Pesses in his essay on the ideology of ecomobility, which demands a hybrid of human and machine, asks an intriguing question: “Can anyone sincerely argue that the vehicles of *Fury Road* are less important to the film than the women?” (43). However, for a certain type of audience, *Mad Max: Fury Road* remains a feminist action film—formulating a critique of society from the feminist perspective, challenging traditional beauty standards and presenting characters with features not determined by their gender, addressing female problems in a male genre. The film’s advocates, among whom I would definitely place myself, highlight the active contribution and participation of female characters in the creation of their own stories. In addition to the feminist context, the scholars of disability studies have also praised the positive impact of *Mad Max: Fury Road* due to its non-stigmatizing and nuanced representations of disabled bodies (Fletcher and Primack 344–57).

In the apocalyptic narrative of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, female characters are symbolically linked to a better past and they carry the promise of a better future. Images of Miss Giddy, Valkyrie, Keeper of the Seeds and the motorcycle-riding Vuvalini stand in opposition to the sick, passive and repressed post-apocalyptic society. The film does not simply reverse gender stereotypes—Max Rockatansky has never been emasculated, but is also never represented as a typically masculine hero type. The

plot presents gender issues in line with ecofeminist concerns. Mainly, it offers the indication that any kind of unjust treatment or control is interrelated—so the liberation of women and environmentalism have a common goal (Sierakowska). According to essentialist accounts, women have been frequently associated with nature as birth-givers and nurturers, or relegated to the private sphere (Ortner). Yates, in her study, clearly addresses the concern of ecofeminist scholars connected with the nature and culture dichotomy. That duality corresponds with the view of women being passive like nature, with men (representing culture) as the ones who situate themselves as subjects of events. However, we can witness how that dichotomic pattern is challenged in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Yates 357–59).

As Cenk Tan highlights, Furiosa's rebellion is symbolic of nature's rebellion against patriarchy to survive. Men's destructive nature has caused wars and brought the world and the whole human population into chaos. Women and "Mother Nature" stand side by side. Finally, Furiosa was able to release the water in the Citadel—to green the desert hold, and to humanize its inhabitants (Tan 41–42). Furiosa in her quest for the Green Place hopes to find redemption referring to being saved from evil and reclaiming one's freedom. What has also been studied is the lesbian subtext in the film: whether coded in the plot, without the overtly inevitable heterosexual love story for any of the female characters, or in the film language. After all, Furiosa introduces herself as the daughter of "many mothers"; within the harem the wives refer to each other as "sisters" (Luis 43–45).

In a broader perspective, the action film genre was until this episode dominated by men alongside rather trivial female personalities, or rather a complete lack of them: *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Soylent Green* (1973), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Road* (2009), *World War Z* (2013). The presence of female characters in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is significant compared to the minimal and diminished roles of women in the previous parts of Miller's saga. These characters are not infantilized, marginalized or demonized (as in the example of Auntie Entity, the ruthless ruler from *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, played by Tina Turner), but, importantly, neither are they idolized. Miller breaks away from the conventional male narrative action formula, as well as the perennial feminized fairy-tale visions. *Mad Max: Fury Road* breaks the rules by creating a rebellious heroine—Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron—the vengeful protector of oppressed girls, a female amputee soldier with a bionic arm, compassionate but also violent and fearsome, definitely a multi-faceted character. She exhibits masculine stereotype traits: a tendency towards violence, reticence, determination and the capacity for radical leadership.

Next to Furiosa stands the group of five fleeing slave-wives, breeders, a biker gang of older women, the Vuvalini, the last survivors of a matriarchal Waste Land tribe. On the margins of this discourse, we can point to a “secondary harem” (breast-milked women) who are featured in an initial scene of the film depicting women hooked up like cows to milking machines. Right from the beginning, Furiosa is portrayed in deep contrast to the wives displaying stereotypical female characteristics. Her beauty is not sexualized in any way. Seemingly, the wives are physically and mentally fragile and desperately in need of protection (Du Plooy 422–26). Of course, they have been victimized by a patriarchal dictator but they also dared to escape, leaving the question on walls of his empty harem “Who killed the world?”

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In the first appearance of the Wives surprised by Max’s presence (while drinking from a hose in the middle of a desert, immediately after surviving a deadly chase), they boldly declare: “We are not coming back.” As has already been mentioned—their bold declaration and feminist perspective contrast with the “the male gaze” of their depiction. As the film progresses, they develop into complex, expressive characters. We witness the evolving image of female characters—from victims to warriors. A maternal figure to the Wives (especially to The Dag) becomes The Keeper of the Seeds, the most vocal member of the Vuvalini. The Keeper of the Seeds is literally carrying civilization strapped to her motorcycle alongside her rifle. After her death the seeds of a new life are taken by the Wives to ensure that the Keeper and the Green Place will endure.

Surprisingly, *Mad Max: Fury Road* emerges as a work of socially engaged cinema preoccupied with the cultural context of gender discourse in the way in which it appeals to the old archetype of a female warrior, expressed through the figure of Amazons, as a figure that has been marginalized. The other films of this genre typically showed the actions of individuals, and their narratives were built around fearless heroines acting alone or alongside the main male characters: Wonder Woman, Lara Croft, Sarah Connor or Ellen Ripley. In these characterizations, we can speak of a kind of duplication of the superhero model of male characters in Hollywood stories. Gradually, from the traditional film roles of ladies and guardians of the hearth, women entered the roles of femme fatales, warriors and vengeful avengers, but their commitment to community building or team cooperation in the spirit of sisterhood was not exhibited.

On the whole, the film’s dystopian narrative is a mesmerizing text, in which one can study the aspect of gender, particularly concerned with questions of social power and oppression. Significantly, the 88th Academy Awards honoured *Mad Max: Fury Road* with six awards out of ten. Although the film was not awarded in either of the two

most important categories—Best Picture and Best Director—the result is still impressive. The mere presence, and above all the form in which the cast of the film presented themselves at the gala, undoubtedly broke the cultural code repeated every year by the artistic and media circles of Hollywood. As Jenny Beavan, *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s costume designer, mounted the Oscar podium wearing a vegan leather jacket with the Immortan Joe symbol on the back, striped scarf, pants and boots, she definitely decided for her outfit to have a positive effect on how women feel about themselves and how they perceive themselves. She seems to have emphasized that being successful does not have to go hand in hand with projecting an idealized image.

Undoubtedly, apocalyptic visions in film are not new. However, we can clearly read *Mad Max: Fury Road* as a commentary on the climate catastrophe and its political and social background. To some extent, the film's manifesto is exposed even too explicitly—it is visualized very literally in the scene depicting the wall of the young women's cell with the slogan that reads "We are not things." Interestingly, it was this slogan that accompanied the social protests of the feminist social movement—the All-Poland Women's Strike.⁴ What makes *Mad Max: Fury Road* additionally intriguing is not only the fact that it is a successful update of the classic version of the film. First of all, it has the potential to discuss the feminist message, which is surprising for this type of genre. I am inclined to argue that, in a sense, the interpretation of this Hollywood production hides a certain "feminist loophole." Surely, the film has an overarching message that a world without women has no *raison d'être*, since they are life givers and their participation is needed if a new world is to be built. The objectification of women also clearly correlates with climate change and thus the creators succeed as *Mad Max: Fury Road* undoubtedly remains a peculiar example of this genre.

⁴ In this context, I would like to quote the fragment of *Furious Feminisms*, a collective academic feedback of Alexis L. Boylan, Anna Mae Duane, Michael Gill and Barbara Gurr, representing such research areas as American literature, art history, sociology and disability studies, who commented on the feminist credentials of this film in the following way: "Looking back at this popular movie released the year before a U.S. presidential election with a plot that features a decrepit and lecherous old man surrounded by sycophants literally blowing white smoke, it all seems terrifyingly prophetic . . . In short, *Mad Max: Fury Road* exemplifies the experience of twenty-first-century popular culture in which something that is *supposed* to be fun and even comfortingly nostalgic—like a long-running summer movie fantasy franchise—instead elicits a hysterical response to evolving gender politics that have become increasingly attached to fandom. The film initiated a cultural moment in which fans insisted that art provide a set of ideological deliverables. In this era, offering divergent readings of the same text places one on threatening, enemy territory; a text refusing to give the viewer what they want generates rage, retrenchment, and recrimination" (8).

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Aligning with Sociopaths: Character Engagement Strategies in Highsmith's and Minghella's *Talented Mr. Ripley*s

ABSTRACT

Patricia Highsmith's stated reason for writing *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) was to see if she could elicit empathetic engagement for her immoral protagonist Tom Ripley. Amongst other factors, she achieves her goal by allowing readers to align affectively with the protagonist's road to self-discovery. Her experiment culminates with Tom's fruition into an aggressive consumer, thus resolving his and the readers' apprehensions. On the other hand, Anthony Minghella's *Ripley* leaves more room for interpretation. In his interviews, the filmmaker states that he does not aim for his protagonist to remain the sociopath from Highsmith's novel. Instead, his story explores the absence of a father figure and how it affects his main characters. Consequently, he frames Tom as an underprivileged youth whose emotional instability brings about his demise. To this end, he employs victimization scenes, as well as moral disengagement cues. I argue that, amongst other factors, such an application of an industry-tested design of emphatic concern elicitation obscures the filmmaker's initial intent. As a result, Minghella's Tom can be seen as a manipulative sociopath, as well as a victimized tragic hero.

Keywords: empathy elicitation, antisocial personality disorder, emphatic concern, antihero, enjoyment, character engagement, identification.

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

The idea for this paper came after a screening of Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999). I found a discrepancy in interpretation between my students and me. After several close viewings, I was sure I understood the film in the way that Minghella envisioned. I found insight into his intentions most notably in his screenplay. Yet the students' reactions correlated with my original perception of the film. The difference is this: either the film's protagonist is, as my students suggested, a brilliant though sociopathic social climber, or, as Minghella envisioned, an outsider spurred to violence by his unrecognized longing for a family. Coincidentally, the former case constitutes the essence of the source material that is Patricia Highsmith's novel of the same title (1955). However, it was Minghella's reinterpretation of Tom's romantic disposition that garnered most critical scrutiny. Minghella was criticized for having "larded the character with a conscience" (Minghella, *Interviews* 97). The discussion ignored the fluidity with which the filmmaker had refined his protagonist. As a result, the film, which is possibly one of the best depictions of postwar American expatriate life, did not earn the accolades of Minghella's acknowledged masterpieces, like *The English Patient* (1996).¹

Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley is often considered to be one of the most popular "sociopaths" in literature. The author's success lies in her ability to invent an identifiable character who throughout the Ripliad remains believably antisocial (Massey 167–68). Highsmith makes the nature of her experiment explicit when she writes: "[W]hat I predicted I would once do, I am doing already in this very book [*Ripley*] . . . that is, showing the unequivocal triumph of evil over good, and rejoicing in it. I shall make my readers rejoice in it, too" (qtd. in Schenkar ch. 11). Unsurprisingly, Tom's identifiability as a character makes for an interesting case study of empathy elicitation strategies, by which I mean storytellers' endeavours to induce and sustain empathetic engagement with their characters.

As far as the critical reaction is concerned, Highsmith's novels are often thought to have been eclipsed by their film adaptations.² According to literary scholar Edward Shannon, such was the case with Minghella's *Ripley* (17). This seems to be true when comparing the immediate reception, however, "Minghella's film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and the reissuing of her

¹ Note that *Patient* won nine Academy Awards including "Best Director" for Minghella while *Ripley* earned five nominations but failed to win in any of the categories (see "Oscars").

² Edward Shannon provides the earlier example of Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 adaptation of Highsmith's 1949 novel *Strangers on a Train*, which "earned more critical respect and attention" (17).

novels” have brought about a positive reevaluation of her work (Wilson 463). We can accept that Minghella’s craftsmanship may have been instrumental and it is probable that his attempt to revise Tom’s character from Highsmith’s antisocial antihero³ to a more relatable tragic hero earned a wider consideration for *Ripley*. Minghella’s intention was thus to forgo Highsmith’s bold narrative experiment for the sake of an industry-tested strategy, aiming to elicit primarily sympathetic identification.

EMPATHETIC ENGAGEMENT

I base my understanding of empathetic engagement on the research of film studies scholars Berys Gaut and Amy Coplan. Firstly, Gaut maintains that narrative identification is “aspectual” in that a viewer’s alignment with a character may be based on four aspects. He argues that those include the (1) affective, (2) perceptual, (3) motivational and (4) epistemic. This means that (1) imagining feeling what a character feels, (2) imagining seeing as a character sees, (3) imagining wanting what a character wants and (4) imagining believing what a character believes constitute the four alternative modes of empathetic engagement (137–52). This is an important distinction made in contrast to the common understanding of empathy as “feeling with others” which limits the phenomenon to the affective aspect (see Keen 83, Batson 15). Therefore, I understand empathetic engagement to be taking place when readers or viewers imaginatively experience psychological states congruously to a character, while simultaneously maintaining a clear self/other differentiation. Coplan makes the important argument that audience members remain aware of the boundaries between them and the character (147–49). More importantly, they are not limited to the states of the perceived characters as this would suggest that empathy and emphatic concern are mutually exclusive.

Emphatic concern (from now on referred to as sympathy) stands in contrast to the affective aspect of empathetic engagement in that it is reader or viewer specific. Narrative sympathy or the feelings of care and concern for a character’s well-being is an other-oriented affective state that the character presumably does not experience (Batson 11). For an instance, if a protagonist, such as Tom, is publicly berated for his low economic status

³ Unlike the antiheroes of the gangster or film noir era, Highsmith’s antihero is defined by his limited capacity to empathize with other characters. In this quality, he is arguably one of the precursors of such contemporary antisocial-antiheroes as Dexter Morgan of *Dexter* (2006–13), Walter White of *Breaking Bad* (2008–13), Frank Underwood of *The House of Cards* (2013–18), James and Alyssa of *The End of the F***ing World* (2017–) or Andrew Cunanan of *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2016).

by a philandering socialite, chances are that readers might be angered by the assailant and become resentful of his privilege. Conceivably, the protagonist experiences similar sentiments. Thus readers align with the character both affectively (they and the character are angry with the socialite) and epistemically (both consider the socialite to be unjustifiably arrogant). In other words, readers experience empathy for the protagonist. However, if they additionally pity the character, then they are concurrently sympathizing with him. It is conceivable that in such a scenario the victimized protagonist might experience self-pity. It would seem that this affect is also congruous to that of readers. However, psychologist Nancy Eisenberg argues that other-oriented concern differs from concern for one's own wellbeing (15–17). Nevertheless, this sort of empathy and sympathy based engagement is consistent with what Noel Carroll describes as a sympathetic bond (“On Some Affective Relations” 177–79). I delineate this distinction between the affective aspect of empathy and sympathy because herein lies the major difference in Highsmith and Minghella's strategies; in contrast to the novelist, the filmmaker is concerned with eliciting pity for Tom.

Returning to the previously described scenario, if the exchange causes us to feel hostility towards the philandering socialite without arousing pity for the protagonist, we are empathetically engaged, though we have not formed a sympathetic bond with the main character (this is most often Highsmith's mode). However, what impedes our sympathetic reaction is a lack of what Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) (Zillmann and Cantor) describes as a positive moral judgement. ADT's model for affective responding during suspenseful drama maintains that viewers pass a moral judgment on characters during the duration of a narrative. If a character continuously displays positive attributes and behaviour, such as helping others, the audience will most likely assess that character positively. According to Murray Smith's comparable model, the Structure of Sympathy, such judgement will lead to a “positive allegiance” or a sympathetic identification (83–86). However, if the character displays negative qualities or conduct, such as killing a friend, the resulting negative moral judgement might lead the viewer to form an antipathetic disposition. To counter this, storytellers can rely on moral disengagement cues. This device, which includes “dialog, innuendo, allusions,” seeks to influence the audience's moral evaluation of characters (see Shafer and Raney 1038). A moral disengagement cue, therefore, will most often be a scene or a narrative event that justifies destructive behaviour. Minghella applies such cues during his adaptation's central murder scene.

Empathetic engagement strategies rely on the storyteller's application of what I call “empathy facilitators.” These are various textual/visual cues and techniques that promote empathetic engagement in the affective,

motivational, perceptual and epistemic aspects. I do not write “elicitor” or “elicitation” because these terms connote the assumption that the application of empathy facilitators guarantees empathetic engagement and that each facilitator autonomously carries elicitation potential. These devices are rarely effective when utilized independently. Instead, they need to be implemented as elements of a larger, sustained strategy targeting a given character. They include a wide range of theorist’s and researcher’s notions such as Wayne Booth’s “inside views” (163), Edward Branigan’s “projections” (132–33); Greg M. Smith’s “emotion markers” (45), Karl Iglesias’s “victimization scenes” and “virtue display” (70–73), Margrethe Brun Vaage’s “POV structures” (159), and so on.

ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER

Among other aspects, Highsmith’s novel owes its appeal to Tom’s character being a believable representation of the antisocial personality disorder. According to the American Psychiatric Association, this affliction is characterized by “a failure to conform to lawful and ethical behaviour, and an egocentric, callous lack of concern for others, accompanied by deceitfulness, irresponsibility, manipulativeness, and/or risk-taking” (764). Highsmith convincingly characterizes Tom as having an egocentric drive, a lack of conscience, a limited ability to empathize, and most importantly an “incapacity for mutually intimate relationships” (764). Arguably Tom behaves within the boundaries of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*’ criteria of a sociopath.

In both the novel and the adaptation, at the bidding of a New York shipping tycoon, Herbert Greenleaf, Tom travels to Europe to convince the man’s son, Dickie Greenleaf, to return home. Since Tom is the novel’s focalizer, the reader is granted access to his perspective. This insight allows us to see that his attempts to befriend characters are underscored by self-serving pragmatism. In social interactions, Tom is often “God-damned bloody bored,” all the while remaining self-monitoring (Highsmith 6). His first interaction in the novel is riddled with evidence of his emotional instability. His moods swing from “ecstatic moments” of fantasizing about his unwarrantedly golden future, to failure or fear-inspired sensations of “dizziness and nausea” (36, 86).

In the first chapter, Tom is cornered into a conversation by the aforementioned Herbert Greenleaf. During the exchange, Tom notes “that all his muscles had tensed” (7). Such behaviour, psychologist Martha Stout argues, is a telling quality of sociopaths. A “lack of conscience” may render such individuals incapable of experiencing a range of affects. To veil their

lack of empathy, sociopaths might mimic the observed displays of emotions (Stout 6–7). This seems to be Tom’s case, as the narrator informs us that the man remains untouched by Greenleaf’s humiliating desperation while finding it necessary to fake “maniacal politeness.” He becomes invested in the conversation only once he realizes that its outcome could afford him a paid trip to Europe.

Highsmith does not attempt to obscure Tom’s emotional instability from the reader. Instead, she fearlessly reiterates the protagonist’s objectionable feelings. It is possible that her antisocial-antihero might initially arouse the readers’ curiosity. However, once his increasingly egotistical tendencies spiral into the homicidal domain, chances are that most readers will pass a negative moral judgement on Tom. Highsmith does not attempt to mitigate their resulting antipathy by using moral disengagement cues.⁴ Instead, she employs a sustained subjective narration, meaning she filters the story solely through her protagonist. Thus, Highsmith aligns the readers with Tom’s affects, perspective, motivations and beliefs, relying most often on projections and inside views.

An example that demonstrates Highsmith’s strategy here is her handling of Tom’s second victim, Freddie Miles. In Minghella’s adaptation, he is a philandering socialite who publicly berates Tom. Once Tom kills Dickie, the man he was supposed to convince to return to America, Freddie is one of the first characters who comes close to the truth. When he confronts Tom, Minghella relies on moral disengagement cues to mitigate the effects of his death. His revised character is substantially more contentious and condescending towards Tom. Minghella characterizes him in a manner that makes his death seem justified. Highsmith undertakes a very different approach. Her Freddie is not as demeaning as he is inquisitive. Still, when he confronts Tom, Highsmith describes him in the following manner: “Freddie was the kind of ox who might beat up somebody he thought was a pansy, especially if the conditions were as propitious as these” (109). She consistently details this character as “ugly, freckled” or “uninteresting.” Highsmith uses “projections” or an empathy facilitator through which diegetic elements “reflect a character’s mental state” thus making it explicit (Branigan 132–33). In this case, Tom’s distaste for Freddie taints the descriptions of the character. Since Highsmith employs a fairly reliable narrator, readers are unlikely to doubt Freddie’s objectionability. This aligns them perceptually with Tom; they both hold a similar view of Freddie.

⁴ Highsmith does include a few victimization scenes especially towards the novel’s beginning; amongst others, Tom remembers his psychologically abusive aunt Dotie (Highsmith 28). However, the aim of those scenes is primarily to provide the reader with a credible backstory. Highsmith does not use this empathy facilitator in a manner that would render it a systematic element of her engagement strategy.

Seconds before killing Freddie, Highsmith grants the reader the following insight into Tom: “He tried to think just for two seconds more: wasn’t there another way out? What would he do with the body? He couldn’t think. This was the only way out” (110). This subjective access into Tom is an example of an empathy facilitator that Wayne Booth calls an “inside view” (163–66). This device is closely related to Gérard Genette’s notion of “internal focalization” which “represents a view of the fictional world through the eyes of a character” (Fludernik 153). More specifically, Highsmith constructs this inside view by using free-indirect speech. The narrator relates Tom’s thoughts in a way that blurs the distinction between her and the protagonist. As with the previous example, Highsmith’s narrator “becomes” Tom, transferring her authority onto him. Researchers have found that such use of free-indirect speech prompts the readers to perceive the thoughts and actions of the accessed character “to be more justified and rationalized” (see Dixon and Bortolussi 405–30; Kotovych et al. 260–88). In this case, Highsmith ensures that readers recognize Tom’s reluctance to kill Freddie, as well as his inability to find an alternative to the situation. Those of them who believe the narrator’s words will have aligned epistemically with Tom.

A TRAGIC HERO

Where Highsmith makes *Ripley* an exercise in making readers rejoice over “the unequivocal triumph of evil over good,” Minghella takes a more inquisitive approach (qtd. in Schenkar ch. 11). He admits his lack of interest in telling the story of a sociopathic killer. His aim is to make the audience perceive the “humanity” of Tom’s character and to “see how that humanity gets corrupted” (Minghella, *Interviews* 68). He envisioned *Ripley* to be the story of a “child who makes a small mistake, tries to cover it up, and in the process, sets off on a journey of bigger and bigger mistakes” (64). Undeniably, Tom searches for a family, but when his endeavours fail, he settles for a family name, appropriating the “Greenleaf” identity.

Many of Minghella’s intentions are explicit in his screenplay, but only implicit in the film. Additionally, before seeing the adaptation, many viewers are likely to be preconditioned by Highsmith’s novel, the film’s promotional trailers⁵ or both. The effect of this may be that many of them may expect Tom to be a ruthless social climber, rather than Minghella’s

⁵ Most versions of the trailer feature the following scenes: Tom spying through binoculars; Tom befriending Dickie; Tom performing chilling impressions; Tom handling potential murder weapons; Tom smiling sinisterly; Marge asking, “why is it when men play, they always play at killing each other?”

misguided orphan. Moreover, critics and scholars reactions tend to focus on the film's sexual nuances, further obscuring Minghella's intended vision. For these reasons, we can observe a split in interpretations, especially of Tom's character. It is, therefore, unsurprising that where some see a vulnerable youth searching for love, others see an ambitious sociopath carefully calculating his interactions.

Matt Damon's depiction of Tom Ripley serves well to illustrate the point. His self-reflexive role required that he graduate between his performance and his character's performance. It is rarely clear whether Damon's Tom is being honest or whether he is performing in order to gain something. Still, the screenplay indicates that until his first murder, he remains transparent to Dickie and his girlfriend Marge. After Tom befriends Dickie, their short-lived camaraderie is interrupted by Freddie Miles's appearance. The estranged Tom sits alone on Dickie's sailboat as his friends frolic in the azure waters. Marge, recognizing his distress, approaches. In the screenplay, Minghella specifies in the action description that she is "conscious of [Tom's] isolation." "The thing with Dickie," she explains, "it's like the sun shines on you and it's glorious, then he forgets you and it's very very cold" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 29). The scene is meant to inform the audience that Tom feels jealous and betrayed. However, those primed to Tom's manipulateness will assume him to be consciously eliciting Marge's compassion, alternatively veiling anger. Regardless of the filmed scene's interpretation, in the screenplay it is evident that Minghella intended for Tom to share in a moment of sincerity or connection. This is something that the novel's character does not do; he remains isolated by his "incapacity for mutually intimate relationships." Conversely, Minghella invents a string of scenes in which Tom solicits affection, or at least acknowledgement. These constitute his journey to find a family.

TOM'S DESIRES

Aside from Minghella's declared motivations, his revision of Highsmith's protagonist introduces an advantageous shift in the narrative. Tom's overt vulnerability and seeming desire for connection, in theory, bolsters the potential for viewers' sympathetic identification. Screenwriting theorist Karl Iglesias argues that virtue displays may include a scene in which "a character lets down his defences and shows his humanity in private moments, when he thinks no one is looking"; moreover, characters' displays of qualities such as "love, politeness, justice, generosity, compassion, and tolerance" bolster the audience's engagement with those characters (70–73).

Scholars agree with Iglesias's hypothesis noting that positive attributes are conducive to a sympathetic bond, with some considering such qualities a prerequisite (see Tan 178; Carroll 173).

Many critics and theorists who undertake an analysis of Minghella's revision of Tom focus on the sexual aspect (see Bronski 41–43; Williams 49; Schwanbeck 357). For example, Edward A. Shannon argues that where Highsmith's Tom is "apparently asexual," Minghella introduces scenes that attest to his attraction to Dickie (22). Accordingly, Minghella presents Tom as a victim of bigotry and his own desires (18).

While Shannon's reading of Minghella's Tom is reductive, his observations about Highsmith's protagonist are certainly valid. In the novel, evidence as to Tom's sexual preferences is circumstantial. Highsmith's Tom harbours an apparent desire for Dickie's attention. But as romantic themes see no significant development in the novel, the unacknowledged physical attraction gives Tom an extra layer of complexity. More importantly, Highsmith contrives such ambiguities to confuse her readers. Her strategy is to withhold the information that, in reality, Tom desires not Dickie but his identity. Significantly, Tom is also unaware of this fact.

Highsmith produces several accounts to play with readers' expectations. Tom, for example, resents the fact that Dickie is having an affair with Marge. For Tom, Dickie functions as an aesthetic concept which, in his mind, the "unsophisticated-looking" Marge disrupts (Highsmith 15). Furthermore, Highsmith's narrator informs us of Tom's enjoyment of drag skit performances (29); we are told that he remembers keeping chaste company with "queer" men in New York, and that Tom recalls that one of his party routines included declaring to the group that he was giving both sexes up since he could not make up his mind as to which he preferred (62). This last example is most likely the reference that led Shannon to assert Tom's asexuality. On a side note, literary scholar Susan Massey notes that "Highsmith claimed that there was much of her own personality in Ripley's representation" (168). Much as Tom views Dickie as an aesthetic concept, one that he prefers to be untainted by the likes of Marge, it is conceivable that Highsmith held similar ideas about Tom. This might be the reason that she chose to keep her "favourite character" unencumbered by relationships with his fictional inferiors.

As the plot of *Ripley* unfolds, ambiguities as to Tom's desire persist. After having an unresolvable (in Tom's mind) argument with Dickie, the men decide to partake in a final farewell trip. As Dickie naps on the train, Tom observes him. Highsmith uses an inside view to relate the "crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration [that] swelled in him, hampering his breathing" (76). She invites the reader to interpret Tom's state as an eruptive passion. In the subsequent sentence,

Highsmith reveals that these emotions amount to Tom's wanting to "to kill Dickie" so that he can steal his identity. This realization seems to have a transformative effect on Tom. "The danger of it," the narrator relates, "even the inevitable temporariness of it which he vaguely realized, only made him more enthusiastic" (77).

Highsmith frequently reasserts Tom's unwitting search for a new identity. During the trip to Europe, he buys an English cap and revels in its potential to make him "look like a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American eccentric, depending on how he wore it" (25–26). As an enthusiast of impersonations, Tom observes that "the main thing about impersonation . . . was to maintain the mood and temperament of the person one was impersonating, and to assume the facial expressions that went with them" (102). Highsmith produces several more foreshadowings of Tom's transformation when he revels in Dickie's clothes and jewellery (59).

The confusion concerning Tom's identity overarches Highsmith's empathy elicitation strategy. On the ground level, she keeps her readers submerged in Tom's experience using empathy facilitators such as the aforementioned projections. On the dramatic level, she ensures that the readers' confusion is aligned with that of the protagonist. The resulting engagement is both affective and epistemic. As mentioned, Tom remains at emotional extremes throughout the novel. His moods pivot when he feels his future is either secure or jeopardized. In such moments, Highsmith utilizes free-indirect speech to promote readers' alignment with Tom. For example, when Tom feels he has escaped justice, the narrator slips into the protagonist's thoughts, "he could have flown—like a bird, out of the window, with spread arms! The idiots! All around the thing and never guessing it!" (162). As the story develops, Tom grows more aware of the temporariness of his living under Dickie's identity. He knows he will have to move on, but Highsmith withholds the realization of his true identity until the novel's conclusion.

The author makes her character's inclination clear in the novel's final act. Once Tom is settled into Dickie's identity, he passes his evenings looking at his trophies, "feeling Dickie's rings between his palms and running his fingers over the antelope suitcase he had bought at Gucci's. . . . He loved possessions. . . . They gave a man self-respect. . . . Possessions reminded him that he existed" (193). Any trace of Dickie's stolen identity is eclipsed by the beautiful items. It is they that define the protagonist. Having experienced the protagonist's turbulent journey of self-discovery, the puzzled reader arrives at Tom's realization—he is a consumer with an undeniable aesthetic sensitivity. Tom, they find, may be strange, asexual, even sociopathic, but at least he can appreciate a good Gucci bag.

SYMPATHY AND ANTIPATHY

In the film, Dickie, who has been murdered by Tom, becomes the chief suspect in Freddie Miles's murder. His father, Herbert Greenleaf, becomes involved in the investigation. Upon arrival in Europe, he says to Tom: "You know, people always say you can't choose your parents, but you can't choose your children" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 73). Minghella comments on Greenleaf's dialogue noting that "there's such a disappointment in his own son, and you feel that is the key to Ripley's escape: Herbert Greenleaf thinks the only person who is capable of behaving badly in the world is his own child" (*Interviews* 68). Unlike in the novel, Herbert Greenleaf is at the heart of Tom's search for a family. Significantly, it is he who sits at the top of the film's most significant love triangle that is central to Minghella's engagement strategy. The absent father figure that Greenleaf represents is the presumed root of all the tragedy that occurs in the adaptation.

Returning to Edward A. Shannon's argument, he claims that Minghella's Tom desires to have a relationship with either Dickie or another character by the name of Peter Smith-Kingsley. Again, this detail is significant to the engagement strategy. Either Tom is capable of caring for others which, as the aforementioned studies show, is a trait that promotes audiences' empathetic engagement, or Tom is Highsmith's self-serving sociopath. If the latter was true, Minghella would need to embrace a more innovative empathy facilitation approach.

Wanting to convey Tom's attraction to Dickie, Minghella introduces a bath scene into the film. The two men play chess while Dickie soaks in the tub. After he rejects Tom's subtle offer of "sharing a bath" he "holds his look momentarily before flicking [Tom] with his towel" (*Shooting Draft* 22). While the sensual undertones are clear, the scene does not function as Tom's virtue display. The protagonist's desire, which otherwise could work as a sympathy eliciting quality, is contestable as many viewers might interpret Tom's seduction attempt as a display of his manipulateness. Conceivably, such a scene might promote a negative moral judgement of Tom. Minghella, aware of this, reinvents Peter Smith-Kingsley. In the film, the character supports Tom during the murder investigation, until he too falls prey to Tom's murderous tendencies. Significantly, after Tom kills Dickie, he rouses the audience's antipathy which could be mitigated, amongst other things, by a virtue display. That considered, Minghella explains the symbolism of Tom's murders in the following manner: "Ripley [is] killing lust or desire or passion with Dickie and then killing the possibility of love with Peter" (*Interviews* 76). In other words, the filmmaker assumes that the latter interaction held the potential for a mutually intimate relationship. Such

development would have amounted to a significant virtue display, one that could have promoted a moral reevaluation of Tom.

A positive assessment of Tom matters to Minghella's strategy as it is a prerequisite to the sympathetic identification which the filmmaker wishes to elicit. An audience passes moral judgements independently of the empathetic engagement process; however, to identify sympathetically, they first need to empathize with the given character. In other words, empathetic engagement allows a positive moral judgment of a character to establish a sympathetic identification. This assumption is consistent with what film researchers Greg Smith and Carl Plantinga observe, namely that that sympathy entails processes constituent of empathetic engagement (see *Film Structure* 98; *Moving Viewers* 100). On the other hand, Highsmith's strategy relies primarily on facilitating empathy, which may be promoted despite a negative moral judgement. A reader may be empathetically engaged by Tom despite disliking him. For this reason, readers' antipathy towards the protagonist is not as grave a concern for Highsmith.

Minghella's revision of Dickie's murder manifests the sympathy elicitation efforts that are essential to his method. In the novel, Dickie's death is a result of Tom's cool calculations. Knowing his host's hospitality has run its course, Tom has the "brilliant" idea that "if he killed him . . . he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself" (Highsmith 77). The killing takes place as the two men set out to sail around San Remo. Though Minghella retains "the oar" as the weapon of choice, Tom does not contemplate the murder, nor does he distract his opponent before attacking him. Instead, he confronts Dickie about his feelings. He is ridiculed and threatened, and thus justified, before he "shocks himself" by striking. Moreover, the murder that follows plays out more like an act of self-defence. Dickie "launches himself at Ripley," and once the struggle ends, Tom "sprawls there, sobbing, next to Dickie, horrified by what he's done" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 39). Minghella's audience has sufficient motivation to suspend their moral judgment. In the screenplay, the filmmaker describes the killing's culmination as Tom "lying by Dickie at the bottom of the boat, in the embrace he's always wanted" (38). The image that plays on-screen shows Tom folded in a foetal position. He seems childlike next to Dickie's outstretched body. It is as if he is embracing an older brother—a compelling coda to a murder which escalated from Dickie's threats to beat some sense into Tom, who assumes the stance of an abused boy, pleading for Dickie to "stop it." Minghella explains that "it's quite possible in the way that I've staged and written the sequence on the boat that Dickie could have ended up murdering Ripley" (*Interviews* 66).

The filmmaker goes further to mitigate the audience's feeling of antipathy. He encourages the viewer to pass a negative moral judgement

on Dickie, to further justify his murder. He introduces into the narrative a new character, Silvana, Dickie's pregnant mistress. Dickie's mistreatment of the woman makes Tom's questionable talents for "forging signatures, telling lies, impersonating practically anybody" trivial by contrast (*Shooting Draft* 12). Silvana's eventual suicide is a moral disengagement cue that is meant to render Tom's murder of Dickie an act of justice.

Despite the use of empathy facilitators such as virtue displays, victimization scenes and moral disengagement cues, many viewers will likely fail to reevaluate their negative moral judgement of Tom after Dickie's murder. The reason for this is that Ripley's virtue demonstrations fail. His relationships with all the characters are self-serving. As the screenplay's Freddie Miles says to Tom, "you live in Italy, sleep in Dickie's house, eat Dickie's food, wear his clothes, and his father picks up the tab" (*Shooting Draft* 29). There is a single instance of Tom offering his help to Dickie by volunteering to take the blame for Silvana's pregnancy and death. Clearly, his proposal is duplicitous as it leaves Dickie "somehow in thrall to Ripley" (32). This leads me to believe that Minghella's engagement strategy would have been more successful had he supplemented it with at least one major virtue display after Tom's murder of Dickie. Arguably, Minghella demonstrates Tom's sensitivity and love of beauty in the film's opera scene; however, the mitigation of a murder would have likely required an act of selflessness or sacrifice for the benefit of another character (see Iglesias 72). Although in the latter part of the film, Tom seems to befriend Peter Smith-Kingsley, the relationship is again one-sided: Peter takes Tom into his home; he supports Tom during the investigation; he attempts to build Tom's self-esteem. Had Tom done something selflessly for Peter, viewers would likely have reevaluated their negative moral judgement.

CAIN AND ABEL

As Tom's interactions are self-serving, he seems to demonstrate the same incapacity to form intimate relationships as his literary counterpart. Interestingly, Herbert Greenleaf is the only character whom Tom, at least initially, does not want to disappoint. Having learned that his son is fond of jazz, Tom spends his time up until he departs for Europe, blindfolded, listening to records and trying to memorize the music of famous jazz artists. Once he arrives in Mongibello, he spies on Dickie through binoculars, learning about his girlfriends, Marge and Silvana, as well as the fact that Dickie named his boat, "Bird," after Charlie Parker. Considering the innocuousness of Tom's mission—to convince Dickie to return to

America—viewers may find his overzealousness surprising, perhaps even menacing. At the least, they will recognize that Tom is highly motivated to fulfil Herbert Greenleaf's wish.

Minghella's film commences with the song "Lullaby for Cain" which proposes an analogy for Tom and Dickie's relationship. The filmmaker intersperses his narrative with suggestions of their brotherhood. Even Tom's bath scene innuendo, "we never shared a bath," references a sibling's childhood tub sharing. In their final confrontation, Tom says to Dickie, "you're the brother I never had. I'm the brother you never had" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 33). In effect, Tom's post-homicidal embrace of Dickie's body is evocative of Cain's shame at killing Abel.

The idea of Tom and Dickie's brotherhood is further reinforced by the character of Herbert Greenleaf. The character functions as the only father figure in the film. To Dickie, Herbert exists essentially as a source of an "allowance" and a constant reminder of his inadequacy. "That's my son's talent," Herbert tells Tom, "spending his allowance" (12). Minghella sees a parallel between the shortcomings of the would-be brothers. "Dickie's actions are almost as reprehensible and careless as Ripley's are," he argues. In this context, Herbert's insinuation that he would have preferred to have Tom as his son is telling of his fatherhood's condition (3). Moreover, after Dickie's presumed suicide, Herbert decides to transfer "a good part" of Dickie's income from his trust into Tom's name" (80). By doing so, he symbolically passes the remains of his fatherhood onto him. Thus Tom seems to find the family he sought. The irony is that Herbert will remain an absent father as he had been for Dickie. Tom and Dickie's fatherlessness is the implied root of their self-centeredness, anger and their resulting proclivity for violence. In other words, both men are essentially the same estranged, tragic character—this is the overlooked core of Minghella's film.

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WITH A LITTLE SEX

Highsmith's engagement strategy entails that Tom is not a victim but a perpetrator. She facilitates readers' alignment with her character by employing a highly subjective narration. Moreover, Highsmith creates an overarching mechanism that encourages a motivational alignment with her protagonist as he searches for a new identity. Unlike Minghella, she does not attempt to appeal to our sympathies by relying on Tom's victimization, virtue displays or moral disengagement cues. Instead, she allows for the readers' and Tom's realizations to occur concurrently.

The changes Minghella introduced into Highsmith's narrative have prompted accusations that he "larded the character with a conscience"

(Minghella, *Interviews* 97). Such conclusions are indicative of a narrowly focused interpretation that may have been induced by Minghella's pursuit of sympathetic identification. Tom's incapacity to form meaningful relationships, I argue, renders him more akin to Highsmith's sociopath. For this reason, Minghella's narrative of a misguided search for acceptance may have been better served by an empathy focused strategy. That said, perhaps recognition of Minghella's biblical allusions provides an interpretative framework that is more conducive to a broader response.

The tendency of critics and scholars to favour the sexual elements of Minghella's narrative narrows their analytic scope. As a result, the film's complex protagonist is often reduced to a single characteristic. In readings such as those made by Edward A. Shannon, lust eclipses Tom's desire for family and acceptance. This is a divergence from Minghella's stated objective. While the filmmaker's protagonist seeks "love in all the wrong places" the story's tragedy ultimately transpires because of a father's withdrawal from his prodigal son (Minghella, *Interviews* 68). If sex obscures this part of the narrative, it might frustrate Minghella's sympathy elicitation efforts. That said, the filmmaker's gravitation towards an industry-tested formula might be to blame. The notion brings to mind the opening scene from Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). There, a Hollywood director explains his vision to his producers: "I wanted to make you something outstanding, something you could be proud of, something that would realize the potentialities of the film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is." The studio executives are unimpressed. "With a little sex in it?" one of them asks. "With a little sex in it," the director relinquishes.

Considering both *Ripleys*, it might be tempting to pass judgment on which of the two engagement strategies has proved more successful. Among other things, affective disposition theory has attempted to explain the "media-enjoyment process" (Janicke and Raney 486). The discussions concern several factors, including moral assessment, sympathy and character identification. On the other hand, recent research demonstrates the importance of both empathy and sympathy in "influencing social attitudes" (see Małeckı et al.). It does not, however, provide any evidence in favour of either of the phenomena. Thus it is difficult to defend either encouragement of sympathy or elicitation of empathy based on a single theorization such as this paper. However, considering the discrepancy between Minghella's stated intentions and the actual effect achieved in his film, it is clear that both storytellers and researchers would benefit from empirical findings that could help assess the general effectiveness of different audience engagement strategies.

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POP CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

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Mer-Hagography: The Erasure, Return and Resonance of *Splash*'s Older Mermaid

ABSTRACT

The 1984 feature film *Splash* initially included a scene featuring an embittered, older mermaid (referred to as the “Merhag” or “Sea-Hag” by the production team) that was deleted before the final version premiered. Since that excision, the older mermaid and the scene she appeared in have been recreated by fans and the mer/sea-hag has come to comprise a minor element in contemporary online culture. The term “Merhag,” in particular, has also spread beyond the film, being taken up in fantasy fiction and being used—allusively and often pejoratively—to describe notional and actual female characters. Drawing on Mary Daly’s 1978 exploration of suppressed female experiences and perspectives, this essay first examines *Splash* and associated texts with regard to the general figure of the hag in western culture (and with regard to negative, ageist perceptions of the ageing female), before discussing the use of “Merhag” and “Sea-Hag” as allusive pejoratives and the manner in which their negative connotations have been countered.

Keywords: mermaids, merhags, sea-hags, hag-ography, *Splash*.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout 20th and early 21st century western popular culture, and in audio-visual media in particular, the mermaid has been overwhelmingly represented with a youthful, (conventionally) attractive and lithesome human upper body and a sleek, scaled tail. In cinema, this figure was pioneered by Annette Kellerman in a series of marine-themed films in the 1910s and early 1920s and by actresses Ann Blyth and Glynis Johns in the late 1940s, in their respective light comedies *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (Irving Pichel, 1948) and *Miranda* (Ken Annakin, 1948). Despite these precedents, perhaps no better example of the conventionally appealing mermaid exists than Madison,¹ played by Daryl Hannah in *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984). Advances in prosthetics, together with Hannah's prowess as an underwater swimmer, allowed her screen mermaid to combine allure with credibility as a denizen of the undersea realm. In western culture the mermaid has a rich duality. With her fishy lower half and lack of genitalia, which renders her unable to participate in conventional sexual congress, she is primarily represented as a problematic object of desire (at least, in terms of heterosexual interaction). But this factor also gives her an intriguing otherness. Skewing conventional gender binaries and delineations of human and non-human, she exists as a mythic figure capable of "swimming through" discourses and stimulating new reflections on subjectivity and positionality (Inkol). The first aspect has been negotiated in various ways in mainstream media, most obviously through the invention of the "transformative" mermaid (Hayward 91–109), who can switch between human and mer-form relatively easily² (in Madison's case, simply by having her tail dried or her legs being splashed with water), allowing her to access the physical capabilities that a fully human form generates.

The main exception to representations of mermaids as wholly human in their upper part and wholly piscine in their lower, is the sub-type of the monstrous mermaid. The inhumanity of this variant is made apparent by her upper body being variously scaled and/or gilled and her face being rendered grotesque, usually by a fanged mouth. To complicate matters, many monstrous mermaids are also adaptive, in that they can switch between inhuman, marine predators and conventional, alluring mermaid form. Tamara, the mermaid in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*

¹ It should be noted that I refer to Hannah's mermaid character as "Madison" (the name she chooses for herself when ashore in human form) in this essay since she reveals her actual name in the film via a set of high-pitched squeals that resists easy rendition in written form.

² NB while the eponymous heroine of Andersen's short story "The Little Mermaid" (and Disney's subsequent filmic adaptation, 1989) undergoes transformation into human form, this is a painful and traumatic process that requires the intervention of an external agent.

(Rob Marshall, 2011), played by Gemma Ward, or the central protagonist of the variously named *Mamula/Killer Mermaid* (Milan Todorovic, 2014), played by Zorana Obradovic, are notable examples of “switchers.” In these cases, their glamorous, semi-human female physiques are presented as an alternate form used to mask their intractably inhuman nature. Almost entirely lacking in the history of 20th and 21st century audiovisual media are representations of mermaids whose upper, human forms are noticeably older and less (conventionally) attractive than the nubile stereotype. On those rare occasions when older mermaids appear, they are glamorously early-middle aged, such as the mermaid mothers played by Inga Tritt in the YouTube video series *Mermaid Miracles* (2014–15) or by Stephanie Chantel Durelli in the Disney Channel film *The Thirteenth Year* (Duwayne Dunham, 1999). Indeed, so complete is the absence of older, less conventionally attractive mermaids in mainstream cinema that the absence (or, more precisely, *removal*) of one from *Splash* before its release has attracted attention and various forms of fan engagement.

SPLASH, MADISON AND THE MERHAG

In the early 1980s there were two mermaid projects doing the rounds in Hollywood. One, developed by director Robert Towne, was slated to star Jessica Lange as a mermaid in a story about a disputed marine development (see Scriptshadow). While this project never made it to the screen, its rival, *Splash*, a light-hearted romcom project developed by producer Brian Grazer, was picked up by Disney as the debut film for their new, adult-oriented division, Touchstone Pictures. As Grazer and Fishman have detailed, the initial treatment was subject to multiple rewrites. One aspect that made it to the final shooting script (written in 1983 by Bruce Jay Friedman, Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel) was a scene where Madison decides to go ashore and find her human love interest (played by Tom Hanks in the final film). In order to prepare herself, and to plan a journey from Cape Cod to New York, she seeks out maps from a sunken galleon. Entering the wreck, she is surprised to find an older mermaid who immediately engages with her, communicating in high pitched, dolphin-type squeals that were intended to be subtitled on-screen. The older mermaid draws on her own experience to warn Madison that if she assumes human form and goes ashore she will inevitably be rejected by her human lover when he discovers her alien identity. Realizing that Madison's mind is set, she instructs Madison that unless she wants to remain fixed in human form she will have to leave land before the full moon wanes. Suitably warned, Madison departs for New York and the human male she desires.

The 1983 film script describes the senior mermaid as “a MERWOMAN,³ old and tired, with long flowing gray hair” (capitals in the original) and a “wrinkled, slightly mad-looking woman’s face” (“J”). The scene was shot with stuntwoman and expert swimmer Marilyn Moe-Stader playing the merwoman and was included in an early, unreleased section of the film until it was deleted, never to re-appear in any extended “director’s cut” nor to be featured as an additional sequence in deluxe DVD versions, etc.

Somewhat surprisingly, the deleted section featured prominently in a lengthy article by journalist Michael Mayo that appeared in the magazine *Cinefantastique* shortly before *Splash*’s cinematic release. In terms of promotional logic, highlighting an element *removed* from a soon-to-be-released product both complicates the launch of that product by suggesting a degree of uncertainty over its ideal form. In this regard, Mayo’s coverage of the excised sequence merits discussion. His 1984 article provided an in-depth account of the production of the film particularly concentrating on the nature of filming underwater, the design of Hannah’s costume and of how the actress wore and performed in it. The older mermaid is featured twice, initially in a half page side panel (on page 97), showing photos of Moe-Stader being fitted with her costume, the costume itself and of the costume being worked on by a team member. Complementing the panel, the final page of the article devotes half of its word-length to further discussion of the older mermaid character and the sequence she appeared in. One of the most interesting aspects of the article concerns a significant shift in the design of the figure. Make-up and special effects supervisor Robert Short related that the initial concept for the figure originated from artist and costume designer May Routh, who stayed close to the script description quoted above by producing an illustration of a “gnarly, but elegant-looking old woman” who was a “sympathetic-looking character” as a guide for Short (Mayo 99). As previously noted, such an image of an older, elegant and sympathetic (albeit “slightly mad-looking”) older mermaid would have been novel in western popular culture if it had made it to the screen. In the event, Routh’s design didn’t progress any further than her sketchpad, as Short decided to interpret the role of the older mermaid differently. Rather than follow Routh’s model, he invented a far less attractive character who he came to refer to as the “Merhag” (Mayo 99).⁴

Short’s designation is a significant one. I have not been able to detect any use of the term “Merhag” prior to 1984 and it is likely that at least some

³ “Merwoman” is a rarely used term and is presumably intended to distinguish her from the overwhelmingly youthful archetype of the *mermaid*.

⁴ I have been unable to ascertain whether Short originated the neologism himself or whether he adopted a term invented by another production team member.

of the subsequent uses of the term have derived from reportage of Short's use of it (with regard to *Splash*) and its repetition in various contexts by aficionados of the film. But while the term "Merhag" may be novel, the latter part of the compound neologism is evocative for embodying a number of deep-set perceptions about older women in western patriarchal culture and in "man made" languages such as English (Spender). The term "hag" came into active English Language usage in the 16th century and is now commonly used in a pejorative manner, being defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as referring to "an ugly, slatternly, or evil-looking old woman." There is also considerable colloquial usage of the term "hag" (along with "crone") to refer to post-menopausal women and a variety of associations of them being innately "deficient" as infertile, dried up, withered, etc. (see, for instance, Ferguson and Parry; or, for a popular media reflection on the topic, Cohen). The compound word "Merhag" used by Short combines these associations by substituting the term "maid" (traditionally a term used to describe a young, virgin/unmarried woman) as the second half of the compound.

Short's reconceptualization of the merwoman character was accepted by Howard and the production team created an "ugly and slatternly" figure in the following manner:

Robert Shiffer developed the makeup for the Merhag face and hair, and we did the rest—making her into a gnarly version of Daryl, with a shawl made out of fishnet and a moss vest for her upper body. We used a latex tail because the stiff way it bent and folded made her look ungainly and arthritic. All her makeup is grey, with just a little bit of orange. She's had a rough life and we wanted her to look it. (Short qtd. in Mayo 99)

As the panel copy on page 97 of Mayo's article details, the Merhag's tail was "wrinkled" and "adorned with sculpted barnacles, dead sea specimens and other assorted scraps" (*ibid.*). Other production stills reproduced online at the *Splash* blog site show her with grey, tangled hair.

While neither Short nor Howard (nor Glazer, who originally envisaged the project) have acknowledged any conscious influence or allusion, the Merhag character has substantial similarities to the sea-witch in Hans Christian Andersen's celebrated short story "The Little Mermaid." Andersen provides a scant description of the sea-witch, leaving it open for interpretation whether she has human, mer- or other form.⁵ He principally characterizes her as unappealing for letting sea-snakes curl around her body

⁵ Disney films memorably visualized her as having a grotesque upper-body and face modelled on US drag performer Divine complemented by six long tentacles comprising her lower body (see Hayward 35–38 for discussion).

and allowing a toad to eat directly from her mouth. Her unattractiveness is as marked in contrast to the Little Mermaid's beauty as the Merhag's is to Madison's. However, there is a significant difference with regard to the use of the character within the narrative. The Little Mermaid's encounter with the ugly sea-witch shifts the tone of Andersen's story, giving it a dark edge as the narrative moves to its sad conclusion (with the Little Mermaid being transformed into seafoam after she fails to secure the love of her cherished prince). By contrast, the Merhag sequence in *Splash* marks a temporary darkening of mood in a soft romcom that ends happily as its chief protagonists find love together in the ocean.

As Mayo relates, when Howard screened an early edit of the film he was "surprised to find that the underwater sequences weren't getting the expected reactions" (Mayo 99). Two (associated) reasons were given for the reaction. The first concerned the Merhag herself, towards whom viewers expressed an "antipathy," and the second concerned the scene *with* the Merhag, which they saw as "low-key and somewhat foreboding, and a bit at odds with the tone of the rest of the film" (ibid.). Faced with these negative responses, Howard decided to cut the galleon scene.

In an interview included in the *Making of Splash* featurette included on the 20th Anniversary edition DVD released in 2004 (in which he referred to the character as the "Sea-Hag"⁶), Howard claimed that by removing the scene "there was a little more mystery about her [i.e. Madison] and we still would learn the rules as the film unfolded," creating a "comedic tension" that "made the story unfold in a more interesting way." The deletion of the Merhag scene was also significant in another regard. In a film produced, written, directed and costume designed by an all-male team in which Madison's physique and physical grace are lovingly followed by the camera and by the principal male characters, the Merhag scene stands out. Instead of seeing Madison through the eyes of male characters in point-of-view sequences, the film presents the Merhag as viewed by Madison (alone). This is, of course, a sleight-of-hand. The male gaze is still present as the meta-perspective (and determines the broader cinematic "regime of looks") here but, nevertheless, the scene provides a representation of the two

⁶ It is unclear whether Howard was misremembering the term used in the production team some twenty years previously and defaulted to a similar term. If so, it is notable that the latter term has cultural pedigree, in that a character referred to as the Sea Hag was featured in the extended meta-text of the *Popeye the Sailor* franchise, first appearing in a Popeye cartoon strip in 1929 as an ugly, mannish (human-form) witch sailing the seas on a dark galleon and recurring in subsequent animated sequences. This usage, in turn, may reflect earlier folkloric sea hags such as the immense *Cailleach Bheur* of Gaelic mythology (see Harris).

mer-characters interacting with each other, unseen by diegetic humans/males. There is another distinct aspect. Whereas Madison's story is told through the film's tracking of her actions and physical transitions, the Merhag delivers a succinct account of her own history to Madison in mer-language. The subtitling is necessary as the audience does not have access to the linguistic codes they share. Speaking in her old, fluid language (which implicitly exists outside of the patriarchal discourses of human speech and its phonetic and aesthetic assemblages), she cautions Madison not to forsake her true form and take on human otherness in a bid to gain the love of a human.

Notwithstanding issues concerning her dialogue being written by male writers, her form created by male designers and her actress's actions directed by a male, the galleon scene is a particularly significant one. It can be understood as a moment when the Merhag acknowledges the impact that the pursuit of heterosexual love across the mer-/human divide has had on her. She urges the younger mermaid to stay true to her form and, thereby, stay true to her identity as an (aquatic) female:

Someday he'll find out about you. About what you are. And he'll hate you. And then it'll be too late to come back. And then you'll be like me. In no world. Just drifting. Growing old. In this ship. In the rotten remains of human misfortune. ("J.")

Despite this stark warning, the (unspoken) issue for Madison is that, in contemporary media-lore, at least, the merman is rarely alluded to and is often so absent from the undersea world that mermaids are largely presented (implicitly or *de facto*) as a *female species*—with all the unanswered questions such a situation brings. Hence, mermaids' frequent interest in and/or desire for congress with male humans within an aquatic order that has not [yet] been represented as complete in its singular gendering and/or been cast as a lesbian society.⁷ Recoiling from the compromise and rejection of her own foray into the world of *humens*, the Merhag seizes the opportunity to speak from her experience and of her identity. In so doing she evokes Mary Daly's reclamation of terms such as "hags" and "crones" for "gynocentric" (i.e. specifically female/feminist) purposes in her 1978 work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. In this Daly asserts this identity/positionality can liberate the "hag" from her oppression within the ageist male patriarchal order:

⁷ Indeed, representations of lesbian mermaids are few and far between. The most notable are the mermaid in *Gums* (Robert J. Kaplan, 1976)—although her sexual desires are only shown in her interaction with a human female—and the mermaid cosplay participants in *Mermaids and Unicorns* (Madison Young, 2013).

Hag is from an Old English word meaning harpy, witch. Webster's gives as the first and "archaic" meaning of hag: "a female demon: FURY, HARPY." It also formerly meant: "an evil or frightening spirit." (Lest this sound too negative, we should ask the relevant questions: "Evil" by whose definition? "Frightening" to whom?) A third archaic definition of hag is "nightmare." (The important question is: Whose nightmare?) Hag is also defined as "an ugly or evil-looking old woman." But this, considering the source, may be considered a compliment. For the beauty of strong, creative women is "ugly" by misogynistic standards of "beauty." The look of female-identified women is "evil" to those who fear us. As for "old," ageism is a feature of phallic society. For women who have transvaluated this, a Crone is one who should be an example of strength, courage and wisdom. (15)

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Returning to Short's description of his Merhag creation (qtd. in Mayo 99), it is also pertinent to note Daly's observation that those women who pursue radical life trajectories and/or means of understanding and expressing these "will become haggard":

But this term, like so many others, must be understood in its radical sense. Although haggard is commonly used to describe one who has a worn or emaciated appearance, this was not its original or primary meaning. Applied to a hawk, it means "untamed." So-called obsolete meanings given in Merriam-Webster include "intractable," "willful," "wanton," and "unchaste." The second meaning is "wild in appearance: as a) of the eyes: wild and staring b) of a person: WILD-EYED." Only after these meanings do we find the idea of "a worn or emaciated appearance." (16)

Daly's 1978 work is a rich and complex text that draws on her background in theology and her interest in myth and creative writing. In it she reflects on women's position in contemporary western culture and identifies means of breaking out of the deep structures of patriarchy and gaining autonomous expression. Drawing on the terminologies discussed above she calls for "Hag-ographies" or "Hag-ologies" that enable the uncovering of the herstories of hags. In these, as Campbell, emphasizes, hagographers "engaged in autobiographics do not merely write their lives; they create new contexts, new Space and Time, in which New Selves Weave Spells" (168).

As I have identified elsewhere (see *Making a Splash*), while mermaids are heavily imbued with and implicated within a Freudian discourse predicated on a phallogocentric order, their agency and charisma are so marked that they can destabilize assumptions of female/feminine essences and roles. This aspect prompts a strong identification from both girls, who participate in the production and circulation of mermaid media texts and performances, and women who have similar aficionado sensibilities

and outlets for cosplay and aquatic performance. Such engagements can generate what Daly termed a “gynergy” that can enable transformations of subjectivity and agency more generally.

While Mayo has asserted that Howard’s decision to edit the galleon sequence sent “Short’s Merhag into Davy Jones’s locker,” the Merhag eventually escaped its confines and appeared in other contexts. Since its release, *Splash* has acquired a considerable aficionado following that is evident in the (independent) *Splash* blog site that was established in 2010, gradually expanded through to 2014 and which has remained online through to the present. The site features text, including a number of interviews and production stills, and includes a page with photos of Moe-Stader from the excised film sequence under the heading “The Sea-Hag.” When the original script for *Splash* became available to fans in 2009 (through unknown means), some aficionados created audiovisual sequences that attempted to recreate the lost scene. One such (anonymous) text, uploaded to YouTube under the title “*Splash* (1984)—The Sea hag (fan scene),” combined footage from the galleon sequence in the released film with a three second long snippet of Moe-Stadler in the role that was repeated, together with subtitled dialogue, in an approximation of the missing sequence. More inventively, artist Quihoma Isaac and editor Mario Escoto made a three-minute animated version of the sequence in the same year entitled *Splash—La Bruja del Mar* (“The Sea Witch”). While it was uploaded to YouTube under the modified title of *Splash—The Sea Hag*, its original designation suggests an association with Andersen’s aforementioned character. In the animation, the older mermaid appears in the last minute of the sequence with gray hair, a motley green tail and wearing a fish net draped about her upper body (as in the original production stills featured in Mayo). Providing an original embellishment to the scene in the original script, Madison and the viewer first see the older mermaid as she catches a fish in her mouth and bites into it, releasing a spurt of red blood into the water (and suggesting her as resilient, vigorous and capable rather than weak and ineffective). The sequence then includes the interaction between Madison and the Merhag from the 1983 script (referred to above) as subtitles over a sound mix that includes dolphin noises standing in for mermaid voices.

Appropriating Daly’s concepts to a fictional context, we can perceive the aficionados who recreated the missing *Splash* sequence to have effectively been working to return the Merhag’s hag-ographical integrity erased by *Splash*’s male production team. It is notable, in this regard, that Daly emphasizes erasure as a key tactic in patriarchal repression of women, referencing it sixty times in *Gyn/Ecology* and identifying it as one of the key aspects of male control and of the texts that support male hegemony and history (11).

THE HAG TERMS IN BROADER CIRCULATION

Given that Howard does not appear to have used the term “Sea Hag” in public prior to the release of the 2004 DVD featurette, it is unlikely that any uses of the term “Sea Hag” in popular culture that occurred between 1984 and 2004 reference or are otherwise inspired by *Splash*’s version of that persona. Yet, at the same time, the novel use of the term “Sea Hag” to refer to a mermaid following *Splash*’s release, indicates—at least—a degree of synchrony in the popular cultural sphere. One such example concerns the adoption of the name for a heavy rock band formed in San Francisco in 1985. The band’s debut album—entitled *Sea Hags*—was released in 1989 with a cover featuring a malevolent-looking mermaid (presumably, given the context, understood to be a “Sea Hag”) whose appearance was pitched at something of a midpoint between Madison and *Splash*’s Merhag. A number of fantasy fiction authors have also adopted the term. John Jackson’s 2009 novel *Aradithia: Rise of the Goblin King* has a notably original twist, featuring merhags as loathsome, fork-tongued transformations of young human maidens who can be returned to their former state by kissing a male virgin. Further developments of the term and entity have also occurred within the bodies of inventive cultural practice often referred to as media-lore (a modern, mass-mediated version of traditional folklore that has become particularly prevalent on the Internet). In this context, Sea Hags have also been rendered as a more monstrous mermaids with fish-like heads who are “deformed and considered barren” and—reinstating the most pejorative uses of the term—“are jealous of those blessed with beauty and working sexual organs and will become violent if mocked” (Matria_mods).

Subsequent to *Splash*’s deleted scene (and the alternative monikers for its mature mermaid character), the next appearance of a similarly named individual in mainstream media occurred in 2002, in season 5 episode 1 of the US TV series *Charmed*. The sea hag in the episode resembles the sea witch of Andersen’s “Little Mermaid” in that she facilitates mermaids’ transitions to human form in order to gain power from them. Unlike Andersen’s story, however, she is not represented as loathsome, appearing in the episode as somewhat glamorous, long-haired, vaguely pre-Raphaelite, fully human figure. Indeed, her appearance—and the etymological duality of the term “hag”—is alluded to in the episode’s dialogue, when one of the lead characters, Piper, asks another “when you said, uh, sea hag, did you mean like ‘old woman hag’ or ‘evil magic hag?’” to which Mylie replies “Uh, she’s kinda both.” Despite the evil aspects of her role she is represented as markedly more conventionally attractive than her counterpart in *Splash*. Other positive uses of the name Sea Hag have been more playful, such as wall-plaques and mugs marketed online bearing a mermaid’s image and the

slogan “Sea-Hag—Mermaid without coffee,” and the signs for Sea Hags Bar and Grill in St Petersburg Beach, Florida, and Sea Hags and Scallywags giftshop in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, which feature traditionally attractive young mermaids on their sign. But despite these light-hearted uses of the terms, they have also become used pejoratively to describe middle-aged to older women in some online media.

While issues concerning the language of ageism—highlighted by writers such as Nuessel, and of sexism, addressed by writers such as Silveira and Spender, and aspects of both explored by Daly—were first advanced some forty years ago, there appears to have been little progress on these fronts in social media contexts. Looking up the terms “Merhag” and “Sea Hag” in the user-sourced, online *Urban Dictionary* (established in 1999) proves salutary. The *Dictionary* occupies an uneasy position between providing up-to-date documentation of a variety of vernacular terms and being a platform for wilfully offensive elaborations and inventions of terms and usages. Under “Merhag,” for instance, the dictionary has the following:

a middle aged milf with droopy tits often seen in water, washing her aged vag, a typical day for merhag includes a dozen blowjobs for the nearest alpha male. other than giving blowjobs, merhags are fairly rare and hard to find.

[Example] Debbie is a such a merhag that she needs to DIAF.⁸ (Schmordon)

Under “Sea Hag,” the *Urban Dictionary* offers two definitions provided by different (also male) authors that are similar in tone:

“Sea Hags” are found in most coastal communities in Southern California and in many other beach environments throughout the world. They usually were cursed from early age with having large breasts and developed “out of control” egos from over attention by horny boys and men. They tend to have bleached blond hair and favor green & blue eye shadow. . . . They usually dress 20+ years younger than their age and from a distance might look attractive in a cheap “Barbie doll/hooker” sort of way, but up close, their shallow contempt emanates through their caked on makeup which easily betrays their age. On contact with a Sea Hag a feeling of mistrust and revulsion will come upon you due to the putrescence emanating from their lost souls. . . . All Sea Hags are trouble-makers and several of their favorite past-times are sleeping with married men, pitting men in fights against each other over them in bars and befriending people to later betray them for their own selfish ends[.]

[Example] Nina is such a “Sea Hag.” (De La Rosa)

⁸ DIAF is an abbreviation for the term “die in a fire.”

And, by the tellingly named “Sea hag victim” in 2009:

A sea hag is a woman that didn’t treat you right. Abruptly and loudly tell her to get out of your life by making only one surf-casting gesture that ends in a pointing finger and say “You didn’t treat me right! Back to the sea with the rest of the hags you sea hag . . . that’s the way it is!” Also, don’t feel bad about it or try to figure out why she didn’t treat you right ‘cause you’ll go crazy. And, you can’t get in trouble for calling someone a sea hag, but you can for other stuff.

[Example] Back to the sea with the rest of the hags you sea hag . . . that’s the way it is!

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As will be apparent, these “definitions” express multiple loathings of the aging female, her changing physique and her sexuality. The second definition is particularly striking for its use of extreme terms such as “revulsion” and “putrescence,” not to mention its spiritual-theological dimension, referring to their “lost souls” and quest for “TRUTH.” As Mary Daly would no doubt would have interjected, “lost” to whom? “Revolting to whom? And whose “TRUTH”?

A number of women have engaged with hag terms differently, attempting to rehabilitate them as terms of endearment and respect in an example of what Sundén and Paasonen refer to as the tactical “appropriation of hateful terminology” by “cultural feminists.” In Elizabeth Stuckey-French’s 2002 novel *Mermaids on the Moon*, for instance, a group of older mermaid performers at the (fictional) Mermaid Springs attraction (modelled on Florida’s Weeki Wachee Springs) call themselves “the Merhags.” Similarly, illustrator Lauren Scott has produced a series of amiable and attractive images of relatively youthful mermaids identified as Merhags on her blog site *Scotty’s Sketches*.

One of the most notable applications of the term “Merhag” to a specific individual involved Debra Beebe, a participant in the “reality” TV programme *Survivor: Tocantins* (2009). Beebe’s nickname originated on social media and was used to variously describe, critique and defend her appearance and behaviour on the programme by various discussants. The *Survivor* formula involves a group of (usually fit) individuals being transported to an isolated—and usually semi-/tropical—location where they have to fend for themselves in shifting patterns of competition and collaboration with their fellow contestants. A series of tasks unfolds and contestants are progressively voted out until one person remains and wins the program’s prize. *Survivor* has had a fairly wide viewing demographic since its introduction and has also been significant in retaining 18–49 year-old viewers at a time when that sector have been drifting away from broadcast television (Koblin). Viewers engage with the series in a number of ways, one of which involves participation in

discussion fora where the relative merits and likeability of participants are debated, often in highly partisan manners. While demographic analyses of these fora are not available, the ID images used by posters, and vernacular terms and sub-cultural references used, suggest that participants are skewed to the lower range of the show's demographics. Beebe's nickname appears to have resulted from her being a 46-year old individual amidst a group of younger contestants and also concerns the manner she was introduced to her audience. Along with a brief sequence of her diving into a river in the initial opening montage of the show, her formal introduction was filmed while she sat waist-deep in shallow water, wearing a cleavage-revealing top with her blonde hair down (in a type of image more usually associated with mainstream and social media representations of younger women). While it is unclear when the appellation "Merhag" was first used, it was adopted in two Tapatalk chat group threads initiated in January 2009, when the show first went to air.

Adopting a redemptive use of the designation and a degree of reverence, a poster identifying as young female named Pinoyako established a thread entitled "Merhag's Graceful Shrine." There were over 73 postings on this thread including a variety of statements concerning how "hot" (i.e. sexually attractive) Beebe was as an older woman; enthusiastic characterizations of her as a contestant (some referring to her as "Debbiegoddess"); and postings of key sequences of her from the series. Another, shorter thread entitled "Debbie Beebe—Merhag—Love Club," also included references to her as "Merhagoddess" and featured a sharp retort from the list originator, char99bok, to a poster who referred to Beebe as a "wench." Notably, in these contexts, the "hag" component of the term was—at most—weakly pejorative as a characterization of age and seems to have been used with a degree of "cynical irony." In his discussion of the latter topic, Bennett explores the complexities of distinguishing between the representational/discursive aspect of (certain uses of) language and the passive irony that (supposedly) uses characterizations such as Merhag in perpetual parentheses, i.e. "Merhag" but—simultaneously—not Mer-*hag* (with all the cultural "baggage" of the latter). But, as Daly emphasizes, this "baggage" is so weighty that it is not easily dispensed with and is valuable, in that regard, in that it can be detournéd and can provide the basis for a more liberatory discourse.

CONCLUSION—LEARNING FROM ERASURE

The markedly different inflections of the Mer- and Sea-Hag terms in the social media contexts discussed in the above section illustrate the active and unsettled nature of the terms' uses. If the (male) production team's

references to *Splash*'s older mermaid, and subsequent uses of these in aficionado contexts can be taken to mark the origination of "Merhag" and the contemporary reinlection of "Sea-Hag" (from its use in *Popeye*), we can see a complex entangling of language and discourse over thirty-five decades. The erasure of the hag-mermaid created by the male production team on *Splash* can be seen, contextually, as a reflection of the hag's potential to destabilize dominant media stereotypes of female form and function. In this manner it could be analogized to a troubling "genie" that the producers tried to cram back into a bottle before that was cracked open by aficionados. Once liberated, the "-hag" forms entered online discourse and became used in a range of contexts, from the most regressive, ageist and misogynist (i.e. the *Urban Dictionary* definitions), through to more redemptive and affirmatory ones. In the middle ground of these is the usage that Bennett identifies as "sceptical," when words are invariably used to mean not quite what they suggest themselves to be. But such a situation is highly contextual. While—as in his case study of in-jokes concerning "Chavs"⁹—there may be a wide sense of "knowingness" in the circuits in which such jokes occur; it is not so clear that there are such shared perspectival points in social media uses of the "-hag" terms discussed in this article. As the polarization of uses detailed above suggest, the stakes are (still) high in such deliberations over gender, age and stereotyping, pointing for the need for recurrent hag-ographies to engage with hegemonic media culture and with the allusive media-loric figures it produces.

It will come as no surprise to those acquainted with tabloid media that—as with all other ageing female film, tv and popular music stars—an ageing Daryl Hannah has been pilloried for showing the effects of time in the years that have passed since her appearance as an ingénue in *Splash*. The hyper-ageist and hyper-sexist discourse of such coverage has seen her predictably recast as a "hag." Commenting on changes on her facial appearance over a thirty-year period and her recent use of plastic surgery, an item in *Radaronline* in 2012 was headlined "Daryl Hannah Has Gone From Splash Siren To 'Scary Fish Lips,' Says Plastic Surgeon." The article went on to contend that such interventionist procedures appeared contrary to Hannah's environmental activism (with groups such as Sea Shepherd and in opposition to the Keystone oil pipeline). Similarly, an item in the *National Enquirer* in 2015 was headlined "From Hot to Haggard!" and contended that "something's gone fishy with Daryl Hannah's face."

The situation experienced by ageing female public figures is fraught. Such women usually recognize that their looks have been an important

⁹ A British term describing young, brash and/or uneducated individuals usually—although not exclusively—from low socio-economic backgrounds.

aspect of their professional employability and marketability and, hence, their identity construction and personal charisma. As time affects them, they may seek cosmetic surgery to remain “in the game” but, at the same time, risk critique (and/or mockery) if external observers believe that such modifications have been either excessive or unsightly. The embrace of haggardness and of giving vent to one’s own hag-ography are onerous options for individuals culturally and industrially conditioned to working in environments where ageism and sexism are so deeply rooted. In this manner, the deleted Merhag scene could be analogized as a cautionary tale for women interested in entering the fickle—and highly ageist—glamour machine of contemporary media. The scene’s restoration and analysis thereby serves to continue critiques of modern media industries and attempts to identify alternative roles and pathways for women in society and on-screen.

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From Romero to Romeo— Shakespeare’s Star-Crossed Lovers Meeting Zombedy in Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*

ABSTRACT

Since their first screen appearances in the 1930s, zombies have enjoyed immense cinematic popularity. Defined by Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* as mindless, violent, decaying and infectious, they successfully function as ultimate fiends in horror films. Yet, even those morbid undead started evolving into more appealing, individualized and even sympathetic characters, especially when the comic potential of zombies is explored. To allow a zombie to become a romantic protagonist, however, one that can love and be loved by a human, another evolutionary step had to be taken, one fostered by a literary association.

This paper analyzes Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, a 2013 film adaptation of Isaac Marion’s zombie novel inspired by William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It examines how Shakespeare’s Romeo helps transform the already evolved cinematic zombie into a romantic protagonist, and how Shakespearean love tragedy, with its rich visual cinematic legacy, can successfully locate a zombie narrative in the romantic comedy convention. Presenting the case of Shakespeare intersecting the zombie horror tradition, this paper illustrates the synergic exchanges of literary icons and the cinematic monstrous.

Keywords: Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*, zombedy.

ROMERO, THE ZOMBIE GODFATHER

Monsters have been present in cinema since its beginning, replicating the roles they play in folk culture and literature. Ontologically liminal, they inhabit the margins (Cohen 6) and from thence erupt to run havoc in the order of things. The natural cinematic environment for monsters, an extension of the literary Gothic they comfortably inhabit, is horror, which, as a genre, narratively and visually exploits the interest in the monstrous body, and in its threatening proximity to humans. However, as Cohen argues, the monstrous evokes a mixture of fear and desire, incorporating repressed fantasies alongside expressly manifested anxieties (4). Much as it is dreaded, the monster can also be titillating, and the scope of excitement varies depending on the nature of its monstrosity. Vampires are particularly alluring; their penetrating fangs and orgasmic blood-draining practices, well exploited in the horror genre, also allow the narratives to move in the direction of drama or romance. As early as 1931, Bela Lugosi's *Count Dracula* had the aristocratic elegance and hypnotizing allure that marked a radical departure from Murnau's *Orlok in Nosferatu*. The gradual change of the vampire figure peaked with Coppola's 1992 film, which successfully and irreversibly relegated *Dracula* to the realm of true love and sacrifice, as well as sexual appeal.

Amongst the various monsters that continue to fuel cinematic narratives, zombies can boast a rich and varied screen history. The earliest well-known screen versions of a zombie, such as featuring in Victor Halperin's 1932 *White Zombie* or Jacques Tourneur's 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie*, use the notion of voodoo magic and directly connect the undead with the Haitian culture. It is, however, George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* that is typically credited for introducing key characteristic features that have since defined the cinematic presentation of a zombie. Romero's iconic undead are decomposing creatures that mindlessly crave human flesh and threaten humanity with their infectiousness. A crucial aspect of Romero's groundbreaking image is the exceptional morbidity of the undead decaying bodies. As Hubner et al. note, zombies violate bodily taboos confronting the audience with "processes of decomposition and the eruption of blood, bodily fluids, entrails, not to mention messy saliva" (6). Unlike vampires, thus, zombies fundamentally lack erotic appeal. As Cocarla argues, "zombies' rotting flesh and general lack of composure has left them neutered and asexual" (54). Moreover, not being nocturnal, they are not mysterious and haunting creatures of the dark, but hungry corpses whose decay is made all the more visible by daylight.

Typically appearing as a mindless horde, zombies also lack the possible appeal as singular, however monstrous, characters. Unsurprisingly, then, while their vampire cousins have moved relatively quickly into the cinematic

narratives of seduction and appeal, zombies remained unattractive in their threatening quantity. Moreover, vampirism, with its promise of immortality, eventually came to be seen as a curse desired by many, but infrequently granted by those who can give it. Zombies' condition, by contrast, is highly contagious and uncontrollable, as any reckless zombie bite or scratch transforms a human into another of the undead. This viral spreadability has been effectively used in cinema to highlight the apocalyptic angle of zombie narratives, which, as McFarland claims, are now considered a generic aspect defining zombie horror (59). The Romero-inspired vision of "a violent, contagious monster" whose fate cannot be undone (Bishop, "The Contemporary Zombie" 27), who is a raw and unstoppable force of destruction, driven solely by the primitive desire to devour human flesh, remains popular in recent zombie films. Forster's 2013 *World War Z*, for example, shows dramatic scenes of zombies swarming, or desperately climbing over each other to get to humans, or moments showing dormant zombies who wander aimlessly until they smell human flesh, or scenes capturing a mass of running zombies ignoring weak and ill individuals on which they do not prey.

R, the protagonist of Jonathan Levine's 2013 *Warm Bodies*, is a zombie that defies most of those typical characteristics. Individualized, empathetic and brooding, he is a vulnerable romantic whose sacrificial love turns out to be redemptive and eventually heals zombies of their condition. *Warm Bodies* is the first full-blown zombie film that puts the romantic plotline at the centre of the narrative, manages to make a zombie protagonist appealing from the beginning, and convincingly promises the development of a brain-eating undead into a love interest. Such presentation of a zombie has been made possible due to several factors. First of all, the film draws from the cinematic legacy of complicating the presentation of zombies, and of gradually making them more sympathetic, and potentially redeemable. The film also capitalizes on the comic potential of the undead, choosing the comedy genre as a way to explore the empathetic take on zombies. The romantic element, however, is secured through a different strategy—an alliance with Shakespeare's iconic lover, Romeo. Examining Levine's film, this paper traces the paths that allow for the presentation of a zombie as a love interest. One is the gradual and inevitable evolution of a cinematic zombie, while the other is contextualizing a horror monster in an iconic literary love story. As an adaptation of Isaac Marion's 2010 novel, which very subtly alludes to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Levine's film further highlights the Shakespearean hypotext and reinforces the importance of the literary references by acknowledging the play's screen history. Falling on the inviting cinematic ground that has been softened by the presentation of zombies that evoke empathy and fertilized by the

comedy genre, Shakespeare's iconic literary text assists the transformation. As a result, Levine's film presents a zombie that is highly individualized and sympathetic, one that in the course of the action proves to be heroic and sacrificial, and that, through association with Romeo, becomes eligible as a romantic figure and a desirable life partner.

A SYMPATHETIC ZOMBIE

Although zombies owed their first cinematic success to how menacing, horrifying and violent they were, they soon began to be portrayed as more ambivalent, inviting audiences, as Bishop notes, "to see the walking dead in more empathetic terms, as the tragic and misunderstood victims of an uncontrollable force, infection or evolution" ("The Contemporary Zombie" 26). One of the ways cinema seeks to partly redeem the zombie character is by focusing on the notion of a zombie plague, which is often, in an apocalyptic vein, connected with a viral infection or medical experimentation gone wrong. Thus, many narratives centre around finding a way to undo the process and present zombies as suffering victims, despite their undead monstrosity. Such an approach is pivotal to most films inspired by Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, including Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.¹ Importantly, as well, the novel is pivotal in complicating the nature of the monsters, showing them to be victims of the infection and stressing the issue of trying to find a cure to it. The most recent adaptation of the novel, Lawrence's 2007 film, foregrounds the fact that humanity is responsible for the plague, explores the ambiguous monstrosity of *Darkseekers*, and offers an ending promising a cure for the condition. The already mentioned *World War Z*, although going in a different direction, also ends with the discovery of a medical solution, even if it eventually only helps people survive, leaving zombies to be exterminated.

The idea of a cure is also crucial for the narrative of *Warm Bodies*. The plague is presented as a disaster that causes the suffering of humans, as well as zombies. While humans try to survive, Corpses, as the undead are called in the film, have their existential struggles, as well. If they give up on the remains of life that define their undead existence, they face an even more terrible condition and transform into Boneys, completely inhuman skeletons for whom there is no hope of redemption. The film's happy ending involves not only the healing of Corpses and the annihilation

¹ On the influence of Matheson's novel on Romero, see Abbott 9–38. Although his undead are called vampires, Matheson's narrative is a crucial hypotext of typical zombie narratives, introduces the notion of a quickly spreading infection, the dead coming back to life, mass attacks of the undead and the inevitable end of the humans.

of Boneys, but also a successful integration of the former zombies and the traumatized humans. This narrative line, however, aims at undoing the aspect that makes zombies so terrifying—that the transformation is irreparable and that it annihilates the human in the monster. Once the zombie is cured, it is no longer a monster.

Another, perhaps more successful, way of taming the zombie figure is trying to individualize it, and endow it with a touch of personality. According to Bishop, this approach originated in the 1980s, with films featuring zombies that can think and act on more than just the killer's instinct, such as Romero's *Day of the Dead* and Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead*, both made in 1985 ("The Contemporary Zombie" 32). Romero, the creator of the iconic cinematic zombie, can thus be credited with prompting the change in the presentation of the undead. Following the depiction of a creature "possessing virtually no subjective, human qualities and encouraging almost no psychological suture with the audience" in his *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*, in *Day of the Dead* he moves on to present "a moderately sympathetic zombie, giving one central ghoul a name and asking audiences to see it—him—as a fully formed character and an active participant in the story" (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 159). By presenting imprisoned zombies and developing the motive of Dr. Logan's experimentations, he further complicates the divide between good humans and bad monsters, and encourages more sympathy for the latter. In his 2005 *Land of the Dead*, Romero takes another step in eliciting sympathy for a zombie. First, as Bishop notes, "zombies appear to have their own identities, personalities, and motivations; in fact, their adventures constitute a separate plotline from the central action and conflict of the film" (*American Zombie Gothic* 159). Moreover, when one of the tough zombie killers, Cholo, is bitten by a zombie, he refuses a mercy shot from his companion. Instead, he accepts the transformation, seeing it as a better way to kill his human nemesis, Kaufman. In this way, as Bishop points out, "the audience finds itself rooting for the zombie and cheering the explosive death of the film's evil human antagonist" ("The Contemporary Zombie" 28). Ultimately, Romero's last zombie installment presents "pitiable and almost heroic zombies" who "have largely become victims instead of maniacal monsters" (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 169).

ZOMBEDIES

What best secures a sense of sympathy for an evolved zombie is a comic element and it is "zomcoms," or "zombodies," Bishop argues, that most successfully explore the zombie potential for subjectivity: "Because

these films deflect the horror of the zombies through both humor and satire, they humanize the creatures and make it easier to relate to them” (*American Zombie Gothic* 181). The comedy appeal of zombies primarily stems from the fact that their rotting and clumsy bodies and their mindless drive for human flesh are grotesque enough in themselves. As zombies violate bodily norms, they “induce disgust and fear but there can also be, in the inversion of social conventions, the pleasures of the carnival. In other words, zombies can be simultaneously disgusting and funny” (Hubner et al. 6). In either exaggerated or slightly tamed versions, zombies easily embrace parody and become very successful comic characters.

Bishop notes the importance of the 1980s and 1990s zombedies, like *The Return of the Living Dead* or Peter Jackson’s 1992 *Braindead*, which successfully integrated clowning and parody into the zombie horror narrative. It is the new millennium films, however, that he credits for bringing a new depth to a comic zombie (“The Contemporary Zombie”). A film that is undoubtedly important for the development of the comic presentation of the zombie phenomenon is Edgar Wright’s 2004 *Shaun of the Dead*. Not only does it close with a swift and successful end of the apocalyptic zombie outbreak, but also, as Bishop notes, offers a comic coda: “Just six months after ‘Z-Day,’ popular musicians are fundraising for a zombie-friendly charity campaign called ‘Zombaid,’ the service industry is employing domesticated zombies as a virtually free labour force, and some devoted spouses have elected to stay married to their reanimated partners” (“The Contemporary Zombie” 27). *Shaun of the Dead* also clearly distinguishes between various types of zombies. Next to the nameless and faceless ones, which can be killed without remorse, there are also important characters that turn into mindless monsters, like Shaun’s stepfather and then his mother. Finally, there are also individualized and tamed zombies in the film’s ending, notably Shaun’s best friend, Ed. Ed’s earlier zombie-like existence—not working, neglecting basic hygiene and wasting his life on playing video games—is a key element of the film’s comic narrative, and creates an interesting twist when he eventually proves his worth by sacrificing himself to save Shaun and his girlfriend, Liz. Attacked by zombies, he inevitably becomes one, but at the end is revealed to be kept by Shaun in his garden shed. As a zombie, Ed merely continues his parasitical existence; yet, he remains Shaun’s best company, being there for Shaun to play together and obligingly not biting when told off.

Perhaps the best example of how the comic convention solidifies the sympathetic and individualized presentation of a zombie is Andrew Currie’s 2006 *Fido*, in which tamed zombies are the discriminated workforce. Here all victimized zombies evoke sympathy, but the title zombie, Fido, as Bishop observes, becomes not only “a pet, a best friend and even a surrogate

father” to Timmy, but eventually even a preferred husband figure to Helen, Timmy’s mother (“The Contemporary Zombie” 29, 30). Thus, even the decaying undead, seemingly unlikely candidates for central protagonists outside of the horror genre, have eventually evolved into more appealing and even sympathetic characters. Through experimentation with comedy, zombies became more flexible and individualized, and have gradually evolved into cinematic creatures that could aspire to become interesting, or even romantic, protagonists. This is the cinematic zombie legacy that allows Levine’s *Warm Bodies* to start with a premise that R, the zombie protagonist whose individualized perspective opens the film’s narrative, is the character the viewers are to identify and empathize with. It then only takes another step—identifying R as a variation of Shakespeare’s Romeo—that the film’s narrative can take a turn towards romantic comedy.

“O ROMEO, ROMEO! WHEREFORE ART THOU ROMEO?”

The impact of literature is a vital element in creating the monster appeal in cinema, and literary inspirations remain an influential source for cinematic narratives and characters. Even zombies, whose origin is not strictly literary, are now seen to have solid literary antecedents. Various undead creatures are well explored in literature: ghouls and golems people various folk tales, Mary Shelley’s resurrected monster has many affinities with a zombie, and Luckhurst (58–74) solidly documents the contribution of pulp fiction to the pop-cultural zombie image. While Romero’s undead are seen as very original, his 1968 film is also inspired by a literary source—Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. The plague-infected people in the novel are referred to as vampires,² but their “rampaging in infectious hordes and hungering for human flesh” (Peirce 60) is a strong indication of how much Romero owes to the novel.³

In the intersections between literature and the horror genre, Shakespearean inspirations are no exception.⁴ As Földvály notes, “since the earliest days of horror cinema, there have been instances of cross-fertilisation

² Adaptations acknowledging Matheson’s novel also retain that association. In Salkow’s and Ragona’s 1964 *The Last Man on Earth* the monsters are presented as vampires, in Sagal’s 1971 *The Omega Man* they are albino mutants, and in Lawrence’s 2007 *I Am Legend* they are nocturnal mutants called Darkseekers.

³ Even if, as Luckhurst notes, the “key source” for Romero’s undead was not Matheson’s novel directly, but *The Last Man on Earth* (137).

⁴ I am indebted to Kinga Földvály for helping me develop the background for this research. She kindly let me read the draft of her recently released book, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos*, and generously shared her bibliography. Without her help, and the inspiration of her book, my work on this paper would have lasted forever.

between Shakespeare, the most canonical of authors, and horror, the allegedly most debased of all genres” (156).⁵ Hutchings makes a reservation that the meeting points of Shakespeare and horror cinema are “small in number and often isolated or marginal” (155), and admits that they may be reduced to “one cryptic line,” as in the case of Renfield quoting the recognizable “Words, words, words” from *Hamlet* in the 1931 *Dracula* (165). Still, they remain a regular element of the contemporary cinematic landscape and attest to the “confidence with which they negotiate their way across what some would consider an uncrossable cultural divide” (Hutchings 166). Hutchings concludes, therefore, that the interactions between Shakespeare and horror cinema, increasing in recent times, suggest promising possibilities, especially that they can “further develop a cultural relationship based not on simplistic high/low distinctions but instead on productive differences and some rather surprising similarities” (166). Zombie narratives also reach out to Shakespeare or Austen, often in a playful or parodic way, and productively use the appeal of canonical plotlines and characters. In the case of Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, the association with Romeo undoubtedly facilitates the transition of a mindless brain-eating undead into an individual with romantic appeal, and helps manoeuvre the film’s narrative towards romantic comedy, creating a new zombie subgenre—a romzomcom.

Marion’s novel, the immediate text behind Levine’s film, has a complicated relationship with its Shakespearean hypotext. On the one hand, its basic narrative is close enough to Shakespeare’s iconic love story—a young couple from two conflicted backgrounds form an unlikely bond and their love eventually brings peace to their feuding “families.” R can be quickly understood as Romeo, and Julie is an obvious reference to Juliet, while the surviving humans and tragic zombies are identified as the Capulets and Montagues. Once the word “zombie” is replaced with “tragedy,” Cocarla’s description of *Warm Bodies* can be read as a blurb for *Romeo and Juliet*: “a zombie-romance story, where two unlikely lovers find themselves having to battle against forces that deem their love and choices unacceptable and incompatible” (66–67).⁶ On the other hand, the novel does not highlight the affinity with Shakespeare and many readers would not recognize the subtext at all, or until way through the novel.⁷ Marion himself admits that the novel is a little more than “a winking allusion” to *Romeo and Juliet*, the play

⁵ For an extended discussion of the development in the relationships between Shakespeare and horror genre see Földváry.

⁶ Although Cocarla in fact argues that, despite “many amusing similarities” between Shakespeare’s play and Marion’s novel, the two stories are fundamentally about something else (67).

⁷ See Desmet 282–83.

itself being “a remake of a remake of a remake” of such universal themes as “love thriving against safety and reason, the suffocating narrowness of our labeled identities, the power of youthful imprudence to disrupt the social order” (qtd. in Desmet 284). In Levine’s adaptation, however, Marion’s multiple layering of recognizable literary narratives is given sharper focus as the film visually references iconic film versions of the play, mainly Baz Luhrmann’s stylistically powerful 1996 film and Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 classic.

Levine’s film is an exemplary romzomcom in which the zombie and comedy components resonate within the established cinematic genres, while the romantic element relies specifically on the popular appeal of Shakespeare’s ultimate love story, even if for many (re)viewers that recognition comes through the *Twilight* saga.⁸ The fact that both films were produced by the same company, Summit Entertainment, allows audiences to recognize *Warm Bodies* as “a gentle parody of *Twilight*’s Romeo and Juliet storyline” (Abbott 168), except that replacing vampires with zombies asks for a different point of reference. The “heteronormative desire and romance” at the heart of the post-apocalyptic reality of *Warm Bodies* (Cocarla 52–53) is a very untypical zombie plotline. Abbott rightly observes that the very notion of a girl falling in love with a zombie, a narrative borrowed from vampire stories, is ridiculous, and the fact that R grows infatuated with Julie partly because of the memories of her boyfriend, whose brain he ate, adds a disturbing element to an already weird situation (168). One way by which the idea becomes plausible is the standard procedure used in other zombie narratives—introducing elements of comedy and parody, and individualizing the zombie protagonist, which often comes hand in hand with the comic twist. The other significant strategy is making the basic romantic plot allude to the love story of all times—William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*—which the film strengthens with visual references to the play’s film adaptations. Although the *Romeo and Juliet* frame is used against the dramatic tragedy genre, being reconstructed into a romantic comedy with a happy ending, numerous elements of Shakespeare’s masterpiece are woven into the fabric of the film’s strategy of making the zombie characters sympathetic. Ultimately, the film succeeds in making a zombie-human romantic narrative work by creating a comedy that sits comfortably with audiences because it relates its key narrative issues through a Shakespearean hypotext, strongly relying on visual affinities with the screen history of *Romeo and Juliet*.

⁸ For an extended discussion on how the Shakespearean subtext was decoded upon the film’s release, see Desmet 283.

I ZOMBIE

The key aspect that allows zombies in *Warm Bodies* to become interesting, and eventually attractive, is their growing individualization. A classical zombie, as Murphy stresses, “is generally portrayed as humanity reduced to its most mindless level, no longer capable of emotional engagement, an animated husk that may look like the deceased but (generally) lacks all remnants of personality” (119). Many zombie narratives stress that while the undead may look like a living person we know, they are no longer them, and cannot be restored to their conscious selves. In *Shaun of the Dead*, Shaun has to persuade his mother to leave her transformed husband locked in the car, and he implores: “That’s not even your husband in there. Okay? I know it looks like him but there’s nothing of the man that you loved in that car now. Nothing!” Later on, in a dramatic exchange, Shaun himself cannot come to terms with the fact that his mother is also turning into a zombie and David has to spell out to him the same thing: “She’s not your Mum anymore! Any minute she’ll be just another zombie.” In *World War Z*, Javier explains to Gerry how he lost his son and wife saying: “Rather, I lost my son to [pause] *something* that had once been my wife.” *Warm Bodies* echoes the same motive at the film’s beginning. Colonel Grigio, Julie’s father, sending young volunteers to get supplies from outside their walled settlement, gives them a warning: “Corpses look human. They are not. They do not think. They do not bleed. Whether they were your mother or your best friend, they are beyond your help. They are uncaring, unfeeling, incapable of remorse.”⁹ This introduction to what Corpses are, however, follows a lengthy opening sequence in which the viewers meet the film’s protagonist, R, a zombie who does not match Colonel Grigio’s description. Similarly set in a post-apocalyptic world, *Warm Bodies* shows the zombie environment in the airport in the vein of Romero’s *Land of the Dead*—introducing the undead before the human protagonists and focusing specifically on the subjectivity of R, the film’s narrative voice. Like Romero’s evolved zombies in Uniontown, who “are rather peacefully attempting to recreate the behaviors of their mortal lives . . . trying to play musical instruments, attempting to pump gas, and even appearing to communicate with each other by grunting” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 191), Corpses in the airport also seem relatively benign, mainly communicating a sense of loss and confusion as they helplessly shuffle around in their apocalyptic realm. As in *Land of the Dead*, Levine’s Corpses are also able to form groups, notice their potential for evolving, and eventually fight, although in *Warm Bodies* the enemies are ultimately not humans.

⁹ To which Julie comments: “Sound like anyone you know, dad?”, implying her father has also changed beyond recognition.

R, however, is a considerable step forward from Romero's evolved zombies. For Comentale and Jaffe, the "sensitive zombie portrayal in romance novels," such as Marion's *Warm Bodies*, rests on the use of "allegorical narratives" that make zombies less of a zombie by granting them "richly subjectivized inner lives" (21). In the novel, the subjectivization is achieved mainly by first-person narration—R can technically only produce zombie grunts, but it is his eloquent internal narration that takes readers through the events. The I-perspective, fundamental in the portrayal of monsters as sympathetic, as Abbott illustrates with numerous examples, is crucial in *Warm Bodies* not only because it positions R as the central protagonist, but also because it presents his "conscious point of view to shape the trajectory of the story" (167). Apart from the personalized narration, R's internal life is enriched as a result of consuming the brains of his victims (Comentale and Jaffe 21), specifically Perry. Flashbacks of the victim's lives, blending in with R's thoughts, make him even more human and are of key importance in the developing relationship with Julie.

The film works around these aspects of R differently. Unlike in the novel, the narrative perspective is not entirely R's. However, from the very beginning, the film foregrounds R's individuality and his exceptional tendency for isolation and reflection, likening that to Romeo's behaviour. The film's opening sequence, starting with R's existential question "What am I doing with my life?", allows viewers to understand the pain of being undead. In a fairly straightforward way, for anybody with knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*, "R's quest to feel 'less dead' and closer to life" (Cocarla 56) strongly resembles Romeo's desire to find real life in true love. While Marion's novel discusses zombie routines in more detail, stressing their communal activities within the airport area, the film gives only a cursory look into those imitations of human life. Instead, it highlights R's exceptionality and his unique desire to break free from a lifeless existence, making instantaneous visual associations with Leonardo DiCaprio's rendition of Romeo in Luhrmann's film. The opening sequence takes time to revel in R's solitude, showing him wandering around the airport, contemplating his existence, reminiscing about the past and dreaming of the future. In that, he is like Romeo in Luhrmann's film, who is shown on his own on the beach, pictured against the sunset, pensively smoking a cigarette, and contemplating love and life. Even when he is around other people, DiCaprio's Romeo seems frequently immersed in his thoughts and needs a distraction to reconnect to his friends. Similarly, in *Warm Bodies*, R roams the airport trying to figure out what it is that he is missing, moving around other zombies but clearly standing out, and often seeking solitude in his shelter, a Boeing 747, where he keeps the remains of real life.

Abbott argues that establishing R's personalized perspective in the film's opening, by combining an extreme close-up of his face with his internal monologue in which he questions his existence, "establishes R as functioning within the teen film, a genre plagued with questions of identity and acceptance" (167). This, however, is also an element that defines DiCaprio's youthful and rebellious Romeo in Luhrmann's MTV-styled adaptation specifically targeting teenage viewers. While those multi-layered associations help to build the internal landscape of R as a sympathetic zombie, what makes it possible for R to be seen as the promise of a romantic, and possibly tragic, lover is the infusing of the character with Shakespearean potential through the parallels with DiCaprio's self-isolating and depressive Romeo.

Another moment that blends the teenage narrative with the charisma of Shakespeare's love story is when R sees Julie for the first time. In Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* this scene is a visual masterpiece. A long music sequence—Des'ree's "Kissing You"—shows Romeo watching colourful fish in a big aquarium when he suddenly sees Juliet's face across the tank. The exchange of their glances, with the focus on their mutual gaze, visually illustrates what Romeo soon after acknowledges—"Did my heart love till now?" *Warm Bodies* takes liberties with the novel in order to romanticize the moment in which R sees Julie for the first time. In the book, he first attacks Perry and, as he is eating his brain, he sees Julie in the flashes of Perry's memories. When he then sees her in the room, fighting off other zombies, he recognizes her and impulsively decides to protect her. In Levine's film, zombies barge into the room where Perry, Julie, Nora and others are collecting medical supplies, and the fight starts. Amid the shooting, R falls, and when he lifts his head he sees Julie with a machine gun. The sounds of shooting fade to John Waite's "Missing You," and a slow motion sequence shows a close-up on R, his eyes fixed on the shooting Julie. For a split second, she registers his hypnotized gaze and, instead of shooting his head off, she hides behind a counter. The fight sequence then resumes, and Perry is taken down by R, who *then* sees flashbacks of Julie while consuming Perry's brain. Building R's character on such cinematic clichés—exceptionality, reflexivity and the power of love at first sight—may seem general enough to be dismissed as Shakespearean, but the film further develops more significant references to *Romeo and Juliet* and its iconic cinematic renderings.

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

What determines the drama and tension at the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy is the fact that Romeo and Juliet cannot be together due to some "ancient grudge" (Prologue) that antagonizes their households. The

play makes it clear that the feud is rooted in a past that nobody seems to remember and that it senselessly perpetuates into a “new mutiny” (Prologue) that destroys Verona. Cinematic adaptations have offered various ways of modernizing the idea of the conflict, like the 1961 musical *West Side Story*, which shows the two families as fighting gangs, Jets and Sharks, with a strong ethnic touch to the conflict. A similar approach is assumed by Luhrmann, whose Capulets and Montagues are also shown as gangs, ethnicity playing an important role in the feud, as well as by a more distant spin-off, 2000 action film *Romeo Must Die*, featuring Asian- and African-American mob war. The human versus zombie conflict in *Warm Bodies* seems to be a natural way to translate the Shakespearean feud into the post-9/11 cinematic code. In a post-apocalyptic narrative, it is humans against various kinds of self-created enemies that best represent the senselessness and the devastating impact of what antagonizes the Capulets and Montagues.

Another strong inspiration for lining up the relationship between zombies and humans in *Warm Bodies* is Romero’s presentation of the two groups, based on the realization that “both the living and the dead communities are similarly struggling to survive in the new post-apocalyptic world” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 193). Similarly to Riley, the key human protagonist of *Land of the Dead*, who notes “little difference between the two groups, claiming both are simply ‘pretending to be alive’” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 193), the protagonists of *Warm Bodies* on both sides of the conflict, R and Julie, realize how little differs them. R not only keeps looking for some meaning in his zombie existence that would make him more human but also understands that Corpses remain somewhat close to humans, as opposed to Boneyes, creatures in the final stage of physical and mental decay. At the same time, Julie keeps commenting on the absurdity of the military walled existence of her community, focused on survival rather than living. She sees her father, as well as Perry, as people who have lost some of their humanity, and are getting more dead than alive.

As in *Romeo and Juliet*, then, the conflict between people and Corpses in *Warm Bodies*, initially presented as irresolvable and fatal, gradually begins to be seen as pointless because the feuding parties appear to be less and less of enemies. As Földvály points out, “by introducing a romance plotline, a sense of equality is created between humans and the non-human. The bond between the lovers, forged in opposition to the rest of society, effectively emphasises the hostile, even monstrous, elements within the so-called human environment” (211). The film stresses this in several specific moments, making the Shakespearean references resonate more strongly through cinematic allusions. The most obvious case is the balcony scene. In *Warm Bodies*, R’s desire to be with Julie to protect her

makes him go on a suicidal quest. He gets into the walled military camp of the humans and goes to Julie's house, where he speaks to her while she appears on the balcony above. Desmet argues that "the scene is indeed redolent of *Romeo and Juliet*—that is, of Franco Zeffirelli's iconic film version of *Romeo and Juliet*," and analyzes the details of the moment to highlight those similarities (286). Since Luhrmann's balcony scene references Zeffirelli's, younger viewers may take this moment to finally realize that *Warm Bodies* is more than just a romzomcom.

Another visually resonant moment is connected to the gradual transformation of zombies. Under the influence of the growing bond between Julie and R, and following R's waking up to feeling more alive, a group of sympathetic zombies, led by R's friend, M, also begin to change. Unlike in the novel, where the change is connected to their waking senses, in the film, at the moment when zombies begin to feel something changing in them, their hearts give a beat and glow for a while. The recurring image of a glowing heart is visually powerful, and clearly references Luhrmann's use of religious imagery. In *Romeo + Juliet*, among numerous crosses of all sizes, tattooed and neon, Juliet's angelic wings, statues of Holy Mary, or the giant statue of Jesus Christ overlooking the city, there is the image of Jesus with a beaming heart on Tybalt's shirt, and the burning heart in a rose wreath on Romeo's. Those hearts not only define the film's key visual tone but also adorn its promotional materials, thus remaining emblematic of the film. Choosing the beating and glowing hearts to symbolize the change in zombies, *Warm Bodies* makes another allusion to *Romeo and Juliet*, building up the context for the developing love between R and Julie.

THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS HAVE . . . A HAPPY ENDING

Although since Romero's *Land of the Dead* zombies have been frequently shown as victims of human violence, the undead are still irredeemable. *Land of the Dead* ends with a promise of a truce, but zombies remain cannibalistic and potentially infectious. Other films that explore the hope for a peaceful coexistence of zombies and humans also tend to problematize the possibility, highlighting the tentative and fragile status of the truce. David Freyne's 2017 horror drama *The Cured* in a realistic mode explores the difficulties of integrating the cured zombies back into social life and traces the disintegration of the fragile coexistence into another round of chaos and killing. In the comedy convention, in turn, as excellently shown in the *iZombie* series (2015–19), the domesticated, benign, helpful and heroic zombies exist side by side with the predatory and evil ones, and the ups and

downs of the instability of their coexistence fuels the series' overarching narrative.¹⁰ *Warm Bodies* takes a step further here, as well, completing the process of domestication of zombies by presenting the condition as curable. By evoking the magic of the Shakespearean power of love and sacrifice, the film offers more of a truce than any other zombie narrative, and more than the "glooming peace" in *Romeo and Juliet*. Using the play's narrative, the film indicates the possibility of a reconciliation between the feuding "families" if the love between their young representatives reaches the level of the ultimate sacrifice. Peaking on that sacrificial moment, however, the film dissolves the conflict into a truly happy ending, befitting the comedy genre: in a paraphrase of the redeeming power of sacrifice made in the name of love by Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, R's sacrifice to save Julie redeems him, his fellow zombies and the humans. In another interesting diversion from Marion's novel, in which the happy ending does not include Julie's father,¹¹ the film offers Colonel Grigio a chance that Lord Capulet did not have—to accept the man of his daughter's choice against his prejudice and to see her happy in love.

That redeeming moment is strengthened by another visual reference to Luhrmann's film. Julie and R, cornered by Boneys, get trapped on a ledge, high above the ground. They realize they are lost, but they refuse to give up and decide to sacrifice themselves by jumping. The attempt is desperate, but R holds Julie tight to become her buffer for the fall, hoping she might survive. In the novel, they fall to the ground, and R suffers multiple breaks and injuries. In the film, however, they fall into a fountain pond beneath the ledge. R is initially unconscious, which terrifies Julie, but then he comes round and they share a long-awaited kiss. In Luhrmann's film, the swimming pool kiss following the balcony scene is one of its strongest romantic moments. Playing on the visual power of the water motif, used also in the fish tank scene, and symbolically complementing the religious imagery, it is another emblematic scene of *Romeo + Juliet*. The fountain kiss between R and Julie is positioned in a different narrative moment, but it perfectly emulates the beauty and power of Luhrmann's sequence, relishing in the passion of the newfound love of R and Julie. Framed in the symbolic power of water, it also signals the baptismal significance of the

¹⁰ The series, in the end, finishes on a decidedly happy note: with the cure being available, some zombies remain highly functioning in the society, with the approval of the humans, and all the major characters, humans and zombies alike, are happily married, with kids. The series, with its sugar sweet coda, however, dates post *Warm Bodies*.

¹¹ In the novel he is so far immersed in his hatred for Corpses that he cannot accept the possibility of their transformation, and therefore has to die. Significantly, he is taken down in a fight by a Boney, which suggests that his stage of moral deterioration matches the Boneys' complete loss of any traces of humanity.

moment when a new life is born: this is when R transforms into a human, thus reversing the play's final kiss of death¹² into a romantic comedy's kiss of love and life.

In Shakespeare's play, appropriately for a tragedy, the love between Romeo and Juliet dooms them to death, but finally ends the feud and brings peace to Verona. The joint loss of their children allows the Capulets and Montagues to see the futility of their conflict and its fatal consequences, so the power of love reaches beyond the young lovers' grave, healing the hearts of their families. *Warm Bodies* takes that Shakespearean cue quite literally. The true love of the unlikely couple saves both humans and zombies and brings peace to the world threatened by apocalypse and annihilation. As impossible love proves to be true love, the kiss that wakes life in R is idyllically presented as a cure for the zombie condition, and its healing power grants everyone a happy ending. In this way, the traditional trajectory of a romantic comedy playfully reverses Shakespeare's iconic tragic ending and allows the cinematic convention to appropriate the Bard's celebrated drama.

From the point of view of a zombie narrative, the film's conclusion may, of course, be seen as unsatisfactory, in that zombies deserve a happy ending only when they stop being zombies. Ruthven, discussing the status of a zombie as "the walking abject, . . . the constant reminder of what must be rejected from the self in order to survive," explains why a zombie cannot be an object of love: "The zombie cannot be rehabilitated, cannot develop a conscience and renounce its murderous ways or its very monstrosity, thereby enabling the heroine to fall in love with it" (345). *Warm Bodies* only seemingly transgresses that border. Julie begins to develop feelings for R when he is still very much undead and manifests those feelings in a kiss before he transforms into a human. However, R does change, which happens thanks to the kiss, as in a traditional fairy tale. In undoing the tragic ending of its Shakespearean hypotext, the film may be seen to finish with a simplified solution, but the conservative and heteronormative happy ending results from a reliance upon romantic comedy cinematic convention, proving *Warm Bodies* to be a typical rom(zom)com.

ZOMBIE SHAKESPEARE

Zombies are a massive cinematic phenomenon, and whenever the world is in an apocalyptic mode, as it is now in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, zombies adjust to new contexts, representing the problems

¹² Juliet, upon waking up from a drug-induced sleep, sees Romeo dead and, wishing to die, as well, kisses his lips hoping for a "friendly drop" of the poison that he took.

and fears of the given moment. Surprisingly flexible, they have not only adapted to various cinematic genres but even proved eligible for marriages with literary classics, as numerous mash-up novels show.¹³ That the paths of zombies and Shakespeare should cross is not that surprising. Shakespeare has already benefited enormously from the synergic marriage with cinema, his plays being adapted to various genre conventions,¹⁴ and his plots and characters feeding countless screenplays. As in any synergy, both sides not only gain, but also inspire each other, further replicating the network of intertexts, references, quotations, parodies or recyclings. These crossing paths become inevitable as a result of hybridizing literary genres and narratives, such as tragedies, Gothic stories or folk tales, with cinematic conventions, like romantic comedy or zombie horror. Genre hybrids, in turn, help to create more flexible monster characters that can function outside of their original structures, as exemplified by zombodies. As Bishop argues, such genres “offer viewers all the shock, gore, and horror of the zombie tragedies, but their resolutions are markedly different: zombodies, true to their classical roots, end on a note of hope, promise, and stability in the form of a newly constituted family and/or marriage” (“Vacationing in *Zombieland*” 29). *Warm Bodies*, now a “classic” romzomcom, illustrates the change, as romantic comedy conventions determine its plotline, and zombie elements are used to create obstacles to the course of true love.

In his 2010 analysis of the development of the cinematic zombie, Bishop offers a prediction that “the next step in the evolution of this highly specially [sic] subgenre will likely literalize the metaphor, presenting narratives in which the zombies tell their own stories, acting as true protagonists and even heroes” (*American Zombie Gothic* 196). This is exactly what happens in Levine’s *Warm Bodies* with the help of Shakespeare’s love tragedy. With that experiment already well tested, new paths will follow, further allowing the hybridization of literary and cinematic classics. Mash-up novels open up to film adaptations that can further enhance their already rich intertextuality. Burr Steers’s 2016 film adaptation of Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, for example, is a radical reinterpretation of the mash-up, taking the novel’s mix of Austenian comedy of manners and Gothic horror into the realm of cinematic action comedy and highlighting the political touches of Austen’s

¹³ These including, for example, Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and Sherri Browning *Grave Expectations* (2011), but involving other monstrous creatures, as well, as in Grahame-Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*, Ben H. Winters’s *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), or Browning Erwin’s *Jane Slayre* (2010).

¹⁴ *Hamlet*, for example, drawing from film noir in Olivier’s version, becoming an action movie in Zeffirelli’s adaptation, or incorporating elements of horror and costume drama in Branagh’s 1996 film.

narrative.¹⁵ Another area for the development of appealing zombie characters is TV series, combining comedy and horror with such TV genres as crime/detective, as in *iZombie*, or family/drama, as in *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–19).¹⁶ Placing zombie characters in the contexts of *CSA* or *Desperate Housewives*, such experiments further explore the questions inherent to classical zombie genres—the nature of the infection, the ethics of killing zombies, the moral dilemma around their feeding routines or the quest for a cure—as well as allowing for the inclusion of thematic areas hardly associated with the undead, such as family life, romance or sex, friendship and career.

The role of literary classics may be less evident in those zombie instalments, but the spectral presence of names like Shakespeare remains palpable, as *iZombie* illustrates. The series makes ample references to various cultural texts, including other zombie films, like *Dawn of the Dead*, *Zombieland* or *Warm Bodies*,¹⁷ and even gets ironically self-referential.¹⁸ Its regular cameo appearances, however, are Shakespearean, as play quotations and other allusions run regularly throughout the series, starting with the pilot episode. When Liv, the protagonist, manages to find a reason to live her undead life by helping people through solving criminal cases, she can finally fall asleep after months of useless zombie existence and says: “to sleep, perchance to not dream.” *Hamlet* is evoked many times, either through quotations, like “Something’s rotten in Denmark. Denmark in this case meaning the Seattle police department” (episode 1.9), or more direct references, as in episode 1.10, when Ravi explains to Liv how he managed to teach his zombie rat a trick. When she doubts him, he ironically says: “Yes. I also taught him to declaim *Hamlet* soliloquies. He holds a tiny skull, it’s quite something.” *Henry V*, *Romeo and Juliet* and even *Julius Caesar* are quoted, and the final episode, in which the human/zombie conflict is resolved and all of the characters are given their happy endings is titled “All’s Well That Ends Well.”

The Shakespearean references in *iZombie* are purely decorative but they are comfortably present throughout the series. Considering that *iZombie* rests on the notion significantly explored in *Warm Bodies*—that zombies experience flashbacks, memories and visions of the people whose brains they consume, which is how Liv helps to solve murder cases—the series may be illustrating an idea that Shakespeare, the amazing “literary dead,” can thus be granted another form of life. Devoured by screen

¹⁵ For an extended discussion on gender and social politics in Steers’s 2016 *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, see Cieślak.

¹⁶ I wish to thank Tim Bridgman for mentioning *Santa Clarita Diet* to me.

¹⁷ *Warm Bodies* is not just alluded to, but explicitly mentioned in episode 1.5.

¹⁸ In episode 2.10 there is an ironic moment when Liv and Clive are investigating the murder at the set of a zombie series, and one of the zombie actors, complaining about how bypassed they are, says: “You know what’d be fun? A zombie show where a zombie is a star.”

zombies for his juicy poetic brains, he returns to life in the form of bits and pieces processed by the undead. As much as he benefits from such revivals, he also gives a spicy touch of classical life to the cinematic undead. This is the type of synergic exchange that *Warm Bodies* illustrates, too. Romeo becomes a way to turn a zombie into a romantic lover and Shakespeare can be credited with the transformation of a zombie narrative into a story of star-crossed lovers, but literature, in turn, may benefit from the evolving forms of the cinematic monstrous, as the timeless story of star-crossed lovers is given another life in an apocalyptic zombie narrative.

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Lacanian Implications of Departures in Zemeckis's *Beowulf* from *Beowulf*, the Old English Epic

ABSTRACT

Although Robert Zemeckis's film *Beowulf* (2007) is a re-writing of the Old English epic *Beowulf* with a shifting of perspective, certain details in the film can only be understood by referring to the poem. That is, a better understanding of the film is tied closely to an awareness of certain narrative elements in the epic. The emphasis on Beowulf in the poem shifts to the Mother in the film. This shift obviously leads to a recontextualization of the narrative elements of the former text. In the epic, Grendel is left without a father; however, in the film, he is fathered by Hrothgar but this biological fathering does not lead to linguistic castration. In their case, things are reversed: rather than the infant being castrated by the Law/language, the biological father is led to a psychic regression due to the son. This appears to be a dramatization of the conflicts between the (m)Other and the shared Other/the representative of the paternal metaphor: that is, Hrothgar. This time, the (m)Other conquers the representative of the paternal metaphor and annuls his masculinity, which radically changes the way in which we evaluate the course of events in the film. These departures make more sense if they are analyzed against the background of Lacanian epistemology. This paper aims to explore the film's departures from the poem by approaching it from a Lacanian perspective.

Keywords: *Beowulf*, Zemeckis, adaptation, Lacanian criticism.

PREAMBLE

Although Zemeckis's film *Beowulf* (2007) is a re-writing of the Old English epic *Beowulf* with a shifting of perspective, the film requires that we should closely consult the first third of the Old English epic in order to produce a comprehensive analysis of the adaptation. Without reference to the epic, certain elements in the film remain obscure because this text both took place within, and took off from, a dialogue with its times, and such a dialogue is never simple. For example, it may be difficult for us to understand why Beowulf risks his thanes' lives to kill this monster if we do not keep the heroic code of conduct and its ideals at the back of our minds. However, the stress I am putting on the similarities goes the other way as I intend to shed more light on the differences between these two texts against the background of the shared elements. Therefore, this essay engages with only the general aspects of these similarities, which I have taken up here in order to avoid giving an unbalanced perspective on the interpretation of the differences.

The course of the events in the film is shaped by a radical shift which foregrounds the psychodynamics of the characters. For this reason I aim to look at the film from a psychoanalytical vantage point in order to cast a new hermeneutical frame over it and to explore more of the resonances that are implied in the departures from the epic. In the film, Hrothgar's link with the imaginary seems to be integral to Grendel's subjectivity (or lack of it). In contrast to what happens in the heavily patriarchal discourse of the epic, in the film the (m)Other¹ conquers the representative of the paternal metaphor. Accordingly, the emphasis on Beowulf in the poem shifts to the Mother in the film which problematizes what Grendel and the Dam desire rather than what Beowulf desires. In this process the film looks at the intricate psychodynamics between Grendel, the Dam, Hrothgar and Beowulf. In my analysis I will consult Lacanian epistemology for my conceptual framework as I believe that Lacanian epistemology can account for this intricacy better than other psychoanalytical perspectives, since, for Lacan, desire is external more than internal: "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (Lacan, *Language* 31) and desire is generated through the psychodynamics and intrasubjectivity between the infant and the (m)Other. Following this line of thinking, I will explore the psychodynamics of the

¹ In Lacanian epistemology, the Other has a double nature as "the Other as both 'inside' and 'outside'; as both 'discourse of the unconscious' and the social substance" (Hook 57). To avoid any conceptual confusion the first will be referred to as the (m)Other and the second as the shared Other or simply as the Other.

relationship between Hrothgar, Beowulf and the Dam by referring to what Lacan said about the correlation between the paternal metaphor and the (m)Other. Grendel's situation in the film will be explored in the context of Lacanian ideas of linguistic castration and the significance of the logic of the signifiers.

LACANIAN IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHIFTING OF THE PERSPECTIVE IN THE FILM

From the meeting between Grendel's Mother and Beowulf on, the film arranges the narrative elements quite differently, to establish internal cohesion. Parallelisms between the film and the first third of the epic do not continue after Beowulf's meeting with the Mother/Dam, as the film radically departs from the text. However, the film continues to borrow and re-employ metaphors and imagery from its source. Despite strong parallelisms between the Old English epic and the early scenes of the film, there are substantial differences, too. The film presents the course of events from the Mother's perspective while the poem is told from the perspective of the Christian narrator (the metonymic extension of the Father) who appropriates Beowulf's struggle. As such, one text foregrounds feminine elements while the other represses them. The symbiosis between Grendel and the Dam is still intact in the film and

Grendel, who desires what the (m)Other desires, continues to hold phallic significance for his Mother. He remains as the subject without lack as it is in and through language that this intersubjective space is fabricated and as "external otherness, language" remains an impossibility in his world. In other words, while internal otherness is achieved in his world, external otherness is beyond his grasp. (Birlik 249)

In the Old English epic, Grendel is left without a father; however, in the film, as stated above, he is fathered by Hrothgar. In a comprehensive comparative analysis of Gunnerson's (2005) and Zemeckis's (2007) film adaptations, Hodapp attempts to answer the question "who is Grendel's daddy?" and tries to explain both the identity of the father and "in part Grendel's invasion of Heorot" (101). However, for Hodapp, the answers supplied to this question reveal more about the film's "twenty-first century audience than about the poem or its cultural level" (101). At this point I depart from Hodapp and suggest that the film problematizes the possible link between the (biological) father and the Father at the heart (Heorot) of this feudal organization. My emphasis falls on the father's (im)potency

in representing the Law. In the film, Hrothgar's biological fathering is not imbued with linguistic castration, which implies the traumatic disconnection from the mother and submitting oneself to the logic of the signifiers determined by the paternal metaphor. In their case, things are reversed: rather than the infant being castrated by the Law/language, the biological father is led to a psychic regression due to the son (to be precise, due to the Dam's desire for a son). As the father's link with the imaginary seems to be kept intact in the film, it appears to be a dramatization of the conflicts between the (m)Other and the shared Other/the representative of the paternal metaphor, that is, the king. This time, the (m)Other conquers the representative of the paternal metaphor and annuls his masculinity. In such a context, "[s]urprisingly, perhaps, the film's moral center, such as it is, lies not with the Danes or the Geats but more with Grendel's mother, who articulates the film's underlying point most clearly" (Hodapp 104). It comes as no surprise that the Mother's representation in the film is "the topic discussed most intensively by the scholars" (Traidl 132).

In both texts, the same opposition between the (m)Other and the paternal metaphor is established between the sea, which is identified with Grendel's Mother—who does not have a name (that is, who is not symbolically positioned or who exists outside language), and the land (or Heorot²)—which is identified with the stable and the masculine. In other words, the phallic Other (represented by the sea/cave/the Mother) destabilizes the parameters and operating mechanisms of the Shared Other, the symbolic in Heorot. In the same line of thinking, both in the film and in the epic, space is presented in binary terms as this world and the underworld. This world is conquered by male phallic energy in both texts: however, in the first one, the paternal metaphor is represented by Hrothgar and Christ (due to the narrator's intrusions) and in the second one, despite the Christian priest in the presence of the king, the paternal metaphor remains unrepresented. In the epic, the underworld has Christian resonances as it is characterized by shadow, misty moors, perpetual darkness, demons, etc. This is the binary opposite of a world which is reigned over by God. This is the uncharted country, outside the Christian domain. In Swanton's words, Grendel "has made his home with all that is antithetical to Heorot," which means "heart" and which is "a major Germanic symbol of both regularity and purity" (56). In the film, Heorot and the cave come to represent the topological structure of consciousness and the unconscious, or the originary "object-seeking" drives. In this way, both of the texts proceed through binarisms which are

² During the reign of *Beowulf*, instead of the mead-hall there is the stone castle, which, for Hodapp, is indicative of *Beowulf*'s "worldly success" (106).

based on spatial oppositions but the significance attached to these binaries differs due to the shifting perspective. These oppositions are darkness vs. light, death vs. life, mother vs. father, imaginary vs. symbolic, nature vs. culture, sea vs. land, pre-Oedipal vs. Oedipal, pre-linguistic vs. symbolic, ungendered vs. gendered, demon vs. Christian, the (m)Other vs. the Name of the Father. It is possible to extend this list based on the basic binary opposition between the sea and the land.

At the beginning of the film *Beowulf* says “I belong to the sea.” Misleadingly, this statement sounds masculine as the sea is turbulent and suggests a harsh form of male life. However, in the course of the film, the connotations of the sea change significantly as it is everywhere: it is under the land and it surrounds the land. It is incomprehensible, indefinable, unfixed and amorphous, and Grendel’s Mother lives in the sea. The sea and the way in which it is depicted reminds us of amniotic fluid and this idea is supported by two details in the film: when Beowulf steps into the sea of the underworld/cave/unconscious, the colour of the water changes. The water seems to react to something alien. Another detail is the liquid substance dripping from Grendel’s mouth and body. His body seems to be covered in this substance. The sea seems to be associated with the Lacanian imaginary and Heorot embodies within itself phallogocentric discourse that is conquered by the (m)Other. At this point, examining the implications of these registers in Lacan might prepare the ground for a better understanding of Heorot, the sea and the cave in the film. Lacan makes a distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic registers but, at the same time, underlines that both are constitutive in the formation of the human subject. The concept of the Borromean knot reflects schematically how Lacan bases his register theory on the co-existence of three registers. This knot assumes an ontological significance as “in order to sustain consciousness, we must be capable of feeling (Imaginary), using language (Symbolic), and encountering surprise (Real)” (Brivic 12). They depend on each other “looping into each other in such a way that if any one is opened, the other will come apart” (Brivic 12). Their distinction and co-existence indicates that, unlike Freud, Lacan emphasizes the relational/identificatory processes to be experienced with the mother or with significant others. Lacan also metaphorizes the Freudian idea of the biological father and associates the Father (Law) with language or the logic of the signifiers: “Language, he describes, as an intersubjective order of symbolization, an order embedded within patriarchal culture, and thus a force that perpetuates that which he calls the ‘Law of the Father’” (Elliott 105).

With language, the infant is integrated into a social and ethical system; this process can be taken as the acculturation process. Language is already there before the infant is born, and it regulates both the unconscious,

conscious and social mechanisms. That is, both the internal and the external are constituted by language; therefore, “the law of man has been the law of language” (Lacan, *Écrits* 225). In other words, for Lacan “it is the world of words that creates the world of things” and man “speaks but it is because the symbol has made him man” (*Écrits* 229). The sense of wholeness/gratification enjoyed by the infant is disrupted by language as the infant internalizes or is encoded by the logic of the signifiers. In this line of thinking, both the film and the Old English text seem to provide an interesting corrective to classical Freudian theory, which tends to give prominence to the biological father in the constitution of the self, underestimating the significance of the mother and language in the process. When we look at two different depictions of Grendel and his Mother in these texts, we can say that in the Old English epic, the discourse within which the once omnipotent king is located is unable to define Grendel, his Mother and their whereabouts. The space in which they live is presented in extra-linguistic terms. The local people do not know the father of Grendel. Obviously there is the biological father but the Father remains dysfunctional in his world:

Land-people heard I, liegemen, this saying,
 Dwellers in halls, they had seen very often
 A pair of such mighty march-striding creatures,
 Far-dwelling spirits, holding the moorlands:
 One of them wore, as well they might notice,
 The image of woman, the other one wretched
 In guise of a man wandered in exile,
 Except he was huger than any of earthmen;
 Earth-dwelling people entitled him Grendel
 In days of yore: they know not their father,
 Whe'r ill-going spirits any were borne him
 The inhabit the most desolate and horrible places.
 Ever before. (*Beowulf* XXI 25–37)

In the film, Hrothgar, who is both the father and the representative of the Father, cannot organize the sliding signifiers in Grendel's world. Grendel cannot achieve linguistic closure, thus, repression cannot be constituted in his psyche. Therefore, Grendel's desire seems to be impersonal: he is not an object apart from the mother yet. The father, Hrothgar, and what he represents are the measure of all things in the epic, and the text is charged with masculine energy. However, in the film, we see a reversal of the traditional hierarchy between the Father and the (m)Other. In the film, Hrothgar, a metonymic extension of the Father, cannot exert his power and authority in the symbolic of Heorot, which is invaded by pre-symbolic

elements that are also integral to Hrothgar's psyche. Therefore, in the film, when Grendel attacks the logic of the signifiers in its symbolic, as he is positioned elsewhere and speaks from elsewhere, he represents the

libidinal intensity prior to conceptual thought. He is the disruptive power of the unconscious in incarnate form which destabilizes the symbolic as he has not yet met the repressive closure of desire in the aftermath of the Oedipal process. As the Oedipal and the social condition have not yet inscribed the inside of his desire, he is the primary chaos of the pre-representation and pre-signification. As a result, he is still shapeless, distorted, not symbolically positioned and he can speak only as much as a two-year-old child can. (Birlik 247)

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In Grendel's world the dominating element is not the F/father but the (m)Other. However, he wants to relate himself to the logic of the signifiers, or the symbolic represented by Hrothgar, and calls him "the father" in the way an infant does. What we hear from Grendel sounds very much like what Lacan terms the *lalangue*, the infant speech before it submits itself to the Law and before it is gendered, or the language through which the unconscious speaks (Nasio 51). Grendel's attacks then also objectify his search for an intrinsic link between his desire and the symbolic represented by his biological father. He wants to be acknowledged by Hrothgar and expects Hrothgar to act as the metonymic extension of the paternal metaphor in his case, too: "This might be the reason why he does not attack Hrothgar himself but kills his 'acknowledged sons' to whom Hrothgar grants recognition" (Birlik 248).

By way of conclusion, despite Grendel's and his Mother's attacks in the epic, the stability and phallogocentric discourse of the land is emphasized and Beowulf is an agent in this emphasis. In the film, this aspect of Beowulf undergoes a considerable change as the emphasis shifts onto the (m)Other. Grendel cannot achieve the link with the symbolic and remains in symbiosis with the (m)Other in the film. This is a far cry from the image of Grendel in the Old English epic, in which he is regarded as a descendant of Cain and is ostracized from the community for his non-Christian elements. Throughout, therefore, the film is dominated by the (m)Other, both the biological mother and what she represents.

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Hercule Poirot and the Tricky Performers of Stereotypes in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*

ABSTRACT

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) remains well-read, and its hero Hercule Poirot continues to enjoy popular currency. Yet the text has not aged well due to some of its now clichéd plot developments and dialogue, as well as Christie's depiction of class, ethnic and national prejudices in it and her other novels. This study hopes to re-energize discussion on *Murder* by finding defensible reasons for its apparent flaws. Not only do the stereotypical behaviors of the passengers narratively distract Poirot and the reader from a solution, but their flaws serve as foils against which Poirot's heroic gravitas and cultural values are positively contrasted. Further, criticism often misses the point that the passengers are performing their behaviors, and if so, the deployment of stereotypes as only acted performances destabilizes them as permanent aspects of national or ethnic identity. Can *Murder* then be read as an *anti-racist* text?

Keywords: Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Hercule Poirot, detective fiction, British fiction, prejudice, stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

Dame Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) has been a perennial success, in terms of print sales and cinema and stage adaptations, and in 1974 alone the book reputedly sold three million copies following the release of that year's film version, directed by Sidney Lumet. The novel and its detective hero Hercule Poirot are now familiar tropes in popular culture. Yet reading *Murder* has now become a dubious pleasure. Its classic whodunit plot unfortunately coexists with what appear to be unpleasant and offensive ethnic stereotypes from the time period, and these features have been criticized in recent scholarship. Taking the novel's film adaptations as models, directorial responses to the "problem" of these stereotypes have included downplaying them while ironizing the story and lowering Poirot's stature. In brief, the argument in this study is that the censure of these claimed stereotypes, whether on stylistic or ethical grounds, misses the point that the passengers "act" their behaviors. These performances comprise a necessary plot element in both distracting the reader and Poirot from the solution and situating him as a heroic figure. Moreover, rather than perpetuating ethnic stereotypes, *Murder* problematizes them by situating them as merely superficial chosen performances. What I hope to show is that while *Murder* may remain guilty of class elitism, it bears some signs of being an *anti-racist* text. As a coda, I also refer to the film and television versions of *Murder* from 1974 to 2017 to highlight how the story suffers narratively by comparison when the stereotypes are "fixed."

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MURDER AND CRITICISM

Murder on the Orient Express has been described with the same dry joke that is applied to Shakespearean plays, that it would be better if it did not have so many clichés. Much of the novel's enduring attraction involves Christie's recurrent "flâneur-detective" (Dalal 269) Hercule Poirot, and despite her later exasperation with a protagonist she called "bombastic, tiresome, [and] egocentric" (qtd. in Gore-Langton), the diminutive mustachioed Belgian remains a recognizable figure: in 1975 Poirot was the first fictional character to have an obituary printed in the *New York Times*. *Murder's* authorizing tropes are familiar when referenced in popular media: the Belle Époque glamour of its train setting, its sometimes over-theatrical dialogue, and the surprise ending which reveals that everyone did it. In popular culture *Murder* has been the subject of innumerable parodies and pastiches. A YouTube search yields television spoofs ranging decades, with Poirot (over)played by Benny Hill, John Candy and Jason Alexander,

and social media mashups combining *Star Wars* or *Downfall*, with Bruno Ganz's Hitler explosively nitpicking over the 2017 Kenneth Branagh film version. *Murder* further iterates into graphic novels, comic books (with Poirot portrayed by Homer Simpson), social media memes and video games.¹ Poirot and the *Murder* story kernel arguably constitute a strand of cultural capital even for those who have not read it, and its influence extends as far as the Hardy Boys, Cadfael and Dr. Who.

In scholarship, *Murder* and “the queen of crime” have fared less well. Criticism may be roughly divided into interwar and postwar debates on Agatha Christie's place in the canon and the detective novel genre's literary status, and into more recent controversies regarding its putative racism and ethnic stereotypes. Virginia Woolf derided middlebrow fiction as a “mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's-foot jelly” (qtd. in Schaub 12), tying *Murder* to earlier Victoriana replete with fusty butlers and Colonel Mustards who “did it in the library with a candlestick” (Suits 201). Postwar commentary continued to diminish Christie's work as disposable commercial fiction, with critics disparaging her as “a depressingly successful perfecter of the art of the readerly clue-puzzle” (Hark, “Impossible Murders” 111) for her “automated production line” (Lassner 31) of stock plots and clichés mechanically advancing towards a predictable resolution. Even contemporary literary peers such as Raymond Chandler cattily summed up *Murder* as Poirot trudging through “a series of simple operations, like assembling an egg-beater,” with the result that “only a half-wit could guess” (Chandler).

In the twenty-first century, such high-low culture partitions have been questioned in postmodern dialogue, or are dismissed as quaintly snobbish. But Christie's sensibilities have not aged well. Academia now attaches a subversive noir chicness to the American “hard-boiled” detective novel, but the more conservative English subtype has not benefited from this rehabilitation, and newer scholarship is careful to concede that Christie feels “trivial, dated, classbound” (Barnard 7). *Murder's* contemporaneity with the sensational kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's baby in 1932 now has little topical currency, and the “rich, sophisticated, salon-like atmosphere” (Dalal 268) of train travel has dwindled in a culture where even the cachet of airplane travel is only evoked nostalgically in television shows such as *Mad Men*. Christie's world appears an antique one threatened by the encroaching spectres of Bolshevism and “modern morals,” and

¹ YouTube clips: *Benny Hill* (<https://youtu.be/zBvLanL8XpM>); John Candy and SCTV (<https://youtu.be/CTpSO5v1qKY>); *Muppets Tonight* with Jason Alexander (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttYc3ZWpWQc>); *Star Wars VIII* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI-CIvvt6s&t=7s>); *Downfall* (https://youtu.be/EhDzbO_6OIE)—all retrieved 7 October 2019.

much of her work displays a “discomfort with modernity” (Hawkes 195). Christie never “gets” the 1950s Angry Young Men or 1960s hippies who squander their proud British Empire legacy via enervating leftism and the welfare state (Prior 207), and her later novels such as *Third Girl* (1966), with its stilted mocking of youth culture and a Poirot still inhabiting a WWI-era milieu, can read as painfully dated. Christie was a lifelong Tory, and Matthew Beaumont posits that *Murder* replays a Victorian-Edwardian conservatism in that “the narrative nostalgically reinstates an order that no longer exists” in its close when this bourgeois group “can safely proceed to Europe across the ominous spaces of the East” (Beaumont 18).

Worse, where Christie’s cardboard character-painting was once merely criticized as a stylistic limitation, in the present climate it has left her open to accusations of bigotry or racism. George Grella surveys the interwar whodunit novels and notes that ethnic foreigners, along with cads and adulteresses, are expedient victims as they provide rationalized motives to their murderers—thus a satisfying ending is engineered when both the killer and the doubtful outsider are cleansed from the social circle of “our type” (41). Christie’s novels particularly suggest both period racism and xenophobic Anglocentrism, with her world a fossilized Little England menaced by the Other. She held a defensive, embattled view of the British Empire that was problematic even by the 1960s: “foreigners of all kinds are either comic or suspicious” (Barnard 15), her indigenous characters can do no more than epitomize chaos and the need for paternal colonial rule (Allmendinger 61), and her “clear racial demarcation of non-whites as troubling, temporary interlopers in an otherwise white Britain” (Prior 201) resonated squeamishly in the Enoch Powell years. She held a particular disdain for Jews, calling an early character “Noseystein” (Lassner 31), but disparaged everyone from Canadians to Catholics to Syrians (Pendergast 392–94). Nervous editors later resorted to bowdlerizing her books, for example re-titling *Ten Little N****ers* (1939) to *And Then There Were None* (Allmendinger 60).

Yet it may be said that Christie portrays some caricatures humorously, and that she did not spare the English from her barbs; she writes of a tourist that “unlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week to elapse before making the first cautious advance” (qtd. in Ro). She also evolved. Her anti-Semitism lessened when events in the 1930s made jokes about Jews insensitive and unfunny, and in her memoir she relates an incident around 1933 when she was shocked at meeting a *real* Nazi who advocated their extermination (*An Autobiography* 465). For all her “blimpish social attitudes” (Slung 67), morality is not inexorably tied to social status in her texts (Hawkes 203). Despite Christie’s conservatism she portrayed

some strong and actualized females (Slung 65), and for her time was sympathetic toward homosexuality (Lutkus 74). Alison Light also argues that her reputation as a hyper-English “high priestess of nostalgia” via lavish periodized television adaptations reflects 1980s Toryism more than Christie (Light 62–63). In Light’s reading, Christie’s Edwardian tableaux are undercut by subtle modernist touches of parodic wit, with older tropes and phrases ironized or mixed anachronistically—“one cannot imagine Watson getting ‘fed up’ as Hastings does” (68).

Murder on the Orient Express seems to complicate rather than resolve these accusations, for while there are references to Arabs and “useless foreigners” (39), the story is not really “oriental” in subject at all—the initial setting of Istanbul conjures exotic intrigue but plays a nugatory role (Dalal 270). Middle Easterners are mentioned, but not one is a significant character. The train passes through suitably glamorous and exotic environs, yet the story has little interaction with them, as its events take place in a locked coach (Linares 16). The crime and resolution are only notionally about place—they happen *nowhere*, in a static interior space, in the blank snow of the countryside (King 9, 11). Nor are the passengers evenly genteel. No one is poor in the train’s first-class section, but the travelers peak with Dragomiroff’s aristocratic status and end far down the socioeconomic line with servants and car salesmen. Despite the claim that “these are books about luxury” (York 135), the train projects the authorizing marks of high status rather than its passengers, who consume such prosaic fare as eggs and coffee. Only Poirot and Bouc, his friend and a Wagons-Lit official, are seen drinking wine, and Mrs. Hubbard’s cognac is medicinal.

Nevertheless, *Murder* elsewhere rather condemns itself. The text is obsessed with the characters’ nationalities and their consequent stereotypical proclivities (King 12). During the first morning Bouc’s panegyric on the diversity of the passengers is too loaded not to see that it will figure into the crime:

“All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never perhaps to see each other again.”

“And yet,” said Poirot, “suppose an accident—”

“Ah, no, my friend—”

“From your point of view it would be regrettable, I agree. But nevertheless let us just for one moment suppose it. Then, perhaps, all these here are linked together—by death.”

“Some more wine,” said M. Bouc, hastily pouring it out. “You are morbid, *mon cher*. It is, perhaps the digestion.” (24)

One expects a peal of thunder, or theater organ trill. The story never allows us to forget its characters' nationalities. Like Chaucer's pilgrims who are named by their work, *Murder's* passengers are "the American lady" and "the Italian." In Poirot's list of clues nationality always follows names and figures prominently in his deductions. While he does chide Bouc, "How you harp on your Italian!" (114), in debating the killer's identity with his colleagues Poirot argues that the crime is an Anglo-Saxon one of design and not a Latin one of passion (146), not that the distinction is frivolous or misleading.

The academic *modus vivendi* in approaching the awkward fact of Christie's popularity and cultural resonance with her occasional stereotypes has usually involved some patronizing admission that Christie is a product of her time, and that the past is a foreign country. It feels unsatisfying for Christie and *Murder* to be forever blushed past with a critical asterisk, and so I would like to attempt an exoneration. First, at a formal level, the ethnic stereotypes have performative functions in Christie's narrative: they usefully distract the reader and Poirot; further, they underscore the reader's sympathy for and identification with him, for the stereotypes reliably make Poirot look more heroic and justified by comparison. Second, we need to be reminded (often) that the passengers are *pretending* to be clichéd tourists from their respective nations, for their stereotypical behaviors are finally revealed as a ruse to misdirect Poirot. If negative stereotypes are thus merely volitional acts and not inherent attributes, *Murder* should be less subject to criticism for them—and may arguably be read as an *anti-racist* text.

POIROT AS NORMATIVE MORAL REFERENCE POINT

Part of the fun of a whodunit is being offered false solutions and dead ends, and so a first line of defense for *Murder* is that its stereotypes serve this purpose rather than being gratuitous. The nationalities of the passengers create distracting assumptions among Poirot, Bouc and Constantine and likewise tempt the reader without the author breaking the rules by "overtly stat[ing] false information" (Bargainnier 39). The English passengers' reserve suggests they are unlikely to undertake a violent murder, and the Americans' penchant for over-sharing suggests they cannot keep one secret. Merja Makinen agrees that Christie deploys "erroneous prejudices" that divert the reader (416), and Ina Rae Hark adds that for Christie to stress the diversity of the passengers makes it less probable and ergo more dramatic that such a polyglot group would collude ("Twelve Angry People" 40). The too-pat distribution of "such an assembly" (Christie,

Murder 253) ironically prompts Poirot's suspicions when he muses "only in America . . . there might be a household composed of just such varied nationalities—an Italian chauffeur, an English governess, a Swedish nurse, a French lady's-maid" (253).

Another usual component of the detective genre is the predominant role of the protagonist in the narrative. He or she serves as the story world's index point, and so the books are subtitled as Poirot mysteries; they are about *him* and his mental machinations in solving the case. Normally the detective occupies an unequal position of power by having more information with which to surprise the reader and other characters (Singer 158). The reader may fancy him or herself a sleuth, but is unlikely to know "the killing distance of a South American blowgun, the rate at which curare is absorbed into the bloodstream, or the effects of an English summer on the process of rigor mortis" (Grella 31). One can save face in feeling superior to the befuddled Watson or Bouc, which is partly why they are there, while aspiring to be as logical as Sherlock Holmes or as sophisticated as Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey.

Christie reliably conforms to this norm in *Murder*. Its narrator has unusually little presence (Bright 47), and so the story largely uncritically relates Poirot's values and perceptions, and there is little ironic detachment from him. The novel never substantively questions Poirot or challenges his worldview. Christie once mused that she was of a more innocent generation who thought "the enemy was wicked, the hero was good" (*An Autobiography* 437), and Poirot occupies such an uncomplicated role "almost defiantly" against period trends (Martin). Nor did Christie have much regard for psychology as a discipline (qtd. in Hawkes 205) or evidently for the view of truth as contingent and unstable. Even if Poirot's methods are more emotional than Sherlock Holmes's, truth and goodness ultimately do exist and are attainable even when order and civilization are "floundering in the mud of the Somme" (Hawkes 200). For Christie "the forces governing the world are both benign and logical" (Martin), and it is assumed to be possible for Poirot to impose the same sort of stable truth integrity on the situation as the novel's view of reality assumes.

Thus whether Christie is serious or partly sardonic in denigrating Poirot, nothing signifies that he is ironized or less than the epicenter of the story's weltanschauung. Christie's daughter once forbade actor David Suchet from playing Poirot as a comic character on television, warning that "people can smile with him, but never laugh at him" (qtd. in "Poirot is not Comical"). If Mary Debenham considers Poirot "a ridiculous-looking little man" (Christie, *Murder* 6) or MacQueen thinks his name sounds like "a woman's dressmaker" (50), these disparaging views are never permitted to be vindicated by events. It is always others who are wrong for misjudging Poirot by his surface quirks,

and the reader is invited to conspiratorially grin at their mistake and anticipate their comeuppance when they learn who this man *is*. The hero who earns the audience's approval by discomfiting those who underestimate him is a trope going back to Odysseus returning home dressed as a beggar, and it is no less satisfying when arranged here. The reader, surprised by unexpected turns, sees that the passengers also have the same experience.

Thus although Poirot may initially be perceived by the passengers as foreign and marginalized, the reader has already been shown that his position is the finer and valorized one. Within the pre-jet set strata where Poirot moves he is "an important passenger" (3) who receives telegrams from important people and goes to important places. Unlike the train's tourists, he "belong[s] to the world" (124), endowing him with a cultivated sophistication beyond their parochialism. His continental values are assumed to be the natural and proper ones of an international gentleman. Poirot and his friends are always at each other's "service" (47, 118), and courtesy and honor are unquestioned genteel virtues; we hear of *honor* twice, once when it is that of the French army, chivalrously maintained by Poirot, and at the end when he refers to it in retiring from the case (4, 265). Chris Ewers notes that the historical Wagons-Lits line was a triumph of continental standardization, but it is odd that he writes that "Poirot is strangely at home in such a milieu" (109)—it is anything *but* strange, for being among the movers and shakers is precisely Poirot's home, and both he and the train mutually inscribe cosmopolitan prestige.

Language is another index of Poirot's elevated status. Far from his non-Anglophone origins isolating or stigmatizing him (Munt 8), the lingua franca of café society is his French as a Belgian. It is taken as a matter of course that the concierge at the Tokatlian in Istanbul speaks French (Christie, *Murder* 15) and that it is the working language of the train line. That well-bred passengers should address staff *en français* ("Ce n'est rien. Je me suis trompé"—"It's nothing. I was mistaken" 35) is natural, and it does not appear to pique Poirot's suspicions that the xenophobic Mrs. Hubbard knows what "encore un peu" (169) means. In dialogues between Poirot, Bouc and Dr. Constantine, gestures of politeness in French are unfailing ("Après vous, Monsieur," "Mais non, après vous"—"After you, sir," "Why no, after you" 72), along with recurring terms of endearment (mon vieux, mon cher—my old friend, my dear one). In interactions with other passengers Poirot inhabits the same mores of continental etiquette, bowing to Ratchett (28) and calling him *monsieur*. Exchanges are conducted with graceful discretion: *tact* is mentioned twice by Poirot (106, 122), and indecorous speech is avoided except where it is patronizingly excused as an "American expression," such as "bumped off" (45) and "once-over" (126).

Scholarship seems to have obstinately missed this insistent glamorization of Poirot's status and potency, calling him an "affront to English masculinity" (Rowland 63) or a "parody of the male myth" (Munt 8), or linking him to "kindly elves" Puck and Ariel (Grella 38), parsing him as surmounting his foreignness only because he "represents no sexual threat" (42). Hall and Plain argue that muscular heroism became taboo in postwar England, and if so, perhaps Poirot's vitality is retroactively minimized by such a taboo. At best there is the defense that his effeminate fastidiousness again lures others to underestimate his competence (Heilbrun 4). Yet such readings are unpersuasive, for seeing Poirot as a sexless outsider making safe comments on the English also implies an ironic reading of the equally un-British Orient Express that he is so closely associated with. If it is true that Poirot is so anodyne, then why is everyone in the story inevitably awed by him? For those in the know, Poirot is deferred to; he is groveled to by the French army, he daunts Lieutenant Dubosc, and he displays a proprietary authority over the train, behaving coequal to Bouc, if not taking command once given the case. He reduces both Bouc and Constantine to nervous foils who sputter "It is madness!" (Christie, *Murder* 166) while he steely deliberates. At the case's end, although he officially defers to Bouc to choose between two solutions, it is Poirot who has set the choices. The events provide an agreeable counterfactual scenario of "how the Lindbergh case *might* have turned out" (York 138) had heroic Poirot been in command.

THE PERFORMANCE OF MURDER'S STEREOTYPES

These two threads connect to a third, for just as the apparent irksome stereotypes of the passengers distract the reader from the solution, their behavior also endorses Poirot by contrast, thus reinforcing his central position as sympathetic hero. Where Poirot's deportment has the proper conviviality and dignity, the English lack the former and the Americans the latter. It does not undercut this valorization of Poirot to learn that the passengers were performing these clichés in order to misdirect him.

A first example is the British, who are indeed "not chatty" (Christie, *Murder* 9). While all the passengers have an interest in not betraying themselves, the cold aloofness that the English present is juxtaposed against the warm bonhomie of Poirot among his peers Bouc and Constantine. In his interview Masterman is superficially polite, with a "sir" after nearly every utterance, but his face is "inexpressive" and only once "held positive warmth and feeling" (91, 92). The novel does not criticize formality itself, for Poirot is also correct in conduct, but rather its motive, which for

Poirot and Bouc is gracious manners and for Arbuthnot and Debenham is contempt. One of Christie's stock types is the haughty, harrumphing English officer, and Arbuthnot's minimal replies convey to Poirot that he is considered an "interfering little jackanapes" (126), and the narrator posits that Arbuthnot is "uninterested in what a pack of foreigners called anything" (125). The apex of unhelpful sangfroid appears in Mary Debenham, whose "calm and unruffled" voice (147) issues noncommittal non-answers such as "I hardly noticed him" and "I cannot say I thought about it" (148). When Poirot becomes sardonic in order to goad a response, Debenham articulates resentment but maintains her evasiveness: "I don't know" and "It's difficult to say" (151).

The apparent behaviors of the Americans and Italian-American also serve to elicit respect for and identification with Poirot by contrast. The American directness about hard cash is gauche among the refined circles of a detective amateur, for Poirot delicately avoids it—he accepts the case out of friendship and diversion and not remuneration (47), and he asks Foscarelli to "pray confine yourself to the point" (144) when the former tries to regale him with sales figures. Christie is fond of following scenes of Poirot's verbal elegance with American brusqueness, and immediately after a charmingly amiable encounter with Bouc in the Tokatlian they hear Ratchett's rat-a-tat "Pay the bill, Hector" (17) and grunt. In the dining car, Poirot and Bouc's eloquent rumination on Balzac is again followed by Hardman monosyllabically telling Foscarelli "You've got to put it over *big*" (25) and Mrs. Hubbard kvetching about meal bills and tipping. After this follows Poirot's tête-à-tête with Ratchett, where Poirot's pecuniary discretion is set against Ratchett's crassness in urging that Poirot prostitute his services for "big money" (30). If Poirot is small, *big* is consequently bad, for it is invariably attached to examples of American tackiness in yet more monosyllabic adjectives, such as declaring Hardman is "a big American in a loud suit" (24).

Added to the American brusqueness is their lack of adult self-restraint. The Americans, excepting Ratchett, are not unfriendly; rather, they have no filter. Poirot might prefer *more* reserve in Mrs. Hubbard, who carps with insular witlessness about foreign currencies being "a lot of rubbish" (28). By the first day he "knew all about Mrs. Hubbard's daughter. Everyone on the train who could understand English did!" in addition to "what she thought of the Turks and their slipshod ways" (33), and the narrator's evident agreement is expressed in the sarcastic use of the exclamation point. Conspicuously far from the erudite repartee between Poirot, Bouc and Constantine, Mrs. Hubbard's prattling is notably juvenile, and Poirot interacts with her as if she were a babbling child, treating her "soothingly" (100) when she gives her deposition. Foscarelli is treated with similar

paternalism; he has a “childish face” (143) and Poirot interrupts him like an annoyed parent three times in his deposition to recall him to the topic (144). In contrast to Poirot’s verbal propriety, the Americans use colloquialisms and profanities—Mrs. Hubbard is fond of “kinder,” *kind of* (97, 104), and even the likeable MacQueen blurts out that Ratchett is a “damned skunk” (83).

Even if *Murder* can be shown to have reasons for its stereotypes, they are arguably still present and reflect Christie’s choices. Yet the fact that the passengers perform their stereotypes is additionally interesting insofar as how they behave after being unmasked. As their act unravels, both Arbuthnot and Debenham lose their coldness; when Poirot exposes Debenham as the Armstrong governess, Arbuthnot switches from being “carved out of wood” (236) to protesting, “I’ll break every bone in your damned body” (239) while defending Debenham, addressing her by her first name. She similarly shifts from defiant equivocation—“it is true that I lied to you” (238)—to breaking into tears. Foscarelli’s machismo equally disappears as the narrator notes, “All the assurance and geniality had gone out of his manner” (243). Although the German and Swedish domestics do not speak later, their revealed ability to sustain the conspiracy belies their presumed simple wit. Further, when the overblown stereotypes are no longer useful the passengers take on a sympathetic amiability unlike their prior stereotypical quirks: Masterman gently avers to Poirot that Foscarelli “wouldn’t hurt a fly” (246), and as the passengers enter the restaurant car, Mrs. Hubbard comforts the Swedish lady with a quiet kindness different from her earlier strident narcissism. After the resolution, Mrs. Hubbard and Arbuthnot display further maturity and generosity; Hubbard confesses their actions with a grace lacking in her prior vanity, volunteering to “lay the blame upon me and me only” (264), and Arbuthnot tenderly adds that Armstrong “saved my life in the War” (263), without his earlier diffidence.

If it is true that Christie economizes by giving her characters easily recognizable single personality traits in order to focus on exposition (Bargainnier 39), for them to lose those sole traits is a considerable change. However, again, there is perhaps a subtle message accompanying this alteration, for such stereotypes evidently have little purchase if they can be chosen and discarded at will. If ethnic and national behaviors are not inherent to those who display them but are merely chosen and temporary performances, Christie ultimately problematizes such stereotypes. Foscarelli’s Italian-ness and Arbuthnot’s English-ness are, evidently, nothing, and whatever identity traits seemingly divided the passengers are shown to be chimerical.

The novel’s last scene is illustrative of these several points, for Poirot’s solution to fabricate a culprit in order to spare the passengers from arrest

and shame, while protecting the Wagons-Lits name, certifies *his* preference for practical community restorative justice and “honor” over abstract law. Everyone admittedly enjoys a personal benefit from going along with Poirot’s ruse, but by privileging these moral aims over punishing a death that no one regrets anyway (Christie, *Murder* 71) Poirot normalizes his own values over everyone on the train, and the previously arrogant and garrulous passengers are now silent. Constantine takes back his objections, and two passengers, Arbuthnot and Debenham, are even romantically united by Poirot’s principled forgery. It is not hard to see the 1934 *Murder* as a comedy in the medieval sense of a story with a happy ending, for its Poirot/Prospero figure contrives to bring about a harmonious outcome with a possible future marriage.

CASE STUDY: MURDER ON THE SCREEN

While this paper’s emphasis is not film studies, comparison between the *Murder* text and film versions may be additionally revealing. If *Murder*’s stereotypes endorse Poirot by contrast, and if their exposure as temporal acts tends toward discrediting them, it might help to speculate how the *Murder* narrative would differ if Poirot were not valorized and the stereotypes did not function in this way. But this is exactly what happens in the film and television adaptations of the novel. The first *Murder* film, Sidney Lumet’s in 1974, is something of a gold standard in terms of authorial sanction, as it was one of only two film adaptations of her books that Christie liked (Mills 44), and its premiere was her last public appearance. As any influence Christie has over her films ceases and we move towards the present, it is a useful litmus test to see how her assumptions about *Murder* are reinterpreted in order to conform to newer sensibilities.

True to expectation, over time in film the novel’s views are given ironic or comic distancing, and the visuals are archaized with a heavily stylized art deco look. Poirot’s gravitas equivalently shrinks. The 1974 Poirot incorporates only minor idiosyncrasies, having him don gloves to read a newspaper. But in later versions, his now—“ridiculous mustache” (Marine) grows, so that by the 2017 Kenneth Branagh movie it is a comically distracting spectacle noted by other passengers and in commentary for the film. The 2017 production further endeavors to democratize Poirot against others by adding bizarre obsessive-compulsive quirks, so that he sends back eggs that are not identically sized, continually asks staff to straighten their ties, and rudely calls Bouc’s companion a prostitute. As a detective the 2017 Poirot is closer to the American “private dick” type, conforming to the trope of being disaffected from society or damaged by personal

emotions in the case, such as revenge or lost love (Cawelti 332–34); he protests that he “needs rest” and must be browbeaten by Bouc into taking the case, and his objectivity is compromised by guilt as a result of receiving a letter from Armstrong requesting help at the time of the kidnapping.

Comparison with the more emotionally charged film presentations of the final exposure scene is again absorbing in view of how later directors diminish Poirot’s stature. In the 1934 text Poirot remains in control and only two passengers speak, and his decision is made with such finality that the book has nothing more to do but end. As each film presents a new iteration of the story the travelers are less deferential. In the 1974 Lumet version they are told to not interrupt Poirot and quietly say “Hear, hear” only at his close; in the 2010 Philip Martin production *Arbuthnot* threatens to shoot Poirot and is restrained by Debenham (Makinen and Phillips 48); and in the 2017 Branagh film *Arbuthnot* *does* shoot at Poirot and the passengers interrupt and challenge him. Congruently, Poirot’s moral certainty attenuates. At the close of the 1974 film the relieved passengers clink glasses and Albert Finney’s Poirot comments wryly to Bouc, “Now I must go and wrestle with my report to the police—and with my conscience.” But by the 2010 version Poirot anxiously accuses the passengers of rigging a “kangaroo jury,” stating that “the rule of law, it must be held high” and rejecting Debenham’s claim that she serves divine justice by shouting, “Then let God administer it, not you!” (qtd. in Makinen and Phillips 47). The 2017 film elaborates further on the fraught ethics of concealing the crime with a climax of emotional pyrotechnics where Poirot tearfully requests to be shot rather than live with a lie, saying, “You must silence me. Bouc can lie. I cannot,” and then bellowing, “Do it!” In the final shot Poirot washes his hands of the affair, walking off the train alone in disillusionment.

Equally, the stereotypes become increasingly muted in film. The 1974 production is multilingual in announcements and dialogue, and preserves the ethnic portrayals, accents and animosities; *Arbuthnot* initially dismisses Poirot as “probably a frog.” The movie continues the act-within-a-play of the pretended stereotypes but also adds a fourth-wall joke by having actors play personas unlike their signature ones—Sean Connery as suave James Bond is now stiff, brusque *Arbuthnot*, and Lauren Bacall, formerly Humphrey Bogart’s elegant co-star in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), is now dowdy, blathering Hubbard (Kahn 209). The 2017 film makes the train and its passengers more uniformly American and most speak an undifferentiated English. The film is also more moralizing about bigotry, as Poirot scolds MacQueen for holding “a man’s race against him” and Debenham chides Hardman over a racist remark made against *Arbuthnot*, who is black. But something has been cheapened, for the 2017 passengers

were lying to Poirot, but not pretending to be anything besides innocent; that *is* what they are like. Little suggests they revert into their other, authentic selves (Arbuthnot's skin cannot be an act), and so evidently Count Andrenyi *is* a brawler and Mrs. Hubbard *is* a cynical, oversexed vamp. The film is flattened by deleting the evocative exposure of the passengers' ethnic identities as staged stereotypes.

In summary, our A/B test shows the expected result: where Poirot and his values are not normative to or validated by the story, and where the stereotypes are minimized and the passengers merely pretend to be innocent, the narrative becomes less about Poirot's thought processes and the case as a mental game, and more about physical plot events. The results may be more visually gratifying, but the psychological and intellectual subtleties and depths of *Murder* are reduced with these two changes.

CONCLUSION

Whatever complaints Agatha Christie made about Poirot, his values are *Murder's* normative and narratorial values, and are coterminous with the train line's moral framework via his friend Bouc. Their performances of such national or ethnic clichés serve multiple purposes—in being amusing, in confusing Poirot, and in fulfilling a basic move of detective fiction by tempting the reader to follow red herrings in order to heighten surprise (Alexander 25). Yet I have attempted to show that the passengers' pretended stereotypical flaws also ensure the reader's awe of and sympathy for Poirot by contrasting against his genteel gravitas, so much so that the characters incline to resemble him in grace and generosity. As Christopher Cannon writes about chivalry, a medieval romance “represent[s] its ethics as so compelling that anyone who confronts the court inevitably becomes a part of it” (20). Here as well, in a different era, the passengers are reconciled with the reader's view of Poirot as they come to admire him for his valor and little grey brain cells, calling him “a very wonderful man” (Christie, *Murder* 262), and the story ends with concord on his terms as they continue home.

Murder on the Orient Express is not always subtle. For all its disapproval of the passengers' misappraising Poirot, the text too often also judges by physical appearances (Lahlmangaihi 15) or resorts to obvious aptronyms (*Hard-man*, *Rat-chett*, *Dragon-miroff*). While Christie's views would mellow (Prior 200), some of her earlier racism is problematic, and her palette of identities in *Murder* mostly includes Euro-Western ones. Yet the story implies that if national and ethnic stereotypes are only a performative stance, then such differences are superficial or dubious. In a field of

action whose values remain dominated by Poirot's continental and Gallic mores, and where everyone is admittedly of a narrow and fairly wealthy demographic, such a hinted message of anti-prejudice freighted under other content is not a deep or wide one. But in the context of 1934, it is significant, and for Poirot's and *Murder's* continuing resonance, it remains so.

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Dystopias in the Realm of Popular Culture: Introducing Elements of Posthuman and Postfeminist Discourse to the Mass Audience Female Readership in Cecelia Ahern's *Roar* (2018)

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes selected short stories in Cecelia Ahern's thirty-narrative collection *Roar* (2018) to see how (and with what losses or gains) the perspectives of posthuman and postfeminist critique can be incorporated via the common dystopic umbrella into the mainstream female readership of romance literature. The dystopic worlds created by Ahern in *Roar* portray inequality and power imbalances with regard to gender and sex. The protagonists are mostly middle-aged women whose family and personal lives are either regulated by dystopic realities or acquire a "dystopic" dimension, the solutions to which are provided by, among other tropes, "posthuman" transformations. *Roar* introduces other-than-human elements, mostly corporeal alterations, in which the female bodies of Ahern's characters become de-formed and re-formed beyond androcentric systems of value. The article raises the question of whether feminist and, to some extent, "posthuman" (speculative) approaches, need to be (and indeed should be) popularized in such an abridged way as Ahern does in her volume. The answer depends upon the identification of the target audience and their expectations. Ahern's *Roar* represents popular literature intended to be sold to as many readers as possible, regardless of their education, state of knowledge, etc. Viewed from that perspective, what some critics could perceive as the collection's structural weaknesses constitutes its utmost marketing asset. The essay argues that despite not being a structurally innovative work of art, Ahern's book fulfils the basic requirements of the popular fiction genre, intermittently providing some extra, literary gratification and popularizing rudimentary elements of the posthuman and postfeminist thought.

Keywords: popular culture, popular literature, romance novels, the feminist discourse, dystopia, the posthuman, Ahern.

As a separate genre, popular fiction is claimed to be generated in regular intervals rather than “created” and mostly constitutes a mode of diversion, possessing a considerable degree of commercial capacity (Gelder 15, 35). In *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practises of a Literary Field*, Gelder aptly points out that these specifics make critics consider the genre to be inferior and sub-standard in relation to high-brow Literature. Consequently, the above-cited scholar observes that nowadays it has become a

commonplace to regard popular fiction derisively as capitalism's most perfect literary form. It is as if popular fiction is “pure ideology,” simply a matter of commerce, nothing more or less than a “product”—whereas Literature (so the argument goes) is more complicated, resisting ideological reduction, disavowing its commercial identity, able to criticize rather than capitulate to capitalism, enmeshed in nothing less than life itself. (Gelder 35)

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Bearing Gelder's arguments in mind, one has to agree with him that it would be a crude simplification, and a form of cultural prejudice, to regard popular literature entirely as a marketing product which conveys the one-to-one ideological system of consumerist capitalism. Following this line of thinking, a key theorist of the popular culture, John Fiske, reminds us that

[p]opular culture is not consumption, it is culture—the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities. Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above. (23)

Recognizing culture in general, and popular culture in particular, as “a living, active process” provides a feasible argument why blurring the boundaries between the so-called high and low forms of culture should not be accompanied by reducing the latter solely to purely commercial practices regulated from above. These practices naturally constitute a vital component of the genre but they do not exclude other merits of such writing convention. The following article explores an attempt to bridge the differences between popular, and relatively accessible, writing for women and the more advanced postfeminist and posthuman thought.

Cecelia Ahern, daughter of Bertie (Bartholomew Patrick) Ahern (Taoiseach, Irish Prime Minister 1997–2008), a best-selling Irish author of the new generation (born in 1981), is considered to be an iconic writer of contemporary popular literature for women. She came to literature from a mass media background: she graduated from Journalism and

Media Communications and even had a brief singing career in Ireland's finals qualifying for the 2000 Eurovision Song Contest ("Cecelia Ahern," *Fantastic Fiction* profile). Ahern fulfils all the aforementioned conditions of popular fiction: her books provide entertainment for readers, she has achieved global commercial success (the Hollywood adaptations of two of her novels have become international box office hits, while the rights to the collection analyzed in this article have been sold, as well), and she writes regularly, publishing, as assured on her website, one book a year. Furthermore, her website informs us that the author "sold 25 million copies internationally . . . published in over 40 countries, in 30 languages." Ahern specializes in romance novels, record breaking in terms of sales, such as *PS, I Love You* (2004), *Where Rainbows End* (2004), *Thanks for the Memories* (2008), *How to Fall in Love* (2013), *The Year I Met You* (2014). The genre that has brought Ahern international fame, popular romantic fiction, in its pure and most classic form, can be distinguished by its sentimental subject matter, "plot predictability" (Killeen 55), submissive female protagonists, frequently resembling damsels in distress, "antiseptic and wan heroines needing rescue by older, wealthier men—a legacy of the Gothic romance . . . more liable to faint than fight back" (Killeen 57), heroines not only saved but sexually awakened by active male protagonists, and by "happily ever after" resolutions of the narrative. Killeen indicates the generic term HEA ("Happily Ever After") as the condition *sine qua non* for this genre (55).

Traditionally, literature written for a mass audience tends to be conservative in content, and it rarely incorporates emancipatory, progressive or overtly controversial issues. There is an implicit assumption that "the romance's conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood is inadvertently 'learned' during the reading process and generalized as normal, natural, female development in the real world" (Radway 186). In this way, stereotypical notions, i.e. about women's allegedly innate passivity are upheld in the mass audience's consciousness. Killeen argues that second wave feminism reinforced the conviction that "romance is 'bad' (especially for women)" (56) since it implicitly reinstates patriarchal values. Considering the above, it comes as no surprise that the terms "popular romance genre" and "feminist" are not frequently used in one sentence in an affirmative context. However, as proved by Killeen, there are popular romance authors, such as Roberts (one can add Ahern to this group, as well) who attempt to redefine the boundaries of this genre and create independent-minded female protagonists in tune with the spirit of contemporary times. What is more, Radway recognizes an empowering potential for women in the fact that "romance reading originates in the very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited, protest" (220).

Consequently, she envisages a further feminist development by employing the “strategies for making that dissatisfaction and its causes consciously available to romance readers and by learning how to encourage that protest in such a way that it will be delivered in the arena of actual social relations rather than acted out in the imagination” (220). Furthermore, to achieve these aims, Radway draws attention to the need to acknowledge “the complexity of mass culture’s implication in social life” (220–21). With regard to her claim, postfeminism seems to be positively predisposed towards exploring these intricacies. As Tasker and Negra emphasize, postfeminism is deeply rooted in popular culture; it is receptive to popular trends and commercial preferences, and, what is more, it “elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents” (2). Tasker and Negra argue that it focuses on women’s choices, opportunities and possibilities rather than constraints and obstacles (2–3). The Chick Lit genre (the fusion of popular romance fiction and postfeminist culture), which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, is defined as a “female oriented form of fiction and a highly successful commercial literary phenomenon” (Genz and Brabon 84). The female protagonists of such novels are allegedly “liberated” from patriarchal restraints, and viewed as acting from a place of female agency as they pursue their autonomous goals. Nonetheless, it seems that this new writing convention nearly routinely departs from former, feminist-oriented goals.¹ Consumer (post)feminism has different objectives: its addressee is supposed to make good use of the earlier gains of the women’s movement, while at the same time, distancing herself from the feminist ethos.²

With her young age and world-wide marketable success, Ahern is not a pioneer of the women’s movement but she evidently draws benefits (including financial ones) from the social and cultural advances made by the second generation activists. Likewise 21st-century Ireland is no longer the same place it was in the previous millennium. The secular turn, multicultural policy, post-Celtic Tiger trauma and changes in gender equality legislation have had an impact upon the country’s development. Ahern, as a proverbial thirty-something, enterprising icon of popular (postfeminist) writing, advocates that, even though, regardless of the radical changes in

¹ Helen Fielding’s canonical *Bridget Jones* book series boasts a protagonist (especially in the early volumes) who speaks lightly of sexual harassment in the workplace and has a limited awareness of global culture, politics or feminist agenda. McRobbie emphasizes Jones’s dream of the married life as being a central part of her future plans (36–38).

² The question of distinguishing the second wave from the third one is explored in detail in my article “From the Kitchen into the Bathroom: Feminist (post) Theory in Crisis.”

Irish society that happened over the last decades, there still exist crucial female struggles and feminist objectives that are not accomplished and that are worth fighting for. *Roar* seems to underscore that it takes more time and effort to alter people's mentality and cultural habits than to eradicate discriminatory laws and regulations. As argued here, Ahern strives (not without stylistic deficiencies and structural shortcomings in the text) to make an astonishing progression from popular fiction into what Angela McRobbie ironically defines as "unpopular feminism" (31–34) and even less popular posthuman stylistics. *Roar* (2018) seeks to usher the devoted, mass reading public of Ahern's earlier romance novels into the world of more challenging dilemmas with some elements of the dystopian reality and posthuman critique; not without failures, it must be admitted.

Presenting "thirty stories/thirty women," *Roar* examines contemporary problems related to cultural femininity and the strict gender policing perceived as women's confinement ("The Woman Who Wore Pink," "The Woman Who Was Pigeonholed," "The Woman Who Was a Featherbrain," "The Woman Who Lost Her Common Sense," "The Woman Who Was Kept on the Shelf," "The Woman Who Found Bite Marks on Her Skin," "The Woman Who Walked in Her Husband's Shoes"). Some narratives explore women's self-definitions in the context of their social visibility and representation ("The Woman Who Slowly Disappeared," "The Woman Who Had a Ticking Clock" and "The Woman Who Thought Her Mirror Was Broken"). Others are organized around metaphors of much desired freedom and defiance: "The Woman Who Grew Wings" or "The Woman Who Found the World in Her Oyster," "The Woman Who Smiled," "The Woman Who Had a Strong Suit," "The Woman Who Returned and Exchanged Her Husband." Different as they might be, all the stories explore the (negative) gender stereotypes held by society (and sometimes internalized by the protagonists themselves), and seek ways out of the impasse. The following article is going to focus only on two tropes of these critical practices: dystopian and posthumanist ones. To make it clear, the term posthumanist is used in the article as a mode of beyond human female bodily transformations, in which the materialities of female bodies, their domestic surroundings, milieu and the androcentric worldview become re-constituted; evidently, in Ahern's fiction, the philosophical claims of posthumanism feature in a much diluted and mass audience-friendly version.

In the dystopian reality of "The Woman Who Spoke Woman" located in the not so distant past (future?), there is only one recognized language: a "man-speaking" dialect. The short story, which constitutes a shrewd political satire on mansplaining, depicts a men-only government, in some unspecified, patriarchal country run by a male Prime Minister (and

resembling Ireland before Mary Robinson's presidency) who declare their apprehension about losing the support of female voters. Oblivious to women's specific needs or interests, the male politicians are deeply convinced that they represent the whole population of the country: "But we speak for everyone," one says. "We act on all of our citizens' behalf" (Ahern 246). Relating to female voters, statesmen refuse to concede that men in power "don't act on *their* behalf. And . . . don't listen to their concerns" (246, emphasis in the original). In the cabinet's view, men's problems are identified as universal and referring to all "mankind," whereas "women's issues" generate nothing more than an unnecessary obstruction in the government's management. When an accomplished and attractive female protagonist is invited to give a speech in front of the all-male governing body, the politicians do not understand her parlance. They need to be informed in an interpretive manner that the orator "was speaking our national language but she was speaking the woman's version" (248). In "The Woman Who Spoke Woman," the fact that female characters might have their own idiom is both incomprehensible and threatening to men's authority. Referring to the Prime Minister, the advisor clarifies that the "women of this country wish you to understand their dialect, and they also wish women who speak this dialect to join the government" (248). In Ahern's short story, female politicians are not generically regarded as the representatives of "*all* the country's citizens" (249, emphasis in the original), since they are solely allowed to stand for the questions regarding their own gender. In the world of governmental affairs, men are willing to listen to women but only to those who can express themselves in the "de-womanized . . . male dialect" (251). In "The Woman Who Spoke Woman," the Prime Minister elucidates the generally-binding responsibilities of statesmen: "the men are just the men—their role is to be a man, no distractions. When they speak, they speak man, and everybody hears them" (254). In contrast, women's administrative utterances might only be acknowledged as providing a tactical diversion from the inconvenient matters that the government may wish to bury. The advisor (who in Ahern's short story is subversively a woman disguised as a man) sums up the proceedings: "we need man-speaking-women in the government to discuss everyday issues, man-speaking-women to translate the women's issues, and we need women-women to distract from the more troubling male issues" (254). As demonstrated in "The Woman Who Spoke Woman," women's statements can be taken into consideration as long as they are articulated in men's language, and when they are consistent with men's interests rather than women's own objectives.

The dystopian "The Woman Who Wore Pink" captures the absurdities of an anatomical categorization of socio-cultural roles and gender

identifications. In some near future, alternate reality, sole two legitimized gender taxonomies are assigned at birth on the basis of one's biological sex and no individual can deviate from the legally enforced Gender Discipline. Ironically, open to redefinitions and renegotiations, gender as a category was introduced precisely to avoid biological reductionism. However, in Ahern's short story, sex-based binary classifications replace one's preferred gender identifications, and to stress this fact everybody is lawfully termed as either "penis" (instead of man) or "vagina," signifying woman (or rather an assumption that every woman needs to be cisgender). The linguistic designation system works like a synecdoche in which a (body) part stands for the whole (person): one biological organ is meant to represent one's entire subjectivity. In the dual sex-categories regime, penises are obligatorily marked by blue bands on their wrists and blue objects they possess, while vaginas have to wear pink bracelets, use only pink taxis and behave in the way that is officially recognized as compliant with their gender. The Gender Recognition Act of 2017 regulates all the norms of social conduct and verbal expression with regard to women's and men's expected behaviour. If a vagina should violate these rules, she can get penalty points, a fine or a court sentence. Generally, women are not allowed to openly refuse men's help, regardless of whether they need it or not. They also cannot offer assistance to men; Mary Agronski (a "naughty vagina"), who held the door open for a man, is punished by the Gender Police and re-educated that "[p]olite would mean you allowing that man to be helpful to you. Polite means everyone knowing their place and making sure we don't upset the foundations of our society" (Ahern 209). Another female culprit is disciplined for declining a man's offer to assist her with carrying the shopping. Her assertive refusal is penalized as an act of belligerence. Any declaration such as "This vagina is well able to take out the rubbish" is viewed as an insubordinate transgression (221). As seen, all forms of verbal or behavioural disobedience questioning the Gender Recognition Act, are castigated by the Gender Police: "The female gender cop is dressed in a candy-pink uniform and her younger male partner is dressed in baby blue. The two saccharine colours pop in an otherwise muted world" (208).

Moreover, Ahern's "The Woman Who Wore Pink" raises the vital issue of transgender people who defy binary sexual divisions. In a different short story from the same volume, "The Woman Who Found the World in Her Oyster," oysters, as stressed by the narrator, signify transsexual creatures: they begin their life cycle as males which discharge sperm, and later, they turn into females and produce eggs. This inclusive metaphor of the fluid and non-binary sexuality of the natural world reaffirms the transgender protagonist of the aforementioned narrative and comforts

her. "The Woman Who Wore Pink" draws attention to the limitations of the twofold gender model and to the dangers it poses for the transgender community. When the official colour band on one's wrist clashes with one's preferred gender identification, it might put people's lives in jeopardy from violent transphobes or lead to undesired disclosure in a professional context. Unfortunately, vital as the problem is, the short story seems to avoid ambiguities at any cost; the narrative is slowed down by the detailed summary of ongoing events and frequent repetitions: "he's embarrassed, and feels degraded. She catches his eye and does her best to offer him a supportive smile but the damage has been done already. . . . It seems such a simple thing, pink and blue gender recognition, but such simple acts as these mean so much more than she thought" (Ahern 211). The above citation reveals the exact problem with Ahern's fiction: her earlier emblematic romance mode seems to compete for primacy with the profound subject matter of the writer's recent prose. To a large extent, clarifying passages, like the ones related above, constitute an essential element of the popular fiction pact between writers and readers. This is how Radway explains such a mutual understanding:

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Romances further obviate the need for self-conscious interpretation by almost never assuming that their readers are capable of inferring meaning, drawing conclusions, or supplying "frames." Typically, after describing a verbal response that any reader can infer is prompted by anger, the writer confides redundantly, "she was angry." Repetition is the rule, not the exception governing these novels. Even in passages obviously intended to evoke a mood, romance writers cannot resist the temptation to assist the reader in her interpretative efforts. (196)

It seems that Ahern has transposed the popular genre convention into her more ambitious current writing quite uncritically. Let us consider a blameless, derisive passage, mocking Starbucks's direct marketing manner of calling customers by their first names, offered by the company together with hundreds of coffee options. In the new reality, there are only two binary oppositional "personal" identification tags—"a chorus of 'penis,' 'vagina,' 'vagina,' 'penis'" (Ahern 206) which—when juxtaposed with copious, sophisticated product selections, creates an ironically amusing effect. The world can recognize thousands of variants of coffee brands but only two types of customers: "Cappuccino, no chocolate, penis! . . . Grande latte to go, please. Vagina" (206). If Ahern had decided to leave this well-played scene as it is, it could have stayed long in readers' minds. But instead, the writer needs to cross the "I's" and dot the "I's" and provide a ready-made interpretation for readers in the way in which the order is

placed: “One latte for a human being” (Ahern 223). As argued earlier, such structural flaws and supplementary stylistic habits are the trademarks of the “romantic writing” in which Ahern specializes. Radway sums it up pertinently:

[R]edundancy and overzealous assertion . . . combat ambiguity, imply that all events are definitely comprehensible. . . . these techniques cancel the anxiety and contingency prompted by the fact that reading is a temporally open-ended act. . . . By masking the interpretative character of the act of reading, the redundant and simple language . . . minimizes the labor that the reader contributes to the production of the story. (196)

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Two other dystopian short stories, “The Woman Who Guarded Gonads” and “The Woman Who Returned and Exchanged Her Husband,” reverse the gender power dynamic and imbalance, only this time men’s wor(l)ds are controlled by women and not vice versa. The first narrative presents the pro-choice debate held on men’s bodily territory (male reproductive rights are being questioned instead of women’s) and the latter depicts the literal commodification of spouses (husbands and not wives) who might be procured, returned or exchanged in market stores. “The Woman Who Guarded Gonads” destabilizes the so-called “pro-life” rhetoric by applying it to men’s reproductive rights. The short story follows a man’s application for a vasectomy, which in Ahern’s dystopia, is illegal. The situation intentionally refers readers to the context of abortion in Ireland, which until recently, according to Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution, “the right to life of the unborn,” was not legally permitted on demand (Connolly 71). The Eighth Amendment of 1983 put the equity sign between the foetus’s right to live and that of the expectant woman. The male protagonist in “The Woman Who Guarded Gonads” does not want to have any more children and he appeals to the “right to choose what I do with my sperm” (Ahern 267). Since 1992, after the X Case of a raped 14-year-old girl who threatened to commit suicide, Irish women wishing to terminate pregnancy had to acknowledge being suicidal in order to justify their claim to abortion (Connolly 73). Correspondingly, the vasectomy-seeking protagonist in “The Woman Who Guarded Gonads” has to provide an account of his mental health and clarify whether he might take his own life. Similarly to Irish women who had to travel to the UK to abort a foetus, the man wishes to have a vasectomy abroad in a country where it is not forbidden by the law, but he is threatened with a restraining order. In “The Woman Who Guarded Gonads,” the male character reiterates the pro-choice arguments: “You can’t make a decision about *my* body, based on *your* personal opinions. IT’S MY SEMEN! THEY

ARE MY TESTICLES!" (Ahern 268, emphasis in the original). However, his voice and his claims that "It's my body" and "It's got nothing to do with you!" (269) are not taken seriously by the female state officials just as the arguments of abortion-seeking women have hardly evoked any sympathy from Irish legislators and administrators. In "The Woman Who Guarded Gonads," the female bureaucrats mimic the anti-abortion rhetoric regarding the state's legitimization to control citizens' reproductive rights. Placards SAVE SEMEN and *Guard the Gonads* (emphasis in the original) manifest the governmental policies towards the need to control male fertility that female clerks support unquestioningly. Published just before the revoking of the Eighth Amendment in May 2018, "The Woman Who Guarded Gonads" expresses Ahern's support for Irish women's right to decide about their own fertility and their own bodies. Valuing the foetus over the life of the grown woman can lead to tragedy, as in the case of Savita Halappanavar who in 2012 in Ireland died of septic shock because her access to medically-induced termination of the life-threatening pregnancy (diagnosed as impossible to carry) was repudiated by Galway Hospital. When admitted to the hospital, Halappanavar was having a painful miscarriage but doctors recommended waiting, which led to her critical condition, lethal infection and the woman's demise (O'Carroll).

In the dystopian reality of "The Woman Who Returned and Exchanged Her Husband," women can purchase husbands in Spousal Market shops. On submitting a receipt, wives have a life guarantee on their male partners, and they can change their minds any time, sending back undesirable companions to the retailer. The refund might be lower if the husband was previously on sale. The Spousal Market takes care of all return procedures. Conveniently, an unwanted husband is swiftly relocated in the company's vehicle to a new destination, and can be further re-sold on condition that his previous wife has given consent to it, and as long as he himself is open to it. Ironic as it may sound, the shop assistant asserts with conviction: "We wouldn't put him back on the market without his permission, he's a human being—not a piece of meat" (Ahern 149). Unlike the non-existent seller's market for older women, the "newly returned" mature men (149), who remained married for a long time, are much sought-after even in the alternate world. Comparable to an abandoned wife in the patriarchal reality, Paddy, the returned husband after forty years of marriage, pleads that he does not "want to be devalued" and wishes to be "appreciated for what . . . [he is] truly worth" (157). Ahern's short story "The Woman Who Returned and Exchanged Her Husband" mockingly subverts the male-controlled convention in which youthful and sexually attractive female bodies are treated as men's prized properties, subject to a reimbursed replacement when women cease to meet their assigned, decorative criteria.

Contemporary popular fiction criticism tends to stress the potential of the fantasy and the dream-like dimension in this literary convention (Killeen 56). Following this line of thinking, popular romantic fiction, rather than being simply regarded as reinforcing a male-controlled system of values, can also be interpreted as a reaction against the patriarchal order and a form of escape from its confining and unsatisfactory reality. In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Radway draws attention to the “wish-fulfilment fantasy” aspect of literature for women, which may constitute some compensation for the deficiencies and limitations of androcentric culture (151) but she also stresses its transformatory potential: “[R]omance reading might actually elicit and then deflect protest about the character of patriarchal social relations” (157).

Before exploring the beyond human corporeal female transformations in selected short stories from *Roar*, one needs to redefine the concept of the body in posthuman critique. In posthumanist thought, “the aesthetic, biological, medical, philosophical, religious paradigms . . . produce and mediate the idea the idea of the normal, beautiful, sick or aged body” (Nayar 80). “The Women Who Ate Photographs” turns out to be an unexpectedly provocative narrative about the material assemblages of the body with the digested intake, which reveal themselves as recollections of past events. In this short story, the process of eating is depicted as

the formation of an assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity. This capacity includes the negative power to resist or obstruct human projects, but it also includes the more active power to affect and create effects. On this model of eating, human and nonhuman bodies reconceptualize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on. Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry. (Bennett 49)

Drawing upon Kass, Bennett claims that the eatable element becomes reconstructed and restructured into the eater (48). And this is the case in “The Women Who Ate Photographs” in which the protagonist’s consumption of the family photos produces cerebral reminiscences. The digested paper actively induces psycho-somatic states, changing the temporality of woman’s existence. Eating the photos transports the central character into the world of the affects connoted by that image: “she was chewing. . . . a tidal wave of emotions, smells and memory enveloped her, wrapping her in a warm, cosy cocoon of love and nostalgia. She closed her eyes and swallowed” (Ahern 95–96). The process of retrieving the sensory data and transforming them into brain sensations and stimuli is rendered

by means of all five basic faculties, i.e. the familiarity of her baby's fingers' touch, the aroma of his breath, the texture of "their old velvet couch beneath her legs" (96). The materiality of the photographic paper resists the process of ingestion: "Chewing photograph paper is difficult. It takes a lot to break down, her jaws ache, the taste makes her retch, but when she reaches the other side, the smells, the sounds, the sights flash into her mind, while the ache in her jaw and the bad taste fade away" (96). The narrative surprises readers with the tragic-comic relief of the seasoning of the photographs, adding olive oil and fusing them with other food. The protagonist experiments with "new ways to consume her memories; mixing the blended photos with tea-leaves, allowing them to infuse with boiling water" (98–99). In "The Women Who Ate Photographs," Ahern renders the discourse of the heroine's addiction in a specialized, drug-related idiom, such as "the hit of nostalgia, the fix that transportation to another place gives her" (97). The writer precisely accounts for the cold turkey symptoms of withdrawal: "aches behind the eyes, stomach cramps, a trembling from inside as though caused by extreme hunger" (99). At the same time, as usual, the author "cannot resist the temptation to assist the reader in her interpretative efforts" (Radway 196), dispelling doubts that what the heroine craves is the sensation of being recognized by her family, "that warm cosy feeling of being wanted, needed, really yearned for makes her feel safer" (Ahern 99). With reference to narrative twists, Radway reminds one that the "romance perpetuates the illusion that, like water into wine, brusque indifference can be transformed into unwavering devotion" (151). In contrast to the fairy tale, the female character in "The Women Who Ate Photographs" is not awakened by a kiss like Sleeping Beauty but enters an active interaction. The materiality of the kiss (its taste, saliva, touch, etc.) that the protagonist exchanges with her husband expands the assemblage that she earlier created: "They communicate with each other through this kiss now. A new moment. It tastes better than any photograph" (Ahern 102).

Morphing posthuman female bodies develop not only re-formed but de-formed ("foreign") deviations from the so-called human anatomy. In doing so, they locate the protagonists of Ahern's narratives in the field of what MacCormack defines as posthuman teratology: "Arguably monstrosity is most often understood as a spectacle of flesh (in 'deformity') or of capability (in diffability for example). But it also includes patterns of non-spectacular expressivity, such as behavioural or communicative diversions from what is considered within the spectrum of unremarkable behaviour" (79–80). The de-formed female body can mutate and it metastasizes, producing "unnatural" growths, changing its cellular composition. In "The Woman Who Was a Featherbrain," the short story wittily incorporates scientific

discourse; as an MRI scan shows that the heroine's brain has grown with feathers: "the left side—is mostly covered in this . . . feather . . . which affects your speech and language, mathematical calculation and fact retrieval, which explains your behaviour and the problems you've been experiencing" (Ahern 188). As in the proverbial scatterbrain condition, the protagonist's mind is diagnosed to have deteriorated, not being exercised enough and not being "as mentally challenged as . . . before" (190). The heroine graduated from Finance and Economics departments and did investment analyses in a top London-based company. Her current occupation "using my head in a different way" (190) is a euphemism for being a mother of four and a stay-at-home housewife. However, regardless of a firm declaration that "[r]aising people is vastly more important than stock markets or bullshit sales meetings," the central character's monologue betrays frustration ("this week my main project is potty training") and discomfort with her current situation ("my brain wants . . . other information, other stimulation"); the heroine's speech reveals her resentment and reservations about the delights of full time child-raising ("I haven't a clue what's going on in the stock markets but I can tell you every episode of every season of *Peppa Pig*") (190). The protagonist's dwindling intellect lacks the cerebral incentives and stimuli necessary for her personal self-development but she is also a monster-mother by the very fact of admitting that maternity does not satisfy all of her vital needs.

In "The Woman Who Found Bite Marks on Her Skin," the mechanism of auto-immune disease attacks the organism of the protagonist, manifesting itself via discernible corporeal self-aggression: bites on her skin. Her body, like an interactive platform, reverberates with androcentric pressures, "[i]t is the interface between nature's unique emergences of flesh and metaphysical attempts to make sense of that flesh" (MacCormack 79). For the protagonist of "The Woman Who Found Bite Marks on Her Skin," the "skin had become a patchwork quilt of guilt" (Ahern 55). The female character tormented herself about not being a good enough mother, neglecting her children when at work, and failing in her job due to being too absorbed in her family life, putting on weight or spending too much on her own needs, and so on. Jordan claims that in androcentric societies based on hierarchy and restraint one's vulnerability results from the lack of control over essential aspects of one's life (124). In "The Woman Who Found Bite Marks on Her Skin," each injury on the woman's body conspicuously signifies a failure to resist the self-blaming disease which has debilitated her entire existence. The narrator portrays the heroine's tormented mind and body in a gory Gothic manner. In the process, the abstract body turns into material posthuman flesh: "Her flesh had been devoured by hundreds of angry bite marks that began as nips but ended in blood-inducing tears of flesh. The physical pain was crippling" (Ahern 51–52).

In "The Woman Who Unravelled," the apparent solidity of the heroine's corporeal framework disentangles to reveal the mesh of the threaded parts. "The Woman Who Unravelled" contains a surreal and uncanny conversational passage that effectively illustrates the process of defamiliarization: the scattered (bloody?) fibres of the female body create horrifying meshed entanglements with the seemingly familiar domestic interior. The following uncanny discussion demonstrates that neither son nor mother seem to be stunned by the fact of the parent losing an arm, and everything is swept under the carpet due to the lack of time in a busy morning domestic routine:

"What's wrong, honey?" She asked.

"Mummy. You've got no arm."

It was true. Her right arm was missing. She was holding her keys in her left hand and wondered how long it had been missing, how long she had been doing her morning chores without realizing she'd lost an arm. There was a thread of skin from her shoulder and a long line leading through the rooms of the house. Her son ran around picking it up as though playing a game. Skin bundled in his arms so high she could just see his brown eyes with giraffe-like lashes peeking out at her as she retrieved her arm from his arms. (Ahern 307–08)

As seen above, the filaments of the house (furniture, clothes) and that of the human body become intermingled: their contours are not clear as they form an assemblage of human and nonhuman. When each subsequent piece of the protagonist's body unknots and drops, the protagonist picks them up, hides and pretends not to notice this fact because she never has any time to attend to her own needs. The protagonist's body is deconstructed, "unravelled" and restructured again, as she calls it: "the unravelling of her was the making of her" (309). Within the posthuman approach, "body as a coherent, self-contained, autonomous self is no longer a viable proposition. We have to see the self as multiple, fragmented and made of the foreign" (Nayar 89). Wolfe captures it as follows: "[W]e can no longer talk of *the* body or even, for that matter, of *a* body in the traditional sense. . . . 'the body' is now seen as a kind of *virtuality*. . . . a virtual, multidimensional space produced and stabilized by the recursive enactions and structural couplings of autopoietic beings" (xxiii). The corporeal fragmentation in "The Woman Who Unravelled" is captured in a very literal way; the detached bodily pieces, the material tissue of her flesh, are stretched all over the house to be found on the floor or between the heroine's domestic utensils. Ahern's fiction contains some elements of considerably simplified, mass-market, posthumanist thought, but that does not mean it is posthuman in spirit *per se*: female characters wish to

be “mended,” and they see their other-than-human condition punitively as a disease to be cured. The pattern visible in *Roar* is that “post-humanity” brought to the surface allows them to identify the problem, and when the question is addressed and processed, the “abnormality” simply disappears. The philosophical dimension of the posthuman condition seems to be absent in Ahern’s fiction. Wolfe rightly argues that

when we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either revolutionary, ecological or technological coordinates (though that is where the conversation usually begins and, all too often ends); rather I will insist that we are talking about *how* thinking confronts the thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges. (xvi)

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“The Woman Who Grew Wings” constitutes an exception in *Roar*: the protagonist’s bodily alteration remains a desired and permanent element of her subjectivity. Growing wings is a bodily de-formation of practical usability, very much appreciated by the heroine. Her embodiment becomes “a multidimensional (interactive) space” organized around “structural couplings” (Wolfe xxiii) of several tropes which are activated simultaneously (anti-xenophobia being one of them). Ahern employs ethnic diversity in her narrative voices, and the protagonist of “The Woman Who Grew Wings” is a Muslim who wears the hijab, which ironically enables her to conceal the growing wings. To render the assemblage materiality of her re-constitution (human/animal/plant body cells), the female character compares the experience of extending bones and producing feathers to budding tree branches, concluding in a surprising way: “It isn’t a weakening she feels in her body, it is a growing strength, spreading from her spine and arching across her shoulders” (Ahern 25). This empowering corporeal “abnormality” is misattributed by the medical profession to a hormonal imbalance in the woman’s body. However, the real problems that the protagonist faces are not connected to health. The woman is a boat refugee and she feels alienated from the local community. She considers native inhabitants to be “polite and educated” (26)—but not empathetic—wealthy middle class citizens who live in secure, gated districts; “good people, these cappuccino-drinking, tennis-playing, coffee-morning fundraisers who care more about book weeks and bake sales than human decency” (26–27). The short story draws attention to racism, isolationism and the disciplining of immigrants in their resettlement places with “sidelong stares and uneasy silences” (26). The heroine in “The Woman Who Grew Wings” suspects that if local inhabitants could, they would do anything “to stop refugees and immigrants from entering their

country” (26). Unlike other characters in the volume, the protagonist does not allow herself to be victimized and decides to make use of her transformed body and learn to fly. Furthermore, she boldly challenges the mothers from her children’s school:

[S]he looks the women directly in the eye, not afraid, not intimidated. She feels immense power, immense freedom, something these women don’t understand—how could they? Their freedom has never been threatened, they have no experience of how effective war is in turning men, women and children to ghosts, in turning the mind into a prison cell, and liberty to a taunting fantasy. (30–31)

“The Woman Who Grew Wings” differs from other narratives included in Ahern’s collection not only due to the audacious rather than passive attitude of the protagonist. In contrast to the previously discussed unwanted bodily alterations (feathers, unravelling, bite marks, etc.), wings are very much welcomed by the heroine. They epitomize the freedom that the protagonist has sought in her own war-ridden homeland and in her current xenophobic neighbourhood. The female character feels empowered to have them and she can appreciate the mobility they allow. Due to her wings, she can literally become a guardian angel for her children, capable of providing them with “[a] safe life. Everything they are entitled to. She closes her eyes, breathes in, feels her power. Taking her children with her, she lifts upwards to the sky and she soars” (32–33). However, the final resolution in the narrative does not put forward an actual solution to the problem: if the female character returns to the surface of the earth at some stage, the long-standing systemic obstacles will still be waiting for her there.

In conclusion, Ahern’s collection *Roar* (2018) has some literary merits. I would like to underscore two of them here: the volume encompasses inclusive and diverse female voices and it incorporates elements of posthuman critique and postfeminist content into a mass audience dystopian framework, rendering it, at the same time, in a lighter, tongue-in-cheek manner. The collection has been praised for its “disarmingly down-to-earth empathy” and modern fairy tale potential (Evans), and defined as “funny, wise and weighty—in a good way” (Patrick). While not being entirely ungrounded, critical reviews claiming that “*Roar* disappoints; the collection is largely saccharine and lacks subtlety and nuance,” focus mostly on the “relevant and pressing subject” (Balter), missing entirely the non-realistic, magical and romance dimension of Ahern’s 2018 collection. I argue here that the structural shortcomings, such as repetitions or the avoidance of ambiguity, result from the conventions of the popular fiction genre in general and its female-oriented romance iteration in particular. In order to

reach a wide reading public and sell millions of copies, popular literature needs to be tailored “for all,” hence some necessary simplifications in the content and a preference for the unequivocal due to the requirements of the mass market. The combination of progressive ideas, aspects of postfeminist and posthumanist discourses and wide distribution necessitates serious compromises. It also cannot be denied that such a “marriage of convenience” does not always end with HEA: “they lived happily ever after.” Ahern’s *Roar* constitutes the best illustration of this thesis.

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BODIES, TRAUMAS, TRANSGRESSIONS

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Performing More-Than-Human Corporeal Connections in Kiki Smith's Sculpture

ABSTRACT

The article examines work by contemporary American artist Kiki Smith, who proposes a future in which human and nonhuman bodily borders merge. The artist's contribution to the more-than-human artistic entanglements is juxtaposed with Joseph Beuys's artistic manifesto from 1974 which proposes, among other things, an attempt to get outside of the represented human towards the asigned ahuman. In Kiki's sculpture, both human and nonhuman animals undergo constant morphogenesis, becoming hybrid forms far beyond the human-social paradigm, implying that the human and nonhuman binary, due to the exchange of affective entanglements, is no longer valid in the heyday of techno-scientific development. The analyzed work shows that both human and nonhuman bodies are raw materials not separated from one another but always interconnected with the world and its ongoing material processes. Thus, the article emphasizes that it is only through the transgression of the human and nonhuman border that one can acknowledge the more ethical and political ways of cooperation needed for the appreciation of the multispecies dimension of our world and its survival.

Keywords: performative arts, more-than-human entanglements, American art, Kiki Smith, Joseph Beuys.

“To live under biopolitics is to live in a situation in which we are all always already (potential) ‘animals’ before the law—not just nonhuman animals according to zoological classification, but any group of living beings that is so framed.” (Wolfe 10)

INTRODUCING MORE-THAN-HUMAN CONNECTION IN ARTISTIC PRACTICES

When German artist Joseph Beuys reached America for the first time in May 1974 to perform his artistic action, no one expected that he would spend three days enclosed in a room in West Broadway’s René Block Gallery with a coyote from Phifer’s Animal Farm in Gillette, New Jersey. Much to everyone’s surprise, the artist did not explore the country and its culture; rather, once he landed at JFK, he was wrapped in felt, laid on a stretcher and driven by ambulance to the gallery where the coyote, which was his sole companion for three days, was awaiting him. To offer more natural surroundings to the nonhuman animal, the artist arranged strips of felt in the space and spent almost the entire time sitting and forging the connection between the coyote and himself. The only remaining objects—the remnants of our civilization—were his brown gloves, a flashlight and a walking stick to lean on. Soon, the process of observing and forging close bodily and audio connections with the coyote started. Though sacred to the Indians and one of their gods’ mightiest creatures, the animal was labeled an antisocial menace—the mean coyote—when the white man appeared on the continent. The animal’s status did not discourage the artist; for three days and nights, Beuys talked to the coyote, choreographed some movements and encouraged the animal to tug at the felt strips. From time to time, he even produced some sounds for his nonhuman companion, playing a triangle which he wore suspended around his neck. Eventually, they forged a strong bond and exchanged their beddings, which was a sign that the two had got used to each other. Then, Beuys¹ hugged the animal and left the gallery. Wrapped back in felt, he was taken directly to JFK airport.

As the artist highlighted, the action entitled *I Like America and America Likes Me* was a form of social sculpture, understood here as an organic forming from the inside out that was meant to concentrate predominantly on the coyote rather than the artist himself. To achieve this, as he pointed out, “I wanted to isolate myself, insulate myself, see nothing

¹ It has to be highlighted that Beuys, in cooperation with his students, was the founder and initiator of the first political party for animals in 1969. His engagement subsequently resulted in the formation of the Green Party in Germany.

of America other than the coyote” (Stachelhaus 174). For the artist, who was a stranger in the metropolitan setting and represented the voice of those who immigrate to the USA, the coyote embodied the continent’s deep trauma, the extermination of indigeneity and the destruction of natural surroundings. Beuys explained that through his action he felt he affected the course of the history of the United States and as he asserted: “I believe I made contact with the psychological trauma point of the United States’ energy constellation: the whole American trauma with the Indian” (Tisdall 228). The dialogue between the coyote, here representing the Native Americans, and the artist, representing the Europeans, resembled a shamanistic revision of the history in which the synergy between the two replaced the violence imposed from above. More importantly, to leave the socio-cultural context and its re-readings, Beuys’s performative action indicated that the establishment of the human and the nonhuman animal relation, which has been enduringly problematic to accept in humanities’ conceptual framework, requires from us activism and eco-thinking beyond the limitations and norms imposed by socio-cultural structures. With grace and engagement, he defied the very concept of human and nonhuman borders, turning the human role away from its focal point and thus redefining the role of more-than-human elements in our conceptual thinking. What was crucial in the process was the material (the part of objects and their materiality), bodily manifestations of thought that allowed him to merge ethics with aesthetics. Beyond discursive, institutional and representation processes, which validate the humanist project, Beuys’s performative action becomes a more-than-human/humanist practice. In effect, through direct corporeal engagement that allowed him to be more-than-human in the world, his activism triggered new forms of productive relations globally, rejecting old patterns of enunciation and imposition of power over the nonhuman.

What particularly interests me in this performative action and its strategies of resistance is the formation of this connective environment, in which both of the actors—human and nonhuman animal—became equal agents of the artistic practice. The interaction with the nonhuman animal based on habit formation and communication experiments brought about a subversion of the human/nonhuman corporeal border. In consequence, the action allowed Beuys, a foreigner in the American setting, to manifest his artistic philosophy which reveals his ideas on how to heal western minds governed by mechanisms of socio-cultural exclusion and constant persecution of the marginalized (both human and nonhuman). Not only was his performance an exercise in connection with the nonhuman animal world and the interrogation of how apparatuses of anthropocentrism produce and police a borderland in which human and nonhuman worlds

coexist; it also suggested that nonhuman animals, refugees, immigrants, war veterans and ethnic minorities share the same plight, undergoing marginalization in the socio-cultural realms. To be more precise, his action revealed that exploitation and exclusion are not only territorial but that they are also equally directed at multispecies. Beuys proposes that the more-than-human perspective allows one to discern how conceptual binaries are constructed and enacted. Having realized the impact of our anthropocentric thinking on the position of the more-than-human world, it is easier to confront oneself with all the response-ability with/for its survival, which is understood by Donna J. Haraway as “collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices” (*Staying with the Trouble* 34). It is worth emphasizing that, for Haraway, response-ability is not merely an individual’s response towards situations; on the contrary, it is the cultivation of the readiness to take actions collectively when needed. In this respect, having realized how human power is exercised over nonhuman life, it is easier to understand the plight of the marginalized.

PLAYING STRING FIGURE GAMES TO MAKE KIN WITH THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN

“Play is the practice that makes us new, that makes us into something that is neither one or two, that brings us into the open, where purposes and functions are given a rest. Strangers in hominid and candid mindful flesh, we play with each other and become significant others.”
(Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 458)

The more-than-human approach has been employed by various feminist scholars within posthumanist studies who interrogate human and nonhuman animal interconnection (Haraway, “Training”; Despret; Adams and Gruen). Donna Haraway, in her book *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in Chthulucene*, for instance, emphasizes that this is the multispecies alliance that can allow us to acknowledge the interdependence of nature, culture, and technology. Socio-cultural awareness of multispecies companionship—and thus, a transdisciplinary/transspecies perspective—enables one to think collectively not from a position of the domination of the empowered but rather to see the world as interconnected. Thus, it can be asserted that multispecies relationality means becoming with the world’s ongoing processes. Haraway discloses her point, providing readers with an anthropological insight into the mechanisms of string figure games, well-known in most cultures of the globe, to illustrate the

connections. The simple game, which is played by weaving a single loop of string on the hands to produce intricate patterns supposed to represent particular familiar objects, enhances not only collective thinking but also the movement in complexity and diversity. As the philosopher points out,

playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before, of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth. String figures require holding still in order to receive and pass on. String figures can be played by many on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained. (*Staying with the Trouble* 10)

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In other words, players, while interacting, unfold their stories, making nonverbal connections, exchanging patterns of giving and receiving. Joseph Beuys explored this relation while he was forming mutual habits with the coyote; though unable to play the game in this context, the artist used similar rules and patterns to connect with the animal. In a sense, the artist's action reminds us of Haraway's writings in which a coyote becomes a trickster "who constantly scatters the dust of disorder into the orderly star patterns made by the Fire God, setting up the non-innocent world-making performances of disorder and order that shape the lives of terrain-critters" (*Staying with the Trouble* 14). The coyote is the one from the peripheries, with the secret knowledge that reminds us that socio-cultural structures, though ordered and well-composed, are, under the surface, riddled with violence against the least privileged. However, it may be anticipated, following Brian Massumi, that it is through play that "the human enters a zone of indiscernibility with the animal. When we humans say 'this is play,' we are assuming our animality. The play dramatizes the reciprocal participation of the human and the animal from both sides. For when animals play, they are preparatorily enacting human capacities" (8). Beuys's play with the coyote was an example of the pure exchange of energy and spatial-temporal acts that enabled both players to cross physical borders and divisions imposed by socio-cultural norms. In this way, since verbal communication was limited, nonverbal patterns played a more significant role, allowing the players to become-with (Haraway, *When Species Meet*) each other, not just to be.

The performance was not only about "thinking together anew across differences of historical position and kinds of knowledge and expertise" (*Staying with the Trouble* 25); it was predominately a new form of corporeal collaboration established irrespective of the similarities and

differences that both agents had to encounter. The artist's connection with the coyote, to invoke Haraway, was an effect of the fact that "string figures are like stories; they propose and enact patterns for participants to inhabit, somehow, on vulnerable and wounded earth" (*Staying with the Trouble* 26). The collaboration, the co-creation, resulted from material and semiotic combinations that activated the agents' bodies, leaving inner blockages outside to form more-than-human relations. In this respect, as the philosopher points out, making kin with the nonhuman can "still [be] a risky game of worlding and storying; it is staying with the trouble" (*Staying with the Trouble* 13). In other words, the revealing of the hidden, which constitutes repressed stories of exclusion and repression, may lead to further dire straits that open up thresholds of our sustainability. However, in line with Rosi Braidotti's thought, it may be concluded that the poetics of sustainability here entails the necessity of containing the other, the suffering, the enjoyment, the organic and non-organic, allowing subjects to redefine the same-other relation, affecting and being affected by others through mutually dependent correlation (*Nomadic Theory*).

Human and nonhuman interconnectedness transgresses all borders and reveals the unseen sights of our becoming. For Haraway, these forms of interaction exemplify sympoiesis, "collectively-produced systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change" (*Staying with the Trouble* 33). By contrast, as she explains, our culture is dominated by autopoietic systems that are "self-producing" autonomous units "with self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable" (*Staying with the Trouble* 34). In this sense, more-than-human relations are sympoietic practices, which aim to generate other potentialities and multiplicities, rather than self-centered acts.² Since multiplicities in Deleuzian terms are the potentials/movements for change, it may be deduced that multiplicity becomes a performative concept as it needs to be continuously activated. The artistic practices concentrated on forming more-than-human corporeal bonds remind us of string figure games that explore new patterns of interaction. Once they have been initiated, the games may show ethical routes of care and understanding of the minor. The equality stems from the fact that "companion species play

² As Rosi Braidotti notices, Donna Haraway's theories emphasize that multiplicity need not necessarily lead to relativism. Quite on the contrary, "Haraway argues for a multi-faceted foundational theory, for an anti-relativistic acceptance of differences, so as to seek for connections and articulations in a non-gender-centred and non-ethnocentric perspective" ("Feminist Philosophies" 210).

string figure games where who is/are to be in/of the world is constituted in intra-and interaction. The partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon the worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements” (*Staying with the Trouble* 13). In other words, we, as humans, need to recalibrate our perspectives in order to recognize a broader range of terrains and territories full of nonhuman agents. This is an action against the limits of humanist vision that only sees humans as social creatures and nonhumans as connected with nature, and which, as Patricia MacCormack aptly summarizes, “involves forsaking the privilege of human social power, including all degrees of majoritarian to minoritarian, which delimits desire to one between humans as viable objects of desire or facilitators of acts, including one’s self as both subject-object and facilitator. In this way, the human becomes the ahuman anonhuman” (127). Therefore, when we refer back to the quotation opening the article, it may be deduced that, as a vehicle of our ethic-aesthetic transformation, the adoption of any form of individual play may facilitate many changes and potentialities, for, once again following Brian Massumi, play is made of performative gestures exerting a transindividual force (5).

BECOMING-ANIMAL AND CORPOREAL CONNECTIONS IN ARTISTIC PRACTICES

The question now arises of how contemporary artists “stay with the trouble” and “play string figure games” in order to respond to more-than-human connections during the techno-scientific turn. Do sympoietic artistic practices resonate with the complexities of today’s world? Can performative actions evoke the complexities of the reconfiguration of bodies in recent times? I would like to apply the Harawayan trope of “staying with the trouble” and “playing string figure games” to analyze artistic works that are not accurate representations of human and nonhuman animal corporeal relations but rather address a transposition between human and nonhuman animal bodies (and other simple forms of life). These are projects inspired by the potential of new bio-scientific—*inter alia*—developments and heretofore take art into unimaginable directions where the vision of what it means to be human is radically abandoned. While blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds, the artists often produce mutations, manipulations and transpecism to de-familiarize the standards in representation of the human and emphasize the ethical impact of technological interference into the organic world. The works often reflect the scientific procedures of encountering the human with the nonhuman elements, implying that life is all about becoming rather

than being. The article does not aim to trace the historical discussion of what is animal versus what is human. The line of argumentation of the article corresponds here to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal³ which "does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 238). In other words, this is becoming-with the nonhuman animal, not identifying with it and producing an anthropocentric imitation. As Deleuze and Guattari indicate in their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), the becoming stems from the fact that

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there is no longer man or animal since each deterritorializes the other in conjunction with flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities. Instead, it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word. The animal does not speak "like" a man but pulls from the language tonalities lacking in signification; the words themselves are not "like" the animals but in their way climb about, bark and roam around, being properly linguistic dogs, insects, or mice. (22)

The work of the American contemporary artist, Kiki Smith, analyzed in this article is experience and practice with human body and its potentials to relate and spatialize with the nonhuman animal in order to evoke the ahuman character present in everyone. As there is no physical barrier between the two, the bodies are deterritorialized, never imitated. Nevertheless, in contrast to Beuys's performative action, Kiki Smith often uses sculpture, robotics and other devices to emphasize the importance of materiality in technological processes. The article indicates that the artistic experiment explores spatial-corporeal encounters between more-than-human bodies to embrace the ahuman character of transgressing all the socio-cultural barriers. While unfolding my line of argumentation, I will suggest that a more-than-human body, in the analyzed work, is "a mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad 33), always dynamic and open to further modifications. Hence, the article proposes that through its engagement with the more-than-human elements, the body forms multispecies connections and thus disposes of adverse effects produced by socio-cultural discourses.

³ It is worth highlighting that becoming-animal for Deleuze and Guattari "does not exemplify anything animal per se (either of an individual or a species), but human apprehensions of affects of animality" (MacCormack and Gardner 4).

KIKI SMITH'S RAPTURES IN NONHUMAN CORPOREAL BORDERLANDS

Contemporary American artist Kiki Smith has investigated more-than-human entanglements for many decades. Some of her prints, sculptures and drawings plunge into borderlands where the division into human and nonhuman does not exist. The world in her works, which is almost on the verge of fantasy and fairy tales, undergoes the process of metamorphosis, thanks to which living forms mutate and modulate. There is, however, no mayhem in her vision; all the creatures are equal, and the natural cycles of regeneration and renewal open up new possibilities of the world's forms to come. While exploring more-than-human connections/becomings, the artist transfigures the classical approach towards the monstrosity and bestiality of nonhuman animals,⁴ giving them a human touch and sensitivity. This stems from the fact that, as Marina Warner asserts, "attitudes towards beasts in Smith's works are continually entangled with ideas about ourselves as humans concerning them, and about where boundaries lie and how the classifications establish hierarchy" ("Metamorphoses" 31). Smith subverts the maintained order and thus the classical legacy of myths and various symbols that promote humans' superiority in western cultures. Stripped of negative connotations, nonhuman animal and human hybrids naturally occur in her projects, corresponding preferably to the ongoing cycles of the world's changes rather than to foundational mythologies. In this way, her works suggest that these bodily mergers have always been present. Furthermore, while commenting on the language of metamorphosis, Smith once remarked to her fellow artist Chuck Close that "you have a certain amount of regrowth. Like reptiles whose tails grow back, or a worm cut in half. We do not tend to think of that, regeneration" (Warner, "Wolf-girl" 44). Metamorphosis and regeneration in most of her art works appear to be naturally generated processes that transform the matter, creating an impression of constant "becoming."

Before I proceed to analyze Smith's works, in which more-than-human entanglements prevail, it has to be emphasized that Smith, acclaimed as a feminist artist, at one point devoted her output mainly to the investigation of the human body, which she has treated as a vehicle for exploring the human condition, spirituality and vulnerability. Having started to experiment with the material structures of the female corpus, the digestive system and bodily fluids—blood, sweat, milk and tears (treating

⁴ What is meant here by the standard ways of representing monstrosity is the fact that Smith's beasts do not embody any danger to humans. Contrariwise, as is highlighted mainly in her prints and drawings, there is an ongoing conversation between the two to indicate their inextricable linkage and connection.

the body as a system)—her works were soon labeled “body art” and have been often discussed in the context of AIDS studies, sexuality and gender performativity. More importantly, however, fragmented, fragile and abject, the human body in her works has always been negotiating with the flesh of the world, as if trying to prove that the materiality of both is not at all separate. When presenting female bodies, she diligently studies their biological structures and functions almost with microscopic precision. Her immersion in bodily processes implies that her projects are attempts to respond to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s question from his essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”: “where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is the flesh?” (138). Smith sees the flesh as a connector rather than a boundary with the other. She constructs and deconstructs the body in such a way as to extend it into the outside world and prove that its material and psychic structure constitutes an integral part of the world’s ongoing processes. The approach corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty understands as the flesh, material and psychic support for the self, “metaphorically as well as materially, and the flesh is an envelope, a ‘limit’ inscribing the juncture between inside and outside but also the site of their joining” (qtd. in Jones 207). In other words, her works are attempts to produce a sympoietic practice of treating the human body as the becoming-with-the world and thus seeing it from the inseparable from the more-than-human constituents of our lives. However, Smith’s works transcend the phenomenological perspective—which traces how humans are embedded socially, culturally, psychologically and materially in the world—producing an anti-anthropocentric voice and recognizing more-than-human phenomenology.

Having explored the dynamism of bodily transformations in her works, the artist entered her next stage, during which she absorbed herself with the question of the animal in the human. Her stunning life-size bronze sculpture *Rapture* (2001), showing a full-blown woman emerging from a wolf’s split-open belly, aptly investigates more-than-human physical connections. Despite the solidity of the material, there is a subtle movement in the sculpture that produces an impression of the presented scene’s fragility during which the woman is stepping forward from the animal, while her left leg remains inside the wolf. Delicate and smooth, the structure of the woman’s body is juxtaposed with the rough and heavily textured fur of the wolf. The only element that structurally joins the two bodies is the pubic hair of the female which introduces an organic balance to the whole composition, placing the wombs of both the human and nonhuman animals as the focal points of the entire composition and suggesting that the movement of metamorphosis starts and ends here. This, combined with the cautious emergence of the female figure from

the nonhuman companion's womb, highlights the naturalness of the ongoing material process, highlighting that the human body is part of an active material world of nonhuman becoming. However, the work is not simply an encounter with the animal; on the contrary, it becomes a mutual metamorphosis for both. In effect, Smith's work becomes a morphological hybrid that erases bodily boundaries between the animal and the woman as they both materially depend on one another, radically erasing the otherness, "physical proximity and (near) contact with the flesh of the animal Other" (Broglio 60). In a Deleuzian-Guattarian sense, Smith proposes becoming-woman/animal not as predicated on the stable and centralized self of the human but rather on a non-unitary dynamic subject that connects to a de-personalized subject. In other words, the sculpture indicates, following Deleuze and Guattari, that

the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities. Each multiplicity is defined by a borderline functioning as Anomalous, but there is a string of borderlines, a continuous line of borderlines (*fiber*) following which the multiplicity changes. And at each threshold or door, a new pact? A fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 249)

As the woman in Smith's work is inextricably linked with the nonhuman animal, becoming together with/from it, the sculpture indicates that the subject is fully immersed in the nonhuman relations that need to be continuously reactivated by getting rid of anthropocentric framing. This is in line with the artist's claim that the work is related to both the medieval legend of St. Genevieve, born from a wolf's womb, and Little Red Riding Hood, and it is a kind of resurrection/birth myth (Zipes 18). Indeed, it may be asserted that Smith's sculpture is the rebirth of more-than-human beings as there is no difference in size and value of the human and nonhuman agents; they both equally constitute the world's fabric and its visage.

The figure of the wolf can be a crucial trope in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming-animal. Antithetical to psychoanalytic insights, the metaphor helps the philosophers to unfold the map of nonhuman becoming.⁵ Unlike the psychoanalytic perspective, which uses anthropomorphized wolves to confirm their role in the symbolic order, the philosophers' notion is shifted to non-anthropocentric ends. In other

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari devoted a whole chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, "1914: One or Several Wolves," to explain "becoming-wolf," referring to Sigmund Freud's patient nicknamed Wolf-Man.

words, the wolf does not represent humans' fears of their instincts, such as sexual desire, hunger, passion for nature, and primitive forms ingrained in us by socio-cultural norms. Rather, the metaphor in their book enables Deleuze and Guattari to indicate the normative confines of oneself, which was also clearly stated in Joseph Beuys's action. In effect, the philosophers open up humans to the aberrated otherness/nonhuman. The widely recognized image of the wolf, dominant in western classical mythologies and fairy tales associated with sexual aggression, violence and the seduction of helpless women, has thus been transgressed by Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the psychoanalytic binary distinction and singularity of the human form. The philosophers focus instead on the becoming-animal that involves "pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 239). "Becoming animal" requires non-hierarchical participation and relationship with the nonhuman multiplicity, for Deleuze and Guattari consider nature not as a hierarchy, but as a multiplicity, a life without subjects and objects. This is an entirely different way of thinking about life as it is based on the connections that introduce a transspecies consciousness, eliminating western distinctions and the privileges attributed to the human. Hence, it may be asserted that Smith's work is not just an encounter with otherness/the nonhuman animal but is predominantly a material becoming out of/with the wolf, indicating that non-subjective individualities can bring more potential to the ethical understandings of our shared existence.

The title of Smith's work, *Rapture*, brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rapture lines⁶ (also called lines of flight) responsible for deindividuated becoming. As Luis de Miranda notices, a rapture line is "a force of impetuous attraction, the torrent of an over-full life (but not always a fool's life) bursting beyond the preservation necessity of the individual belonging to a species" (108). The rapture produces transspecies experience that widens one's horizons and thus brings us closer to the ahuman position. Furthermore, in Smith's sculpture, the transspecies interdependence without any hierarchy is established owing to the rapture lines, disintegrating elements of the structural order. The woman and the wolf's body/bodies transform, deterritorializing⁷ their social, perceptual, conceptual and historical functions and formats. In this manner, the sculpture traverses individual and collective subjectivities to combine

⁶ In other words, Deleuze and Guattari contrast the rapture line with the molar one that is the vital line of dominance and order. The rapture is the energy line of the multiversal monster.

⁷ For Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization can be understood as a movement that produces changes and fluctuations to the organization of life structures. It frees all the fixed relations, bringing the potentials.

various human and nonhuman affects and percepts in ways that conjugate one another. This is in line with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the conditions of the process of becoming-animal. As the philosophers highlight, if becoming-animal "takes the form of a temptation, and of monsters aroused in the imagination by the demon, it is because it is accompanied, at its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 247). The human is "raptured" here, as the nonhuman animal and the sculpture's material structure become equal agencies in the material and thus the socio-cultural process of more-than-human-becoming.

CODA: PERFORMING MORE-THAN-HUMAN/ REPRESENTATIONAL ENTANGLEMENTS

To conclude, I would like to refer again to the film documenting Joseph Beuys's performative action, in which he defines the concept of the social sculpture. As he asserts, if artists want to heal western minds, they need to infiltrate the institutions of science, religion, architecture and politics. Beuys, contrary to expectations, entered into dialogue with the system not via discursive critique but through a playful game with the western world's central theoretical and practical tenets, indicating the humanist project's failures. Hence, the categorizations of nonhuman animal in our perceptual thinking were unpacked, and the creative human-nonhuman interactions, which opened a space for the emergence of unexpected affections and connections, were activated. His sympoietic engagement with the nonhuman animal proved essential to produce a new quality of affirmative ethics based on relational rather than exclusive politics. Also, Kiki Smith's sculpture—though more contemporary and totally different in its material methodologies—presented micropolitical experiments, investigating what bodies can become and how humans and animals can live together (Bennet) in the age of post-biological times. Her work is a form of becoming with and for the animal, focusing on more complex conceptions of human bodies' materiality and the more-than-human world than the traditional perspectives based on representation methods and the denial of nonhuman agencies. Hence, the artist proposed more-than-representational plans to evoke a human character that can allow us to understand, challenge the ontologies of humanism rooted in binary oppositions, and subsequently leave behind the free vectors of power responsible for the formation of our socio-cultural framework. The work demonstrates that embodied, affective and more productive encounters with nonhuman life bring new

forms of posthuman ethics—conceptualized by Patricia MacCormack—as a set of new relations that offer liberty and deeper contemplation of the systems of power. One thing seems certain: one has to reach the ahuman level, apply ethical rules of care, and finally relegate humans’ position in order to fully appreciate and understand the complexity of our more-than-human entanglements.

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“Never Trust a Survivor”: Historical Trauma, Postmemory and the Armenian Genocide in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on Kurt Vonnegut’s lesser-known and underappreciated 1987 novel *Bluebeard*, which is analyzed and interpreted in the light of Marianne Hirsch’s seminal theory of postmemory. Even though it was published prior to Hirsch’s formulation of the concept, Vonnegut’s novel intuitively anticipates it, problematizing the implications of inherited, second-hand memory. To further complicate matters, Rabo Karabekian, the protagonist-narrator of *Bluebeard*, a World War II veteran, amalgamates his direct, painful memories with those of his parents, survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Both the novel and the theory applied to it centre on the problematics of historical and personal trauma, engendered by two genocides which are often the object of comparative analyses: the Armenian Genocide, also referred to as the Armenian Holocaust, and the Jewish Holocaust. The latter is central to Hirsch’s interdisciplinary work in the field of memory studies, encompassing literature, the visual arts and gender studies. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut holds to account a humanity responsible for the atrocities of twentieth-century history: two world wars and two genocides for which they respectively established the context. The article examines the American writer’s reflection on death and violence, man’s destructive impulse and annihilation. In a world overshadowed by memories of mass extermination, Vonnegut interrogates the possibility of a new beginning, pointing to women as agents of renewal and sociopolitical change. He also identifies the role that art plays in the process of potential reconstruction, the story of Karabekian, a failed artist and highly successful art collector, being a *Künstlerroman* with a feminist edge.

Keywords: Vonnegut, Hirsch, Armenian Genocide, historical trauma, postmemory, art, feminism.

Bluebeard, Kurt Vonnegut's twelfth novel, is not among his best-known works; nor is it among his most appreciated ones.¹ As Charles J. Shields reminds us in the American writer's first—and so far only—biography, “[w]hen it was released in spring 1987, many major publications, including *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, chose not to review it. As an extended debate on aesthetic theory and the role of an artist, it's convoluted and too allegorical” (378).² Classifying *Bluebeard* as a “novel . . . about art and art theory” (378) seems to suggest that it is not a work typical of Vonnegut either. Indeed, it is no use looking for traces of science fiction or science *tout court*, for even though some of the characters or situations may appear somewhat overblown, the novel follows the conventions of realism and the author does not devote any particular attention to new technologies in it. Neither is *Bluebeard* the best example of Vonnegut's postmodern stylistic experiments, although one will certainly discern elements of postmodernism in it. However, as for other components of Vonnegut's literary DNA, such as black humour, which manifests itself in, for instance, the use of interjections reminiscent of the famous “So it goes” from the writer's *magnum opus*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, things look different.³ Importantly, although *Bluebeard* is not, strictly speaking, a war novel, deeply humanistic reflections on war and peace, the cruelty of

¹ A measure of it may, for instance, be the absence of *Bluebeard* from certain compendial works—both American and Polish ones—dealing with American literature. Examples include *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, whose edition published over ten years after the appearance of *Bluebeard* mentions, in a rather extensive biographical entry devoted to Vonnegut, most of his novels, both early and later ones, but not the one with which the present article is concerned. This is also the case with Krzysztof Andrzejczak's history of American prose, *Opowieści literackiej Ameryki. Zarys prozy Stanów Zjednoczonych od początków do czasów najnowszych*, an otherwise informative and detailed publication.

² Shields, who devotes considerable attention to *Bluebeard* in his biography of Vonnegut, is not enthusiastic about the novel. He depreciates and simplifies it, in fact seeing it, despite obvious arguments to the contrary, which are put forward in the present article, mostly as a reflection of the crisis in Vonnegut's second marriage. However, Shields is not a literary critic or literary scholar, but a biographer, and his opinion of *Bluebeard* seems to dovetail with the biography's sensationalist aspect, discussed in one of the essays included in my monograph *Teksty transatlantyckie. Szkice o literaturze amerykańskiej i francuskiej*. Shields's biography, *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life*, published four years after the novelist's death, actually provoked protest from Vonnegut's relatives. See Flood.

³ As Gavins observes, “the phrase ‘So it goes’ . . . is used exactly 100 times during the course of the novel [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] and . . . almost always follows descriptions of traumatic or emotive events experienced by Billy [the protagonist]” (117). The narrator of *Bluebeard* uses similar phrases in similar contexts, though not with the same frequency, thereby introducing into this novel as well the elements of distance and absurd which Gavins discusses in relation to Vonnegut's most famous work.

which man is capable and what one should do in order to be truly human, play an important role in the story of Rabo Karabekian, the protagonist-cum-narrator.

Just as some reviews of *Bluebeard*, which provoked extreme reactions from American critics, were enthusiastic, so the novel itself eludes clear-cut classification, revealing a wealth of meanings to which justice has not perhaps been fully done yet. Narrated by a Karabekian nearing the end of his days, the story encompasses his whole life, from his birth in the middle of World War I to 1987, the year in which he started to write his autobiography/memoirs and which is also the year in which Vonnegut's novel was published. The story of Karabekian, a failed artist and a world-renowned collector of the works of "the real painters" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 50), that is the Abstract Expressionists, seems to mostly concern art, as well as the artist's fate and dilemmas, combining elements of the Bildungsroman and the Künstlerroman, to which the coming-of-age novel is related. However, a careful reading of *Bluebeard* makes it clear that other aspects of the novel also deserve to be looked at more closely by both readers and literary scholars. In addition to issues which have already been mentioned, namely art and war, Vonnegut's novel touches upon the problematics of family, male-female relations, the condition of women and feminism. Moreover, the American writer attempts to settle accounts with the twentieth century, which—if we consider, as historians sometimes do, its actual beginning to be the outbreak of the Great War—is coeval with his protagonist. Exegetes of the novel may also be interested in dealing with its form, wondering, for instance, how Vonnegut explores and exploits the codes and conventions of autobiographical writing. It is possible that it was *Bluebeard*'s multilayered structure, which is not to be confused, as Shields does, with convolutedness, which underlays the helplessness to which the American author admitted when the novel was nearly finished. In January 1987, Vonnegut wrote in a letter to Peter Reed:

I am about a month from finishing another novel—this one about an Abstract Expressionist painter in his seventies, looking back on the founding of that school of radical non-representation. It is called *Bluebeard* because he has a painting locked away which nobody is supposed to look at until he's dead. I wish to hell I knew what the book is *really* about. I should *know* by this time. My God—I'm on page 305! (Vonnegut, *Letters*)

The present article focuses on representations of historical trauma and the survivor experience in *Bluebeard* as exemplified by two world wars, Rabo Karabekian being a veteran of the second one and his parents having

managed to survive the Armenian Genocide during the first one. The latter determines the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Karabekian and, indirectly, the fate of their son, for whom it becomes a formative experience of sorts, even though he did not really participate in it.⁴ Central to the analysis undertaken here are the notions of memory and postmemory, that is inherited memory and inherited trauma, which mark survivors' children and affect their identity. Particular attention is given to family, the parent-child relationship and the intergenerational conflicts engendered by traumatic survivor experience and its consequences. Predictably, the motifs which are examined include war, death and violence. Moreover, artistic expression and the role of women, both of which are connected with the problematics of historical trauma, postmemory and family in Vonnegut's novel and the theory applied to it in this article, inevitably come under scrutiny.

The concept of postmemory, formulated by American scholar Marianne Hirsch, constitutes the theoretical framework of the present article. Hirsch, a literary scholar and leading exponent of the academic discipline known as memory studies, was born in Timișoara in the late 1940s into a family of Ukrainian Jews who had survived the Holocaust. The publication of her 1992 article entitled "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory" marked the beginning of her study of postmemory, which she continues to this day. The above-mentioned article discusses the famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, in which notable American illustrator Art Spiegelman, the son of Holocaust survivors, deals with the Sho'ah, taking inspiration from his own parents story and depicting the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats. Hirsch is appreciated for her contribution to Holocaust studies. Simultaneously, however, she points out that the study of postmemory is not limited to problematics related to the extermination of the Jews, its object being "a global space of remembrance" (Hirsch, "Interview"). In addition to literature, including comparative literature, her interests encompass the visual arts, with particular emphasis on photography and film as well as gender studies. Hirsch makes it clear that memory is not a category determined by gender. Nevertheless, she acknowledges drawing on feminist theory and methodology when exploring the connections between "past and present, words and images, and memory and gender" (Hirsch, "Interview"). The issues to which she devotes particular attention also include family and

⁴ One of the parts of the monograph *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, edited by leading American-Armenian historian Richard Hovannisian, is devoted to representations of the Armenian Genocide in literature and culture. However, none of the essays collected in it is concerned with Vonnegut's novel, and his name does not appear in the book at all.

violence. In her monographs and articles, she examines the questions of “intergenerational transmission,” the narrative tradition and “[i]nherited trauma” (Hirsch, “Interview”).⁵

As such, it may be stated that the main trajectories of Hirsch’s research dovetail with the problematics central to Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, and the application to literary analysis of the theoretical concept formulated by her is more than justified. In an interview given a few years ago, which constitutes a summary of her scholarly work to date, Hirsch defines the notion of postmemory, to which in time she added the term *postgeneration*, in the following way:

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“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. As I see it, the connection to the past that I define as postmemory is mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch, “Interview”)

Referring to the secondary nature of postmemory, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the interdisciplinary nature of her research into it, which encompasses both the private and the public spheres and combines various areas of life, such as museology, the media, art and culture, Hirsch notes:

Inherited trauma transmitted familiarly—or even culturally—can have significant effects on our lives, but it is not we who have suffered persecution or deportation. It is for this reason that I am particularly interested in tracing the workings of postmemory through a second- and now also third-generation aesthetics as manifested in literature, film, and visual arts. (Hirsch, “Interview”)⁶

⁵ Since the appearance of the article “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” Hirsch has published, among others, the monographs *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*.

⁶ By the “first generation” Hirsch means the generation which survived the Holocaust or some other traumatic historical events. The “second generation” are thus the survivor’s children while the “third generation” are their grandchildren.

Significantly, the genocide with which the present article is concerned is also alluded to by Hirsch, who suggests it is underexplored in relation to postmemory:

The process and structure of intergenerational transmission that I understand as postmemory has become an important explanatory vehicle and object of study in numerous contexts ranging from American slavery to decolonization; the Vietnam war, the dictatorships in Latin America and Eastern Europe, the *Armenian*, Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, the Japanese internment camps in the US, the stolen generation in Australia, and others. These resonances and connections are important and announce new directions in the field of memory studies. (Hirsch, "Interview," italics mine)

Artistic expression of postmemory is also the subject of this article, which is devoted to a literary work whose author himself did not grapple with what Hirsch refers to as "inherited trauma," but whose hero carries the burden of his parents' atrocious experiences, which eventually find expression in his own painterly oeuvre. The statement to which the article owes its title is part of the advice that the protagonist of *Bluebeard* often hears from his father: "Never trust a survivor . . . until you find out what he did to stay alive" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 35). The advice concerns a man who deceived Rabo's parents although he was their compatriot and a survivor of another Armenian massacre. The reader will never know what exactly Vartan Mamigonian "did to stay alive," just as Karabekian Senior probably did not know, either. What is known, however, is that Mamigonian later made an immense fortune out of arms dealing. Vonnegut's suggestion that survivors of major disasters, historical or otherwise, should be viewed with suspicion or at least reserve, has a symbolic dimension, since it points to the complex psychological, historical and cultural implications of this kind of experience, to the way it leaves its mark not only on those to whom it happens, but also on their descendants.

Strikingly, not only does Vonnegut's novel touch upon the question of postmemory and explore its dialectics because postmemory, as Hirsch points out, is full of tensions and contradictions, but it also contains, in literary form, what could be described as an intuitive protodefinition of the concept formulated by Hirsch five years after *Bluebeard* was published. In the novel's first chapters, Rabo Karabekian and Circe Berman, a recently widowed writer, whom the protagonist meets accidentally and who spends the summer at his house and encourages him to start working on his autobiography, discuss the so-called survivor syndrome. Circe diagnoses Karabekian's late father with it:

“Your father had the Survivor’s Syndrome,” said Circe Berman to me on my beach that day. “He was ashamed not to be dead like all his friends and relatives.”

“He was ashamed that I wasn’t dead, too,” I said.

“Think of it as a noble emotion gone wrong,” she said.

“He was a very upsetting father,” I said. “I’m sorry now that you’ve made me remember him.”

“As long as we’ve brought him back,” she said, “why don’t you forgive him now?”

“I’ve done it a hundred times already,” I said. “This time I’m going to be smart and get a receipt.” I went on to assert that Mother was more entitled to Survivor’s Syndrome than Father, since she had been right in the middle of the killing, pretending to be dead with people lying on top of her, and with screams and blood everywhere. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 29)⁷

Rabo argues that “[e]verybody who is alive is a survivor, and everybody who is dead isn’t. . . . So everybody alive must have the Survivor’s Syndrome” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 39). Berman believes that her host has a grudge against his father and is, paradoxically, jealous of the latter’s traumatic experiences. Rabo’s claim that, as a permanently maimed war veteran, he has the right to consider himself a survivor, too, fails to convince her. “You may be entitled to the Survivor’s Syndrome, but you didn’t get it,” Circe concludes (40). The finale of their discussion reveals that Circe’s good knowledge of the topic is not due to her Jewish roots, since none of her relatives has experienced the Holocaust, but to her work on one of her best-selling novels for teenagers, which have brought her fame and fortune. *The Underground* is the story of a friendship binding three American schoolgirls from different ethnic backgrounds, whose seemingly irrational bond is in fact based on the survivor syndrome “inherited” from their ancestors, survivors of the Sho’ah, Nagasaki and the civil war in Nigeria in 1967–70. Berman tells Karabekian that *The Underground* is a novel “about people like you: children of a parent who ha[s] survived some sort of mass killing” (41). In Rabo’s case, the power of the “inherited trauma” is doubled because both his parents miraculously escaped death during the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide, also known as the Armenian massacre of 1915, is regarded as the first genocide of the twentieth century and that is

⁷ Rabo Karabekian’s father hides in an outhouse under a heap of excrement, which saves his life and spares him the sight and sounds of the massacre.

how Vonnegut describes it in his novel. He does not expose the reader to graphic descriptions of cruelty; nor does he delve into the historical details of the mass killings and ethnic cleansing, which in this particular case are exceptionally lurid. Out of the complex genesis of the events in question, which encompasses the ethnic and religious hatred which turned Turkish Muslims against Armenian Christians, as well as political determinants and the context of the Great War, Vonnegut selects two unarguably significant factors. The Armenians belonged to the intellectual and social elite, and, to make matters worse, their compatriots lived in Russia, which Turkey considered an enemy. The essence of the genocide itself is summarized by Vonnegut in two sentences, economical and devoid of pathos, formulated in a matter-of-fact, direct and pictorial way:

The Turks simply took all the Armenians they could find in their homes or places of work or refreshment or play or worship or education or whatever, marched them out into the countryside, and kept them away from food and water and shelter, and shot and bashed them and so on until they all appeared to be dead. It was up to dogs and vultures and rodents and so on, and finally worms, to clean up the mess afterwards. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 15)

The narrator of *Bluebeard* notes with bitter irony that the massacres perpetrated by the Turks were a prefiguration of what the Nazis were to do even more efficiently and effectively during World War II:

The problems presented by such ambitious projects are purely industrial: how to kill that many big, resourceful animals cheaply and quickly, make sure that nobody gets away, and dispose of mountains of meat and bones afterwards. The Turks, in their pioneering effort, had neither the aptitude for really big business nor the specialized machinery required. The Germans would exhibit both par excellence only one quarter of a century later. (14–15)

The analogy between these two murderous chapters in global history will resonate even more strongly towards the end of the novel. The genocidal actions of the Young Turks are sometimes referred to as the Armenian Holocaust,⁸ but, while knowledge of the Sho'ah is very common, the Armenian Genocide is not nearly as deeply ingrained in collective consciousness.⁹

⁸ See Matosyan.

⁹ For an extensive study of the Armenian Genocide and its aftermath, see Dadrian's *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, as well as Dadrian and Akçam's *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials*.

The motif of the family album in reflection about photography plays a crucial role in Hirsch's study *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. She refers to Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hirsch points out "the relationship of love and loss, presence and absence, life and death that for him [Barthes] are the constitutive core of photography" (*Family Frames* 4). She reminds us that Barthes's *Camera Lucida* "defines loss . . . as central to the experience of both family and photography" (5). Loss is interconnected with time and mourning because he understands that "[t]he referent haunts the picture like a ghost: it is a revenant, a return of the lost and dead other" (5). *Camera Lucida* deals with, Hirsch concludes, the way "[f]amily is structured by desire and disappointment, love and loss. Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life" (5).

The trope of photography recurs in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*. The protagonist has a theory about modern art, which began with Impressionism and led up to his favourite Abstract Expressionism. According to Karabekian, modern art was born in large measure due to the fact that painters, who up to that point had faithfully reproduced reality, could not withstand the competition of the camera, a peerless and infallible copyist. In one of the novel's first chapters, Rabo Karabekian pictures "the past as though it were a vista through a series of galleries like the Louvre, perhaps" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 37). This imaginary museum is filled mostly with paintings and drawings authored by both himself and other, much more notable artists. The first exhibit in Karabekian's make-believe museum is, however, a picture of a house which Rabo's parents bought from Vartan Mamigonian prior to leaving for the United States, only to find, upon their arrival in America, that the property they had purchased did not exist at the address given. Overwhelmed by a sense of failure, which, more or less consciously, he tries to inculcate in his son, Karabekian Senior keeps the picture for years. It is his parting gift to the adolescent Rabo as the boy goes out into the great world, that is New York: "If you happen to come across this house," he said in Armenian, "let me know where it is. Wherever it is, it belongs to me" (38). In the Karabekian family, the ill-fated photograph becomes a symbol of injustice, unfulfilled hopes and failure in life, for which, in the protagonist's opinion, his father is as responsible as the cruel and dishonest people he has happened to cross paths with. In a symbolic gesture, the main character destroys the picture of the house immediately after his father's death.

When it comes to the photograph of the Karabekians' mirage house, questions of nostalgia and sentimentalism are particularly problematic.

Effectively, what we have to deal with in this particular case is not so much a dreamy longing for bygone bliss as regret and bitterness over a lost chance for happiness, which, to make matters worse, deprive one of future chances for happiness, as well. Such a negative attitude to life and its vicissitudes also marks the way the protagonist's father approaches photography as such. Rabo remembers that, unlike his wife, Karabekian Senior "refused to touch a camera, saying that all it caught was dead skin and toenails and hair which people long gone had left behind. I guess he thought photographs were a poor substitute for all the people killed in the massacre" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 75). On the one hand, this approach inscribes itself into the aforementioned argument that the art of capturing reality on film has a strong thanatological dimension. On the other hand, Mr. Karabekian's stance is devoid of a certain idealism which may be attributed to photographs, to those who look at them and probably also to those who take them. To put it simply, Rabo's father notices the transient dimension of photography, but has no illusions as to what lies behind this dimension. This, in turn, brings to mind the conclusions to which a reading of Barthes has led Hirsch. As she puts it, "[P]hotography, he [Barthes] implies, does not facilitate the work of mourning" (*Family Frames* 20) because "[p]hotography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability" (20).

Both in the theory formulated by Hirsch and the Vonnegut novel discussed here, the concept of postmemory is inextricably linked with the problematics of the family, which "[i]n the second half of the twentieth century . . . becomes the object of intense social and cultural scrutiny and observation. There is nothing about the notion of family that can be assumed or in any way taken for granted" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 10). Hirsch simultaneously points out the complicated status of the family in a century marked by historical cataclysms, generating external and internal tensions, with which the basic social unit has to cope:

In the postmodern moment, the family occupies a powerful and powerfully threatened place: structurally a last vestige of protection against war, racism, exile, and cultural displacement, it becomes particularly vulnerable to these violent ruptures, and so a measure of their devastation. But, as *Maus* also demonstrates, these external perils do not disguise the violence and destruction that occur within the family itself, the power of the father to silence the mother's voice, the power of the son to rewrite the father's words. (13)

Bluebeard is a vivisection of family relations, as well as a story about the need for belonging and attempts to fulfil this need by entering various familial and parafamilial structures. In the protagonist's case, apart from the nuclear family from which he comes, the family he starts when he first marries and the one he gains through his second marriage, these structures include, by his own admission, the army, in which he serves during World War II, and the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.¹⁰ It is hard to resist the impression that what matters to Rabo, aware as he is of the dangers and dependences of which Hirsch speaks, is not only the very fact of having relatives, including those to whom he is not related by blood, law or marriage, but also their number. He regrets that large families, like the ones from which his parents came, were murdered by the Turks. It may therefore be assumed that the genocide which nearly cost Mr. and Mrs. Karabekian their lives affects almost all the important human relationships their son forges as an adult.

The Armenian Genocide leaves a particularly strong mark on the protagonist's relationship with his father, whose trauma is more severe than that experienced by his mother:

Although my mother's memories from the Old World were more gruesome than my father's, since she was right there in the killing fields, she somehow managed to put the massacre behind her and find much to like in the United States, and to daydream about a family future here.

My father *never* did. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 15)

Rabo's attitude to his parents, in particular his father, is tainted by retrospective thinking, by his reflecting on the choices which were made—or failed to be made—by the Karabekians, all of which were either directly or indirectly linked with the events of 1915. The protagonist's mother and father met while escaping their Turkish oppressors, which, in a sense, makes his own existence the effect of atrocious historical events.

¹⁰ All these structures turn out to be impermanent or incomplete. The protagonist's mother dies young when he is still a child. His father, with whom he has a difficult relationship, passes away shortly after Rabo has entered adulthood. The main character's first marriage breaks down after about ten years. Following their parents' divorce and their mother's remarriage, Rabo's sons take their stepfather's name and break all ties with their biological father. Karabekian's second marriage is happy and lasts until his wife's death, but the couple is childless, which the protagonist mentions with regret. Similarly, the narrator's relations with his comrades-in-arms and members of the art world fail to stand the test of time. Rabo's friendship with writer Paul Slazinger, probably the longest in his life, since it lasts several decades, comes to an end while the seventy-year-old protagonist is writing his autobiography.

Rabo accuses his parents of helplessness and passivity, which, after their arrival in the United States, results in their spending their entire lives in a place, as it were, assigned to them by Mamigonian while they could move to an Armenian community in the same state, which in all likelihood would make the life of an immigrant family easier. In the small Californian town where they settle, Rabo's father, a former teacher, earns his living by mending and making shoes, and bitterly resigns himself to professional degradation, something his son will never forgive him. The main character of *Bluebeard* actually believes that the historical cataclysm and the ensuing trauma justify only to a certain extent his father's inertia and bitterness. Later in life, Karabekian Senior, a once ambitious man, does virtually nothing to improve his social and intellectual status or at least his well-being: "Oh, no—it wasn't Mamigonian who tricked him into being the unhappiest and loneliest of all the world's cobblers" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 38). As a counterbalance to his father's attitude, the narrator of *Bluebeard* gives examples of Armenians who have managed to realize the American Dream: "And Armenians haven't succeeded only in business here. The great writer William Saroyan was an Armenian, and so is Dr. George Mintouchian, the new president of the University of Chicago. Dr. Mintouchian is a renowned Shakespeare scholar, something my father could have been" (39).

By contrast, the quintessential American belief that you must never give up and that life's adversities are all the more reason to redouble your efforts, as well as archetypal American optimism and a tendency to think ahead, characterize Mrs. Karabekian. As far as Rabo's future is concerned, she is the one who shows initiative, which leads to her son becoming a disciple of Dan Gregory, formerly known as Gregorian, a New York-based Armenian illustrator who has achieved spectacular success in America.¹¹ The undertaking which—whatever one thinks of all its consequences—enables young Rabo to get out of his provincial hometown and escape from the lack of prospects is sabotaged from the very beginning by his father, who is, to put it mildly, sceptical about it. He questions both the idea itself and the credibility of Gregory and his mistress, Marilee Kemp, thanks to whom Mrs. Karabekian's plan works. Rabo's father persists—as does, for that matter, the protagonist's mother—in using the original form of the famous illustrator's surname and criticizes Gregory for having allegedly cut himself off from his ethnic roots.

¹¹ Mrs. Karabekian's resourcefulness is compatible with the overall message of *Bluebeard*, which depicts women as self-reliant, active and decisive, as well as prepared to mend what men have destroyed or neglected. This aspect of the novel is perfectly summarized by the title of Rabo Karabekian's last, monumental painting *Now It's the Women's Turn*.

As for Mr. Karabekian, he never masters the English language to the extent necessary to become a headworker in America and speaks to his family mainly in Armenian. The fact that in conversations he refers to Armenian culture, history and tradition may be seen not only as proof of his being faithful to his own national identity, but also as an act of resistance to the culture, history and tradition of the New World, to which he never really acclimatizes himself. One may get the impression that an attachment to the past and one's ethnic roots, which the novel's narrator respects and approves of as such,¹² becomes, in his father's case, one more way of dwelling on past tragedies and failures, exacerbating his sense of injustice, discouragement and chronic acedia. Mr. Karabekian refuses to take up the challenge and set himself more ambitious goals because "that [i]sn't *humiliating* enough" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 25), as his son ironically puts it. As a result, "he bec[omes] his own Turk over here, knocking himself down and spitting on himself" (25). Driven by masochism, as well as a sense of guilt or at least loyalty to his compatriots who did not survive the genocide, "he welcome[s] all proofs that the planet he had known and loved during his boyhood ha[s] disappeared entirely" (25), since "[t]hat [i]s *his* way of honoring all the friends and relatives he ha[s] lost in the massacre" (25). With time, as a relatively young man, he becomes mentally united with the victims of the Armenian Genocide, in fact heading only for death and turning, in the words of one of his few acquaintances, into "a perfectly contented, self-sufficient zombie" (66).

Relevantly, Hirsch describes the graphic novel *Maus* as the story of the author's parents as well as "the story of Art Spiegelman's own life dominated by memories which are not his own" (*Family Frames* 26). Despite the emotional distance and grudge which mark his relationship with his father, Rabo Karabekian is aware of the fact that, by writing his autobiography, he immerses himself, as did his father all his life, in the past, including his parents' story, tragically inscribed into history with a capital H. He therefore experiences what Hirsch, in her examination of *Maus*, identifies as "Spiegelman's challenge [which] is to be able to inscribe in the story his ambivalence—both his passionate interest and desire and his inevitable distance and lack of understanding" (13). Rabo's narration is replete with allusions to the Karabekians' past, but also—importantly, since, as Hirsch points out, genocide encompasses both biological extermination and "cultural genocide" (13)—with references to his own Armenianness, to historical facts and the cultural heritage of the nation from which he comes, as well as to what it means to be a true Armenian. For instance,

¹² During his army days, Rabo Karabekian is encouraged to change his name to Robert King, which he fails to do. He also leaves his immense fortune to his two sons from his first marriage on the condition that they return to their original Armenian surname.

the protagonist has no doubt that, contrary to what Mamigonian did, an Armenian worthy of the name must be honest. A counterexample of Armenian honesty is Rabo's mother, who takes jewels belonging to one of the victims of the massacre, but manages to do so without desecrating the corpse. Mrs. Karabekian reverts to this detail in stories of her survival, which she tells her son on numerous occasions because, as Hirsch would put it, "[s] he is the survivor who has a story to tell" (19). The question of morality is directly related to the question of potential revenge for the wrongs suffered by the victims and survivors. When eight-year-old Rabo, who is aware of what the Armenian Genocide was from an early age, asks his father about it, Karabekian Senior restricts himself to expressing the hope that, as a result of the extermination and exodus of the Armenians, Turkey "is an uglier and even more joyless place, now that *we* are gone" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 43).

The genocide experienced by the protagonist's parents affects his life on several levels: the cultural, moral, existential and psychological. At a very basic level, one may also speak of a cause-and-effect relation: the narrator does not joke when he blames Mamigonian for his having been permanently maimed on the front lines of World War II. Moreover, and perhaps as importantly, the previous generation's traumatic experiences incline Rabo to think about his own life in terms of those experiences, which become a point of reference for him, and even superimpose themselves on his own traumas. They shape not only the narration contained in the autobiographical book on which he is working, but also his own inner narration. At one point in the novel, Circe Berman encourages him to describe his state of mind following the departure of his first wife, who took with her their children, as well as their portraits painted by Rabo, the latter action having a symbolic dimension. The protagonist recalls "feeling what [his] father must have felt when he was a young teacher—and found himself all alone in his village after the massacre" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 229).

The most famous survivor of the Armenian Genocide may be Arshile Gorky, an American painter of Armenian origin, whose mother died as a result of the hardship caused by the ethnic cleansing. As an exponent of Abstract Expressionism, mentioned in Vonnegut's novel alongside other prominent representatives of this artistic movement, such as Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, Gorky is also a link between the motif central to *Bluebeard*, namely art, and the themes of genocide, war and cruelty, with which the present article is concerned. Importantly, Gorky's oeuvre is sometimes read in the light of the atrocious experiences which marked his childhood.¹³ In Rabo Karabekian's case, the effect of both the artist's own and inherited trauma on his creative output is also visible.

¹³ For an examination of this subject, see Pitman.

Rabo Karabekian's career in the visual arts may be divided into three stages. The first one encompasses the attempts undertaken in his schooldays and his apprenticeship with Gregory, which consists mostly in the boy running errands for his mentor. Although their masterly realism borders on the kind of precision that is proper to photography, the famous Armenian's works do not predestine him to achieve the status of a truly great artist because "[t]hey [a]re truthful about material things, but they lie[] about time" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 80). This, however, does not change the fact that Gregory's illustrations bear the strong imprint of their author's personality, which is not the case with Karabekian's otherwise technically perfect drawings. The lack of individual artistic trademarks is the reason why a professor of fine arts whom Rabo, now working as a graphic designer in a New York advertising agency, approaches refuses to accept him into his class.

The next stage of the protagonist's artistic activity begins after World War II, when he becomes friends with painters of the Abstract Expressionist circle. They are the ones who present him with pictures which later make him the world's leading collector of the New York School. Rabo himself also starts to create nonfigurative art. Initially quite successful as an abstract painter, Karabekian eventually fails miserably: as a result of his using impermanent paint which peels off, the pictures, to the buyers' dissatisfaction, turn into unpainted canvases again. Compromised as an artist and abandoned by his first wife, the nearly middle-aged protagonist undergoes a nervous breakdown before being emotionally rescued by a wealthy, warm and likeable woman who becomes his second wife. By her side, Rabo leads a happy, affluent and, by his own admission, idle life for the next twenty years, simultaneously becoming, thanks to his collection, a rich man in his own right. Her death leads to his sinking again into depression, during which, however, he returns to painting and creates his *magnum opus*, a multigure composition which summarizes his life, both personal and artistic. The latter is as if suspended between mimetic and figurative art, on the one hand, and non-representational art on the other.

Karabekian crosses paths with several people who understand painting in the traditional way. This is the case with Gregory, who hates the modernists in general and Picasso in particular, as well as with two women who despise Abstract Expressionism: Dorothy, Rabo's first wife, for whom being a true painter is tantamount to being a skilful draughtsman and a realist, and Circe Berman, who has a low opinion of Karabekian's impressive collection. By contrast, the two other important women in his life, Marilee Kemp, with whom Rabo in time embarks on an affair, and his second wife, Edith, take a different stand. The former, inspired by Karabekian, amasses her own large collection of Abstract Expressionist

works; the latter, invariably kindly, remains neutrally benevolent as far as her husband's artistic preferences are concerned. Hovering between the two poles, the protagonist of *Bluebeard* moves from one to the other to eventually return to figurative art in his last work.

The secret which the potato barn situated on Karabekian's Long Island estate hides and to which the novel owes its title¹⁴ is a gigantic painting, a panoramic vision woven from the protagonist's war memories, on which is superimposed his parents' experience of the Armenian Genocide. This historical juxtaposition confirms the rightness of what Circe Berman tells Paul Slazinger when he quotes George Santayana's statement "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" : "[W]e're doomed to repeat the past no matter what. That's what it is to be alive" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 88). That the ekphrasis contained in the finale of *Bluebeard* also draws on Vonnegut's own experiences is evident from the novelist's letter to George Strong, a fellow soldier and prisoner in Dresden during the carpet bombing of 1945, and thus a co-participant in the events which inspired *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

In the last chapter of what may be my last book, *Bluebeard*, I describe the valley we came to after we walked away from the schoolhouse at Hellendorf. Six of us appropriated a Wehrmacht horse and wagon, and traveled around for several days unimpeded by anyone. We made it back to the slaughterhouse, I'm not sure why, and were arrested by Russians, who locked us up in the barracks of what used to be a training camp for Army Engineers. That was outside Meissen, I think. Then we were taken in Model A trucks to the Elbe at Halle, and traded one-for-one for subjects of the U.S.S.R. held by the Americans on the other side. Many of these, including Gypsies and Ukrainian turncoats, I heard later, were shot or hanged almost immediately. What fun! (Vonnegut, *Letters*)

In *Bluebeard*, the protagonist's analogical experience is referred to as "Old Soldier's Anecdote Number Three":

"One evening in May," I said, "we were marched out of our camp and into the countryside. We were halted at about three in the morning, and told to sleep under the stars as best we could."

¹⁴ Needless to say, this is an allusion to a seventeenth-century fairy tale of the same name by French author Charles Perrault. It tells the story of a man who serially gets married and serially murders his wives, subsequently hiding their bodies in a chamber to which only he has access. His last wife fails to respect the interdiction, which saves her life. In Vonnegut's novel, Circe Berman tries to find out what it is that Karabekian keeps in his potato barn, but, unlike in the original French version of the story, she achieves her aim with the owner's permission.

“When we awoke at sunrise, the guards were gone, and we found that we were on the rim of a valley near the ruins of an ancient stone watchtower. Below us, in that innocent farmland, were thousands upon thousands of people like us, who had been brought there by their guards, had been *dumped*. There weren’t only prisoners of war. They were people who had been marched out of concentration camps and factories where they had been slaves, and out of regular prisons for criminals, and out of lunatic asylums. The idea was to turn us loose as far as possible from the cities, where we might raise hell.”

“And there were civilians there, too, who had run and run from the Russian front or the American and British front. The fronts had actually met to the north and south of us.”

“And there were hundreds in German uniforms, with their weapons still in working order, but docile now, waiting for whomever they were expected to surrender to.” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 204)

Not only does the ekphrasis of the painting *Now It's the Women's Turn* constitute the coda of Vonnegut's novel, but it also summarizes its wartime strand. Echoes of World War II recur in the pages of *Bluebeard* in the protagonist's flashbacks, memories and musings, at times interlocking with reminiscences of other wars, before and after. The male characters in the novel are often veterans, who have been in the wars in both the literal and figurative senses. Apart from Rabo Karabekian, who lost an eye at the front, *Bluebeard* features two other former soldiers, both of whom are the main character's best friends, Terry Kitchen and Paul Slazinger, who shares with the protagonist “[l]oneliness and wounds from World War Two which were quite grave” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 148). Fred Jones, Dan Gregory's assistant, used to be a flying ace in the Great War; they will both perish in Egypt, fighting on Mussolini's side. Even John Karpinski, Rabo's East Hampton neighbour, was wounded in Korea while his son never returned from Vietnam, about which the narrator comments as follows: “One war to a customer” (43). William T. Sherman's oft-quoted statement “War is hell” finds its expression in the narrator's reflections as he inventories Gregory's collection of militaria: “I can remember thinking that war was so horrible that, at last, thank goodness, nobody could ever be fooled by romantic pictures and fiction and history into marching to war again” (130). This belief is gainsaid by the wartime experiences of the characters in Vonnegut's novel,¹⁵ whose message is *par excellence* antimilitary and pacifist.

¹⁵ After the end of World War II, Marilee Kemp, now the widow of an extremely wealthy Italian aristocrat, creates in her Florentine palazzo a safe haven for women who have been harmed by the war and by men.

Rabo Karabekian notices an ironic analogy between what Fred Jones felt when he shot down plane after plane and what the Abstract Expressionists felt during the process of creation. The difference, he points out bitterly, is that “what Pollock did lacked that greatest of all crowd pleasers, which was human sacrifice” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 141). As a young man, Rabo loses himself in painting, but sees himself as a talentless artist, someone whose “shallowness as a participant in a life of serious art” (133) is evident. However, this does not change the fact that, despite not thinking highly of his painterly *chant du cygne*, he is not completely dissatisfied with it either. He observes sarcastically that the canvas “might actually outlive the ‘Mona Lisa!’” (177).¹⁶ The monumental painting depicts “human sacrifice,” the victims of war, who are either already dead or about to die, or will at best survive the war physically and spiritually maimed. According to its author, the message of the painting is “Goodbye” (172), “the emptiest and yet the fullest of all human messages” (171).

It is worth taking a closer look at the aforementioned crossover nature of *Now It's the Women's Turn*. The human figures depicted in the painting have their own fictitious stories, some of which Rabo tells Circe Berman when, accompanied by her host, she finally manages to cross the threshold of the mysterious potato barn. The fragment of Vonnegut's letter to Strong and the relevant passage from *Bluebeard* quoted earlier in the present article give us an idea of what the “gruesome Disneyland” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 241) created by Karabekian looks like. The immense canvas is filled with the microscopic figures of “clearly drawn World War Two survivors” (241), including those who are unlikely to have met in the same geographical context during the war, which, however, emphasizes the global dimension of the military conflict in which the protagonist of Vonnegut's novel participated. Contrary to what the title of the composition may suggest, it seems that women are largely absent from it, a fact which Circe points out. Rabo explains to her that her impression results from the havoc wreaked by war, which deprives women of their health and beauty and makes them indistinguishable from the men in the painting. Another reason for this apparent absence is that the female inhabitants of the local villages are hiding from rapists in basements, probably in vain. There is, however, one female figure who attracts attention: the dead Gypsy queen. This particular element of Rabo's work is a tribute he pays to his mother's experiences and memories of the Armenian Genocide because the deceased has on her jewels which some living person will find.

¹⁶ This is a reference to the paint used by Rabo Karabekian to create his now non-existent canvases. The advertisement for Sateen Dura-Luxe alluded to da Vinci's famous painting. As it turned out, the producer had grossly overestimated their product.

Now It's the Women's Turn thus amalgamates events which took place not only during World War II, but also during the Great War. As such, it is a blend of its author's memory and postmemory. For Rabo Karabekian, his parents' traumatic reminiscences are so vivid that they become part of himself. Relevantly, Hirsch points out the symbolism of the way Spiegelman, who was born in 1948, portrays himself in *Maus*. He wears, for instance, a striped concentration camp uniform or a mouse mask, as opposed to the Jews who lived in the time of the Holocaust, depicted simply as actual mice (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 27), in keeping with the meaning of the graphic novel's German-language title. Spiegelman's work thus "demonstrates how immediately present their war memories have remained for Art and his parents in their subsequent life, and how unassimilated. But [following his mother's death] the grieving Art does not actually *remember* the concentration camp whose uniform he wears—mediated through his parents' memories, his is a postmemory" (32). Rabo Karabekian's situation is more difficult than Spiegelman's because his memory and trauma are triple: in his own life, he has experienced atrocities comparable to his mother's and father's horrific experiences. As a result, the painting which is, in a sense, a summary of his own existence includes fragments of the historical events which the Karabekians miraculously survived. The fact that they are merely fragments perfectly fits the theory of secondary memory: using the term *mémoire trouée*, which is French for "holed memory," borrowed from Henri Raczymow's essay, Hirsch notes "the indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory" (23), that is postmemory.

At the most basic level, it may certainly be stated that, while creating his *magnum opus* and transmuting the material provided by primary and secondary memory, Rabo Karabekian uses an amalgam of sources. He draws, at his own discretion and in accordance with his own feelings, on his mother's and probably also—albeit in a less direct way—his father's memories and, more generally, on the postmemory-drenched atmosphere in which he grew up. Such a *modus operandi*—notwithstanding all the differences—brings to mind analogies with what Hirsch sees as the main idea behind Spiegelman's graphic novel. In her words, *Maus* is "Art's graphic interpretation of Vladek's [Art Spiegelman's father's] narrative. This is a 'survivor's tale'—a testimony—mediated by the survivor's child through his idiosyncratic representational and aesthetic choices" (*Family Frames* 26).

"*Maus* is," Hirsch observes, "the collaborative narrative of father and son: one provides most of the verbal narrative, the other the visual; one gives testimony while the other receives and transmits it. In the process of testimony they establish their own uneasy bonding" (*Family Frames* 34). The relationship between the protagonist of *Bluebeard* and Karabekian Senior can hardly be deemed good and unproblematic. The difference is that, in Vonnegut's novel,

the main character's father never works through his trauma and fails to form a close and healthy bond with his son. The fact that, as Hirsch points out, working on his graphic novel "represents his [Art Spiegelman's] attempt both to get deeper into his postmemory and to find a way out" (32) makes one realize that, for Rabo, painting *Now It's the Women's Turn* is similarly a form of therapy, conducive, hopefully, to working through both his own and inherited trauma. While *Maus* is the fruit of cooperation, *Now It's the Women's Turn* is the work of a single author, though it may be speculated that Rabo's parents, who have been dead for decades when he embarks on his monumental project, are, to a certain extent at least, its co-authors.

Hirsch points out yet another question which is relevant to Vonnegut's novel. She perceives *Maus* as an example of what Klaus Theweleit refers to as Orphic creation, a product of the human mind which

results from just such a descent [as the Holocaust] into and a reemergence from Hades: a masculine process facilitated by the encounter with the beautiful dead woman who may not herself come out or sing her own song. Orphic creation is thus an artificial "birth" produced by men: by male couples who can bypass the generativity of women, whose bonding depends on the tragic absence of women. (*Family Frames* 34)

In the case of the graphic novel created by Art Spiegelman in cooperation with his father, the absent woman is Anna Spiegelman, Art's mother and Vladek's wife. She committed suicide over twenty years after the end of the war and nearly twenty years before the publication of the first part of *Maus*. To quote Hirsch: "Through her picture and her missing voice Anja [short for Anna] haunts the story told in both volumes [of *Maus*], a ghostly presence shaping familial interaction" (34). *Now It's the Women's Turn* is, officially at least, the work of one man. There is, however, no denying the fact that another man's, as well as a woman's contributions to the painting are unquestionable and that the spirit of the latter along with the collective spirit of many women seem to be hovering over a work which is, like Spiegelman's *Maus*, "the personal and the collective story of death and survival" (34).

The most important of the above-mentioned women is, of course, Rabo's mother, of whom the protagonist speaks with incomparably more warmth than he does of his other parent and whose premature death left a void in his life, simultaneously depriving him of a buffer against his father, of whom he never achieves a true understanding.¹⁷ Mrs. Karabekian's

¹⁷ The main reason why Rabo Karabekian wants his sons to resume his surname is that this is what his mother would have wished: "She wasn't even a Karabekian by birth, but she was the one who wanted no matter where, no matter what, the name Karabekian to live on and on" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 250).

influence on her son's last painting is evident. It may, however, also be argued that the conversation the main character has with Marilee Kemp a few decades before *Now It's the Women's Turn* comes into being also affects the final shape of Rabo's work. For Marilee, war and men are inextricably linked, and the latter's responsibility for violence on a mass scale is unarguable. It is men who start and wage wars, whose victims, apart from men themselves, are women and children.¹⁸ This view is in keeping with the overall message of Vonnegut's novel, whose narrator similarly blames men, their greed, rapacity and cruelty, for military conflicts and other forms of evil, such as colonialism, imperialism, and even capitalism.¹⁹ Marilee tells Rabo that prior to coming up with the idea to collect works of Abstract Expressionism, she contemplated decorating her palazzo with frescoes whose themes and message would have been similar to those of *Now It's the Women's Turn*. She eventually opts for abstract painting because she comes to the conclusion that

[a]fter all that men have done to the women and children and every other defenseless thing on this planet, it is time that not just every painting, but every piece of music, every statue, every play, every poem and book a man creates, should say only this: "We are much too horrible for this nice place. We give up. We quit. The end!" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 205)

By contrast, at the beginning of their acquaintance, Circe Berman, who sincerely detests Abstract Expressionism, encourages Rabo to paint a picture which would portray the dreadful experiences and suffering of his mother and other Armenians, unaware of the fact that such an artwork already exists, hidden in the potato barn. By making Marilee and Circe the protagonist's sources of inspiration and the *spiritus movens* behind what is the culmination of his life's work, Vonnegut reiterates a suggestion which is central to Rabo Karabekian's story. Despite *Bluebeard* being a novel which deals with male worlds, the invariably cruel world of war and the often ruthless world of great art, the future belongs to women, who are likely to have the last word.

¹⁸ Shields's view that "most of the strains in the novel [*Bluebeard*] sympathetic to feminism are drowned out by the importance of women as seductive" (380) is, in my opinion, wrong.

¹⁹ Karabekian Senior's definite opposition to militarism is made clear when Circe Berman asks Rabo whether his father, who died before the outbreak of World War II, would have been proud of his son joining the army. The narrator replies: "Don't forget that it was young soldiers whose parents thought they were finally going to amount to something who killed everybody he'd ever known and loved. If he'd seen me in a uniform, he would have bared his teeth like a dog with rabies. He would have said, 'Swine!' He would have said, 'Pig!' He would have said, 'Murderer! Get out of here!'" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 249).

Filtered through the lens of Hirsch's theory of postmemory, Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* turns out to be an insightful literary study of trauma caused by historical cataclysms, one which is deeper and more complex than a cursory reading of the novel would suggest. The theoretical framework provided by Hirsch illuminates seemingly random or secondary elements of the novel's represented world, some of which might otherwise have been overlooked or underplayed. Vonnegut's writerly intuition enables him to delve into the way historical factors shape the lives of those who are directly affected by them and, just as importantly, the lives of their descendants. Anticipating the work of one of today's leading trauma scholars, Vonnegut explores the complexities and subtleties of what is now referred to as postmemory, bringing to the fore, as does Hirsch in her writings, the intergenerational psychological and cultural implications of traumatic historical events. *Bluebeard* looks at how history marks the family, capturing the tensions within it, and interpersonal relationships in general. It depicts the difficult process of working through trauma and its connection with the creative process. Vonnegut convincingly demonstrates that being a survivor and a survivor's child are tantamount to being steeped in the past, which superimposes itself on the present and determines it. Consequently, the postgeneration, to use Hirsch's term, faces the task of navigating an uneasy inheritance, burdened with guilt, grudge, bitterness and regret. The novel's humanistic and pacifist message is interlinked with gender issues, culminating in conclusions of a feminist nature, which associate men with responsibility for war, genocide and human suffering, and women with hope of peace and renewal. In a Hirschean vein, central to Vonnegut's reflections are the visual arts, namely photography and painting, which are carriers of memory and postmemory, as well as media through which trauma is both expressed and healed.

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“My Monster Self”: Violence and Survival in Margaret Atwood’s *Moral Disorder*

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood’s novels are usually celebrated for their blunt feminism. However, in *Moral Disorder*—a series of interconnected stories that forms a novel—feminist concerns are replaced with worries about territory and survival. The protagonist is an insider whose sole concern is to survive and to protect her territory. The confrontation between the narrator as the insider and the outsiders does not occur directly but could be inferred by her cruelty toward other characters and her violence against the animals under her care. The present study argues that this cruelty, which abounds in the novel, could be viewed as a substitute for violence against the outsiders. The narrator’s gaze at the Indian boy who entered the protagonist’s territory manifests a garrison mentality. The frequent references to axes in the novel are compared to the use of axes in “Wilderness Tips,” a short story by Atwood in which axes also have a metaphoric significance. The beheading and dismemberment of domestic animals could be the punishment awaiting the intruder. The novel establishes a division between the insider/outsider, here/there, self/other and civilized/barbaric to call for action and awareness about the importance of protecting one’s territory.

Keywords: caregiving, outsider, insider, garrison mentality, gaze, survival.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novels have inspired and invited feminist readings. They typically demonstrate the restraints that society places on women and the façade that women adopt in response to them. Atwood's female protagonists are portrayed in unfavorable circumstances occurring in patriarchal societies. They are marginalized in their private and professional lives, and are unable to adjust to the social expectations imposed upon them. Typical Atwoodian characters might experience a psychological breakdown and slowly detach themselves from the mechanisms of society (*Surfacing*), refuse to eat (*The Edible Women*), become obsessed with their weight (*Lady Oracle*), become entangled in negative relationships (*Bodily Harm*) or have trouble coping with their identity (*Surfacing*, *The Edible Women*, *Lady Oracle*). Some of Atwood's manipulated, devastated and vulnerable female characters try to reconstruct themselves in order to overcome the obstacles they face in a hostile patriarchal society. Characters like Elaine in *Cat's Eye* or Joan in *Lady Oracle* are characterized as being either on a journey to selfhood or involved in a quest for identity. In some of Atwood's novels like *Surfacing* and *The Robber Bride*, the individual quest for identity coexists with the quest for Canadian identity. Although these novels deal with the construction of Canadian identity, as well as the formation of personal identity, their rendering of this theme is somewhat ambiguous. As Fiona Tolan observes:

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Canada is caught between two opposing power positions. It is both the ex-colonial nation (that is, the colonial other to Britain's colonizing self), and it is also undeniably a First World nation, with a position of privilege and power in the world (and therefore is the First World self to the Third World other). (143)

Bennett also argues that "English Canada has played an oddly doubled role: subjected to an imperial power, it has also been an agent of that power in the control it has exercised over populations within Canada's boundaries" (Bennett, "English" 116). In some of her novels, Atwood mainly deals with Canada as an ex-colonial nation—as the other to Britain and America—but ignores Canada as the self to colonized nations. Similarly, there are two sides to some of Atwood's protagonists: although victimized and marginalized in patriarchal societies as outsiders, they can become cruel and cold-hearted when they try to protect their territory. This transforms them into insiders.

The narrator of *Moral Disorder* plays this double role. On the one hand, she tries to define herself as a free woman in a traditional society where relationships and social roles are gendered. In this role, she is in

a victim position and invokes sympathy. On the other hand, she creates sharp distinctions between the self and others, and exercises power over other characters, as well as violence against animals. The book is informed by concerns about territory and the importance of survival, rather than feminist issues. The narrator writes from inside a position of power, confronting members of her family, foreigners and animals.

Moral Disorder tells the story of a female narrator called Nell during different phases of her life through a series of short stories. These stories may appear unrelated, but can be considered as one novel when taken together because they are interconnected and recount the experiences of one central character. Except for the first story set in the present, the others depict flashbacks to the narrator's past and could be read as selected chapters from a *Bildungsroman*. The flashbacks occur chronologically—from the time when Nell was 11 years old until the time that she is a middle-aged woman. Although each story could stand alone, they are all part of a greater narrative and have a recurring theme in common: a woman exploring her relationship with the world and the individuals around her. These stories are open to different interpretations by the reader, contrary to those implied by the narrator.

“The Art of Cooking and Serving” depicts the 11-year-old Nell trying to cope with the increasing demands of her family and her final liberation from the duties imposed upon her. “The Headless Horseman” explores Nell's relation with her sister, “My Last Duchess” is about Nell's self-realization, and “The Other Place” depicts Nell in search of her place in the world. “Monopoly,” “Moral Disorder” and “White Horse” are Nell and Tig's farm experiences told in the third person. “The Entities” is about the effect of Oona's death on Nell's life. The last two stories, “The Labrador Fiasco” and “The Boys at the Lab,” depict Nell's father and mother when their health has deteriorated. The last two stories are significant because they deal with survival in the wilderness. In “The Labrador Fiasco,” the predicament of Nell's father overlaps with the doomed mission of the explorers Hubbard and Wallace. “The Boys at the Lab” is also about wilderness and survival. It depicts the incongruous presence of an outsider in the wilderness. Nell's mother tells her about a recurrent dream in which she is left alone in the wilderness. This dream emphasizes the importance of finding one's path in wilderness. The lab boys have names, Cam and Roy, but the Indian boy has no name and is not in the pictures. The story ends with the narrator keeping an eye on the Indian boy and demanding that action be taken against this outsider. The text can be studied as a novel because all of the stories are selected chapters from Nell's life.

“The Headless Horseman” tells the story of Nell dressing up as a strange headless figure for her last Halloween. Her choice of costume

might initially seem accidental, but becomes quite meaningful in the light of other stories. The significance of her choice is the severed head which was kept in the trunk room years after the costume was made. Nell sees the head through the door and narrates that it is “staring out at me through the gloom, blood dripping from the corner of its mouth . . . it seemed malignantly attentive, as if it was . . . putting a sour construction on my motives” (*Moral Disorder* 32). After a while, the head is taken into her sister Lizzie’s dress-up box and triggers a series of nightmares for the four-year-old girl. Why and how the severed head “migrates” into Lizzie’s room is never mentioned. Once the game started, her sister could not distinguish between Nell and the monster, and remained terrified and disturbed for days. Recollecting the events some years later, Nell asks herself: “Why did I behave like this? . . . My excuse . . . was that I was simply giving in to . . . a demand made by my little sister . . . Did she believe she’d finally be able to face down my monster self . . . ? Did she hope that I would finally-at last-transform myself . . . into who I really was supposed to be?” (39).

This is a significant question because it is the closest the narrator ever gets to acknowledging her dark side. This dark side remains hidden throughout the novel as the narrative voice falls into contradictions and omissions in attempting to conceal it. As Nell discloses her relations with her sister and Oona, contradictions in her speech and behavior become more obvious. Lizzie accuses her of being egoistic: “You used everything up. You used up all the good parts . . . There was nothing left over for me” (45). This proves true as Lizzie depends on Nell even when she is grown up. She visits the farm frequently, expecting Nell to solve her problems. Other characters, like local farmers, see Nell as a very powerful woman who can handle every situation and outlive everyone. The structure of the novel emphasizes the narrator’s capacity to survive, with Nell and Tig leading the first story which is set decades after the events depicted in the novel. It is ironic that Nell who is most unfit for taking care of others is either asked by other characters to tend to their needs or assumes the role of a caretaker willingly.

CAREGIVING

As a young girl, Nell shows her dissatisfaction with accepting responsibility and caring for others when she refuses to attend to the needs of her baby sister. When her mother asks her to put the baby to sleep, she says: “Why should I? . . . She’s not my baby. I didn’t have her. You did” (23). There is a general consensus among critics about caregiving. Nischik sees this and similar remarks as declarations of independence and signs of

rejecting traditional domestic roles assigned to women (87). Regarding the relationship between women and caregiving, Halwani argues that caregiving could be a method for abusing women (2). In a similar critical vein, Bowden asserts that the values of care naturally assigned to women are manifestations of patriarchy and their acceptance implies women's lack of identity and self-respect (8). Brabeck criticizes traditional assertions about the moral superiority of women because these remarks reinforce the stereotypes of men being reasonable and women being emotional; thus implying the superiority of men (33–34). Mann suggests a solution to the problem: women should practice “fair-caring” in order to create a balance between caring for others and caring for themselves (107). De Falco highlights this theme in *Moral Disorder* and observes that all the stories revolve around the question of care and conflicts consequent upon caring as the narrator cares for various family members, strangers, friends, and animals. Stating that caring is essential to survival and identity, and emphasizing that it is about feeling and action, she concludes that the self is harmed in the process of caregiving. She believes that this is the experience of the narrator of *Moral Disorder* who has a conflict between selfishness and sacrifice (“Moral Obligation” 236–63). De Falco later modifies her evaluation of the narrator as a caregiver and observes that Nell tries to avoid ethical responsibility (*Imagining Care* 57). Because sexual politics has always been central to Atwood's fiction, the issue of care was informed by the traditional division of roles between genders. Consequently, the female character's rejection of care has been celebrated as a manifestation of women's independence and quest for identity. Although the narrator of *Moral Disorder* is a woman, she is not a typical female caregiver.

A survey of Nell's relationship with Oona could perhaps demonstrate that Nell is not an angel of mercy. When Nell meets her, Oona—Tig's wife—is a successful woman living a happy life with him. Soon the couple breaks up and Nell replaces Oona. The narrative voice remains silent about the circumstances that brought about Tig and Oona's separation. As the narrative voice in “The Entities” gives a relatively different view of Oona and Tig's breakup, the possibility of Nell's active role in the separation comes to mind. Nell's denial of her role in the breakup becomes meaningful when the narrative voice suddenly changes from the first person to the third person. The point of view changes in “Monopoly” where we learn about Nell and Tig's decision to get married. The title of the story was symbolic as Monopoly is the name of the game that Nell plays with boys for the first time. She refuses to lose to them, and shows she will monopolize their father. Nell's role in Oona's degradation becomes evident when she decides to buy her a house using the money she deposited in a bank, money that “sat there accusingly” (*Moral Disorder* 179). In buying Oona

a house, she not only frees herself from feelings of guilt, but also takes revenge upon Oona, who had always behaved as if she were superior. The once attractive, efficient and rich Oona who has changed into a fat, sickly woman dies in Nell's house. After Oona's death, Nell admits that she is "not a generous person at heart" (180). In another occasion, in "The Other Place," Nell is unable to sympathize with Owen who spoke to her about a horrible childhood experience. "Surely, I lacked empathy, or even simple kindness" (88), she says about herself when she does not say a word to the man who expects sympathy from her. This confession, like the time she admits to having a "monster self" or not being "a generous person at heart," reveals her as cold-hearted and cruel. Her sole concern is to survive in circumstances in which everyone and everything are sources of potential dangers.

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SURVIVAL: THE GARRISON MENTALITY

Atwood believes that Canadian identity is inextricably intertwined with the idea of survival. Canadians have to overcome many obstacles in order to survive and this has given their literature its special characteristics. The problems of unknown territory, people's need to physically and mentally master the land they inhabit, and their need to protect it against the intrusion of outsiders are the main concerns of Canadian literature. Atwood observes that Canadians come to a realization of what Canada really is through their literature:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (*Survival* 19)

The importance of literature in the formation of Canadian identity has been identified by many critics. W. L. Morton, for example, speaks about the "psychology of endurance and survival" which allows Canadians to adhere to "the essentials of the greatest civilizations in the grimmest of environments" (qtd. in Goetsch 170). These views were influenced by Northrop Frye's theory of the garrison mentality, a common theme in Canadian literature that depicts characters on their guard against the dangers of the outside world. Frye describes that communities likely to develop a garrison mentality are "small and isolated communities

surrounded with a physical and psychological ‘frontier,’ separated from one another and from their American and British cultural resources, communities that are . . . confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting” (350–51). Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that Frye’s concept of the garrison mentality is the foundation of the ideas that Atwood developed about survival as a unifying symbol for Canadian literary identity (Alter 159; Bennett, “Criticism” 161; Cooke 26; Goetsch 171; Howells 23; Jurak 29; Macpherson 18; McWilliams 138). Aware of the deficiencies of survival as the main theme of Canadian literature, Atwood admits that “*Survival* was fun to attack. In fact it still is; most self-respecting professors of Can lit begin their courses . . . with a short ritual sneer at it” (*Second Words* 105). Although Atwood seems to be modifying her views, her fiction is still informed by survival and garrison mentality. As one critic claims, *Survival* has made no significant changes in later editions, giving a misguided view of Canadian literature (Mathews 119).

Atwood’s survival theory has been criticized for being mythical, naïve, tendentious, restricted in scope and not being grounded in reality or the history of literary tradition. The garrison mentality has also been denounced as it encourages an austere mentality, implies a Canadian moral superiority, is related to colonialism, acknowledges a primarily white Canadian character and could be used to marginalize and silence minorities. Jones rejects the garrison mentality because writers obsessed with it have been “haunted by the sterility of an overly ascetic order resulting from a complete withdrawal from life” (10). Cavell regards Frye’s theory as colonial because it reasserts the superiority of European cultural exercises by sacrificing local modes of expression (14). Pell criticizes the garrison mentality as a celebration of an indispensable white Canadian character (53–71). Selmon warns against the potential danger of a garrison mentality because it creates a link between the Canadian landscape and uncivilized others, making allowances for the status quo to silence and marginalize minorities (qtd. in Pell 54). Although critics like Mount believe that Frye’s influence is exaggerated (75), Frye seems to remain an influential figure in contemporary Canadian criticism. In an interview with Barry Cameron, John Metcalf states that because of Frye’s influence that has sealed Canadian literature in protective isolation, reviewing in Canada is considered an outrageous act (407).

The narrator of *Moral Disorder* proves ruthless, cold-hearted and irresponsible to the suffering of others. Always contemptuous of weaker characters, teenager Nell does not care about her sick mother and sister. As an adult, she is insensitive to the feelings of Tig’s sons. She was also the cause of Oona’s death. Her character proves fallible when she voices her sympathies for the Duke who has killed the Duchess in Robert Browning’s

“My Last Duchess.” In the short story, “My Last Duchess,” Nell sees the Duchess as “a disgusting Dumb bunny” (*Moral Disorder* 71) who deserved what she got. When she reads *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, she finds similarities between Tess and the Duchess, and has the same callous attitude:

Tess had serious problems. . . . She got taken advantage of, at night, in the woods, because she’d stupidly accepted a drive home with a jerk, and after that it was all downhill. One awful thing after another, turnips, dead babies, getting dumped by the man she loved, and then her tragic death at the end. . . . Tess was evidently another of those unlucky pushovers, like the last Duchess and like Ophelia. . . . These girls were all similar. They were too trusting. . . . They smiled too much. They were too eager to please. Then they got bumped off, one way or another. (73–74)

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By placing the duchess, Tess and Ophelia into the category of naïve and simple-minded girls doomed to fail, Nell distances herself from them. These girls are “unlucky pushovers” unable to survive. Nell is repelled and irritated by Oona’s smiles. To her, Oona is a naïve woman who trusts everybody and is doomed to fail. She thinks it is natural that loving and trusting would lose in the struggle for survival because only the “fittest” can survive. Nell is a character of low morality who justifies stealing Ted from Oona: “By the former rules, you did not steal other women’s husbands. . . . But there was no such thing as husband-stealing now, it appeared; instead there were just different folks doing their own thing and making alternate life choices” (105). The moral disorder of the title refers to Nell who lacks a clear moral orientation and exploits other characters. Violence arises from this lack of morality.

VIOLENCE

Violence is the inevitable consequence of the garrison mentality. It seems inevitable for survival and the protection of one’s territory. It remains hidden in the novel’s deepest layers, but surfaces in images of sharp implements and in the way animals are treated. In “Moral Disorder,” Nell strikes the deformed chicks using a shovel and buries them (135). Tig beheads a hen that “ran around in the yard, spouting blood from its neck like a fountain” (132), an incident that is later told to cheer up a company of friends. Cows reared on the farm are sent to the slaughterhouse and served in the next meal: “Susan the cow went away in a truck one day and came back frozen and dismembered” (131). Nell takes the lamb she has reared to the slaughterhouse and later enjoys her as a meal. “I’m a cannibal, she thought with odd detachment” (141). According to De Falco, who sees no

hope of moral order in farm stories, Nell's cannibalism shows "the most extreme perversion of care since it involves destroying another for one's own substance" (*Imagining Care* 71). The farm stories manifest a lack of moral order because animals under Nell's care are destroyed or eaten by her. Farm stories show an obsession with beheading and dismemberment, which is reminiscent of the time Nell dressed up as a headless horseman for Halloween, a figure that terrified her sister for years. After this period of initiation on the farm, the narrative voice comments on the necessity of Nell learning to use an axe, which becomes indispensable to farm life:

Maybe she would grow cunning, up here on the farm. Maybe she would absorb some of the darkness, which might not be darkness at all but only knowledge. She would turn into a woman others came to for advice. She would be called in emergencies. She would roll up her sleeves and dispense with sentimentality, and do whatever blood-soaked, bad-smelling thing had to be done. She would become adept with axes. (*Moral Disorder* 141)

Nell gradually finds herself taking an "interest in sharp implements—shears and clippers, picks and shovels, pruning saws and pitchforks. Not axes. She didn't think she could handle an axe" (120). It took Nell some time to realize the importance of axes. When she reads about local pioneers, she thinks of them as people who "had never used an axe before" (121). After living on the farm, she realizes that axes are important as an inseparable part of colonial life. In a photo, Nell's father pretends to "shave himself with his axe" (139). In spite of this joking gesture, axes seem to serve a more serious purpose. Although they are never put to use, they take on metaphoric proportions and become closely related to the garrison mentality and the theme of survival.

Animals in the text are abused and treated violently. They are beheaded, killed, buried alive, dismembered, frozen and eaten. Because these numerous episodes of violence against animals do not serve any narrative or structural function, they hint at a hidden layer of meaning. The equation made between animals and human beings can explain the importance of these episodes. Black speaks of an equation between animals and human beings as victims of ideological systems. Referring to Bosmanjian, Black observes that if colonized people are regarded as "animalistic," then the animals can be seen as colonized. He supports his argument by drawing upon the similarities between the places where animals are kept and those in which the colonized are kept (124). Nibert views animal cruelty as a consequence of the expansion of capitalism and observes how cruelty toward Native Americans and Native Canadians is closely related to cruelty toward

domesticated animals (124–25). Nibert also maintains that colonization has relied on the slaughter of domesticated animals, mainly cows and pigs, for the domination of European colonizers (63–64). Wrenn also points out that the exploitation of animals is a justification for the exploitation of human beings (22). The belief that there is an equation between the domination of animals and that of the colonized subject is shared by many other critics (Chidester 93; Huggan and Tiffin 135–39; Mbembe 236–37; Putnam 81–84; Wadiwel 178; Walters Denyer 52). The novel is not openly postcolonial, but the violence that lurks beneath its surface and might erupt at any moment shows that it is about power relations.

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GAZE AS A MARKER OF SELF/OTHER
DIFFERENTIATION

The treatment of animals recalls the problem of binary opposition between human/nonhuman and the civilized/non-civilized. “The Bad News,” the first story in the collection, draws a clear boundary between the self/other and good/bad, oppositions that overlap other polarities. The enemy in the modern world is the equivalent of wolves that threaten the existence of deer. The novel does not explicitly mention the importance of territory, or measures that must be taken to prevent possible attacks. However, the consistent presence of sharp implements with which animals are tortured or killed hints at the conflict mentioned at the beginning of the novel. The presence of axes in the novel raises thoughts about their functions. In “The Bad News,” Tig and Nell’s peaceful life is disturbed by the bad news of the murder of the leader of the interim governing council. Nell imagines a “herd of deer in the meadow, heads down grazing peacefully. Then . . . *wolves approaching* is the news. Quick . . . into a circle! Females and young to the center! Snort and paw the ground! Prepare to horn the enemy” (*Moral Disorder* 5–6). Although both the victim and victimizer are animals in this analogy, the self and the other are distinctly divided into herds of deer and wolves. This sharp division between victim/victimizer, and the self/other not only realizes where the self belongs to but also points at a place outside the here from which the enemy attacks. This also justifies the exercise of violence on the other. When the enemy attacks, there is a desperate need to use a weapon to defend one’s territory. Atwood creates sharp boundaries between “good” and “bad,” an opposition which overlaps that between the civilized and the barbaric. Referring to the murder of the leader of the interim governing council Tig says: “We shouldn’t have let so many barbarians into the army. You can’t depend on them” (8). The conflict between the civilized and the barbarians takes on different forms in the

stories that follow “The Bad News.” The analogy in the first story prepares the reader for one such opposition, but the actual confrontation is between the narrator and other characters and animals. These animals, which are slain cold-bloodedly, become substitutes for the enemy—the other—and all violence against them is made to look natural. The first story sets the tone, and the last story, “The Boys at the Lab,” reveals a resolution. An Indian boy in the last story is placed under the surveillance of the narrator. With the emergence of this foreigner, an explanation could be provided for so much cruelty and violence. Animals function as substitutes for the other that is not directly confronted. The self/other and human being/animal opposition is extended into the opposition between the civilized and the barbaric and that between the insider and the outsider.

“The Boys at the Lab” confirms these binary oppositions by introducing an Indian character represented as an outsider. Atwood changes the position of the barbarian and the civilized, viewing the boys at the lab as barbarians from the point of view of the Indian. As she is constructing the story of the Indian who proposed to buy the insect-diagnostic-lab, she imagines that he must have returned to India and told his country-men a story about “the black flies and the log-cabin lab, and the two young barbarians with their bare feet sticking out of their tent” (224). Atwood, however, has already characterized these lab boys as adventurous, interesting and full of life, and compared them to movie stars. If her father’s “incongruous assistant”—the Indian—sees these lovely boys as barbarians, then he is probably a barbarian himself, an alien in a harmonious scene. The necessity of taking action against this intruder becomes obvious when the writer completes her imaginary story about real characters by having her father, the lab boys and the Indian move downhill to the dock at the lab: “The Indian man looks back over his shoulder: he alone can sense me watching. But he doesn’t know it’s me: because he’s nervous, because he’s in a strange place” (225). The fact that it is the Indian she is watching out of all the men shows her sensitivity to the presence of a stranger and the possibility of him being a potential threat. The narrator is so conscious about the “hereness” of the region that she feels endangered when an outsider enters her territory. Critics such as Wilson have already mentioned the relationship between watching and survival in Atwood’s major novels in which vision plays a vital role in the survival of the self-conscious narrator who is usually the gazer (180). Gazing is important because it helps to locate and control the intruder.

The importance of taking action against the intruder, even at an imaginary level, is obvious. In “Wilderness Tips,” one of the stories in Atwood’s short story collection of the same name, Hungarian George, who is sly and calculating, seduces three Canadian sisters. However, he is hated by their brother who relieves his hatred for him by imagining himself

beheading the intruder with an axe. “Down comes his ax on the head of George” (*Wilderness Tips* 195). As in *Moral Disorder*, the violent games the characters play go back to their childhood. The axe game is what Roland and Prue used to play as children. Roland can never forgive Prue for bringing George to their territory, wishing he had killed her back then: “He had his stone axe. He could have brained her. She was not Prue, of course, she was treachery, she was the enemy” (197). Beran points out that in Portia’s vision at the end of the story, Canada could be seen as the sinking Titanic where passengers are unaware of the lot that has befallen them. Beran argues that this story and similar ones could be seen as manifestations of the native Canadians’ fear of the presence of strangers, non-natives and foreigners (70). As in *Moral Disorder*, axes exist in the imagination of a character whose territory is endangered. Although they are not used, they seem to suggest a possibility of confrontation with an enemy.

When the narrator’s gaze identifies the Indian as a potential source of threat, Atwood expects the reader to respond and take action against the intruder. In Beran’s words, the role that Atwood assigns readers is “responding with rage and then transcending it” (74). The wide range of sharp implements and the axe could be used against anyone who endangers the territory. The Indian does not know “it’s me.” Atwood invites a whole nation to take action against the intruder who has come “here,” where he does not belong and where he might be a threat to the peaceful community.

CONCLUSION

In its deep layers, *Moral Disorder* is about the importance of protecting one’s territory. Although it describes the life and experiences of a woman from her childhood to her middle age in the first person, these experiences are not specifically female experiences. Throughout her life, the narrator not only evades all ethical responsibility, but also destroys the lives of people and animals that she is supposed to take care of. Critics generally embrace a female character’s rejection or denial of the responsibilities and roles assigned to her because of her gender, but Nell goes far beyond rejecting gendered identity. She destroys people and animals who are related to her or are under her care. She destroys the life of her younger sister, and brings to complete ruin the life of the woman whose husband she stole, and kills, beheads, dismembers and eats farm animals that she reared and took care of. The frequent cruel practices in the novel hold significant meaning with the appearance of the Indian boy who Nell gazes at and places under her surveillance. The narrator writes from within a context where binary opposition abounds. The novel clearly distinguishes between

the here and there, the inside and the outside, the self and the other, and the civilized and the barbarian. The narrator defends her territory against anyone or anything that might threaten it. The cruelty towards animals and frequent references to sharp implements such as axes could be seen as a substitute for the cruelty that the novel suggests should be exercised on a stranger. A line is drawn to divide the civilized from the uncivilized, the here from there, and the insider from the outsider. The narrator writes from within the safe side of the line, controlling the situation, gazing at the others and destroying them if the circumstances necessitate it. The book advocates the garrison mentality that has been criticized for being white, supremacist and colonial.

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Narrative, Insecure Equilibrium and the Imperative to Understand: A Hermeneutics of Woundedness

ABSTRACT

Addressing trauma as a phenomenon which happens on the level of the human psyche and body, this article explores the impact of the interlocking nature of human lingual and bodily being in discovering a fuller possibility of interpreting and understanding woundedness. The non-transparent and problematic character of trauma calls for a hermeneutic investigation in order to gain a far-reaching insight into what happens *with* us and *in* us in traumatic experience(s). The imperative to understand the situation of affliction is an unending task which not only relies upon extant understandings but continually *pro-vokes* new ones. I argue that the process of healing, encompassing the spoken and bodily narrative, does not establish a secure equilibrium, but rather searches for self-restoring, healing energy and commences ever new understandings of what needs to be comprehended and healed. This article offers an examination of trauma as featured in three short stories by British authors: Rudyard Kipling, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, to exemplify the possibilities of literature to shed light on the intricate nature of traumatic experience. It interrogates the ways in which literature, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis meaningfully converge.

Keywords: hermeneutics, literary narrative, psychoanalysis, trauma, woundedness.

INTRODUCTION

Literature offers distinct possibilities for approaching and articulating what is inaccessible to straightforward understandings of confronting trauma. Cathy Caruth makes this claim exceptionally powerfully in “Literature and the Enactment of Memory,” the second chapter of her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.¹ Literary embodiments of trauma grant unusual access to the “listening” to trauma and the possibility of understanding. Attempting to evoke traumatic experiences, literature operates in the liminal spaces of narrative construction and the use of language. Literary texts inspire hermeneutic readings of traumatic event/s enacted on a metaphorical level. In its psychologically shattering nature, overwhelming pain, confusion and embarrassment, trauma cannot be fully rendered in either speech or memory, but because of this very limitation it calls for interpretation, explication and understanding. Hermeneutics of woundedness acknowledges the call for the interpretation of the apparently impenetrable realm of traumatic experience to unravel those senses which seem to escape facile explication and encourage us to go deeper into the intricacies of trauma. Hermeneutic investigation of human woundedness explores the way in which trauma affects a human being, how the self experiences his/her vulnerability and how it is reflected in that of another. In its preoccupation with a response to the vulnerability of the Other (*répondre à la vulnérabilité*), hermeneutics of woundedness recognizes conversation and touch as two vital tools in the healing process, inviting us to delve deeper into an understanding of our being-in-the-world as a lingual and bodily being. The fashion in which a literary narrative addresses trauma opens a path to comprehend that which cannot be stated overtly. In the narrative’s incongruities and displacements, the reader can better sense trauma’s stigmatizing and unresolved impact.²

It is commonly claimed that in post-traumatic syndrome the afflicted party remains mentally in the past. The state of latency and unintentional

¹ See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (26–58). Unexpectedly to readers’ expectations instead of analyzing a literary narrative, in chapter two of the book, Caruth explores the French film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* by Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras (1959). Offering a close reading of the storyline and dialogues, the author elaborates the narrative’s (screenplay’s) possibilities to grasp the otherwise unfeasible and unintelligible reality of trauma. The more specific explication of the role of literary narrative in understanding trauma can be found in “The Wound and the Voice” (Introduction) and “Addressing Life: The Literary Voice in the Theory of Trauma” (Afterword), where Caruth uses the example of Freud’s employment of Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Liberated* to interrogate trauma.

² Cf. e.g., Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*; Denborough, *Trauma: Narrative Responses to Traumatic Experience*; Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*.

retrospection are identified as crucial elements of traumatic experience, which can be defined accordingly as “response sometimes delayed to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations* 4). The impossibility of stepping out of the excruciating pain of the past creates a situation of permanent repetition of the back-and-forth paradigm in which moving forward in self-development is constricted by an inevitable and involuntary moving backward.³ The continuous reliving of the past is dictated by the search for a rational explanation of what happened. An attempt to understand often adopts the form of a narrative as to narrate means to symbolically relive the past in a different and more disclosive way. The wounded party seeks the reason for experiencing trauma in the hope of breaking through the unresolvable in the understanding of a hurting experience. Rationalizing, however, stumbles against its own constraints and the limited possibilities of unveiling the crux of the traumatic event prevail.

NARRATIVE AND THE VACILLATING CONTOURS OF HEALING

The hermeneutics of the wound places at its very center an assertion of a possibility to heal in a journey through a fictional narrative. Ancient Greek theatre serves as an illustration of the recreation of traumatic experience, in which the “happening as if” can spur a healing process:

The key to the releasement from the nightmare, which this elementary *muthos-mimesis* permitted, is the fact that it balanced the act of identification with a theatrical representation so that the pain, which could not be lived directly, could be re-lived by being re-presented “as if” it was happening again but this time from a certain distance (the “estrangement” being provided, however minimally, by the theatrical form and plot). (Kearney, *Imagination* 132)

Richard Kearney’s investigation of the self’s identification of trauma with that of the Other (which can be called a “mirror effect”) via the visual/auditory/scriptural medium is not only rooted in the findings of psychoanalytic theory and practice back to Freud and Jung, or Levi-Strauss’s anthropology of the myth (myth narratives both articulate trauma and

³ On the pattern of repetition, see e.g., Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (6–8).

are capable of triggering healing), but also resonates with contemporary psychiatric practice. A good example is Irving Yalom's insistence on collective experience as a prerequisite for the cure—the return to “we” rather than the solitary “I” as a possibility to sustain a healthy equilibrium.⁴

If literature sensitizes us to what can only be said indirectly and in ways which defy a typical way of comprehending life events, and if it is capable of evoking and *invoking* situations of healing, Rudyard Kipling's story, “The Gardener,” exemplifies well narrative's distinctive potential to disclose the meaning of human woundedness. Nesting a story of epiphany within a story of enigma, “The Gardener” thematizes the emotional disturbance caused by trauma and sketches mechanisms of repression. The story features the drama of a mother who lost her son in the wake of the Great War.⁵ The acute pain experienced by the protagonist, Helen, is amplified by the impossibility of disclosing the truth about her motherhood. Allegedly an aunt, she mothers the young man she mourns—the fruit of an illicit relationship. Tangled in an unending series of lies, now bereaved, she cannot fully mourn the loved one. The trauma of her loss is doubled by the past locked in her heart and the unfeasibility of confiding in others.

The partial release of the grip of the traumatic event comes through a reflection of Helen's trauma in that of another—a stranger who confesses her loss of a lover in the war and the love of whom she could not acknowledge. The conversation with another mourner—a mirror held up to Helen's experience—offers a unique possibility to regain equilibrium. This, however, is an insecure one as the truth about the past cannot be learned by those who surround her in daily life. As Dori Laub emphasizes: “The not telling of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life” (64). Possessed by an obsessive need to exorcise the ghost of the past, Helen succumbs to this invisible, psychic tyrant compelling her to remain fixed in what is already gone but never reconciled. The incessant, compulsory need to speak trauma away, to find an appropriate way of expressing it becomes a life task precluding healthy living long after traumatic event:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully

⁴ Cf. e.g., Yalom, *Understanding Group Psychotherapy*.

⁵ It is commonly acknowledged that the story alludes to Kipling's own drama of losing his beloved son in the war and the search for his body.

captured in thought, memory, and speech. The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations* 63).

The struggle to tell and the unfeasibility of doing so in Kipling's story continues until its closing lines which unexpectedly reveal the secret of Helen's life. The narrative ends with a conversation at the cemetery in which the enigmatic figure of a gardener reveals the truth about her motherhood:

"Who are you looking for?" "Lieutenant Michael Turrell—my nephew," said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life. The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown grass toward the naked black crosses. "Come with me," he said, "and I will show you where your son lies." (Kipling)⁶

However, the recognition of truth does not provide an unequivocal resolution as the story's denouement poses the question of who the gardener is.⁷ Its closing lines seem to allude to the Redeemer's unassuming presence and compassion towards those who mourn their loved ones (John 20:15).⁸ Recognizing in the gardener the resurrected Christ, some critics assert that Kipling's story hermeneutically includes the spiritual beyond—the possibility and efficacy of supernatural healing. Thematizing the trauma of mothers who lost their sons in the Great War, "The Gardener" takes an important place among literary works dealing with post-traumatic syndrome. A similar situation, involving the disinterestedness of the outer world and a mother's lonely struggle to deal with her trauma, is vividly captured in Siegfried Sassoon's poem "The Hero" (1917):

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
"The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
In the tired voice that quivered to a choke.
She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

⁶ All citations from the story are taken from Kipling, "The Gardener," <https://greatwar.nl/books/gardener/gardener.html>

⁷ For the manifold interpretative possibilities of the encounter between Helen and the enigmatic gardener, see e.g., Maunder (107).

⁸ See e.g., Einhaus (87–88).

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
 For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
 Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair.

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The mother in the poem exemplifies all mourning mothers "with white hair," living in the shadow of "gallant lies," which are spoken to them, and cherishing the story of their heroic sons. Just as it is in Kipling's story, trauma in the poem is depicted as an experience of unspeakable pain. It does occur beyond words—speech cannot render it.

Considering the extent and depth of its impact, traumatic experience can be viewed as a profound experience, a notion which Nicholas Davey introduces in his essay "Lived Experience. *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*" and defines in the following way: "Profound experience is never transparent. . . . Such experience withholds aspects of itself, is never amenable to fill conceptual determination" (328). To deploy the notion of *profound experience* in the hermeneutics of the wound seems to be well grounded as the term subsumes traumatic experiences in their radicality and disparagement of the assumptions of "normalcy." What happens in profound experience exceeds the "normal" level of expectation. The presumed lines of thinking and context do not apply, and the level of familiarity is low. Thus, making it comprehensible to the Other often means surpassing the unsurpassable. But what does it mean to surmount that which presents itself as a conceptual impossibility? Narrative can reflect a lived experience, but it is not done fully and unambiguously. Both the exigency and *aporia* of narrating our experiences stand at the very heart of existence as a human being: in our humanity. The need to speak and an impasse in conveying what we genuinely want to convey are central to profound experience.

The impossibility of narrating traumatic experience rests on its tightly folded nature, its apparent strangeness and oddity until the point when it becomes translatable to the experience of the Other, until it finds a legitimate place in the lived experience of the Other. However, there arises the question of translatability's efficacy. Elaborating on the notion

of profound experience Davey muses: “Learning from these experiences is not simply a matter of undergoing an intensity of experience but concerns dwelling in their content, drawing it out, patiently bringing to life what lives on within it which has yet to be lived out” (328). The living out of what lives within an experience, the patient bringing to life of what it contains, amounts to a hermeneutic stripping of the layers of meaning enfolded in a painful event or series of events. The expression “to dwell in its contents” seems to be very appropriately used in the context of a traumatic experience as it signifies a prolonged, and possibly exhaustive, look at the experience from a variety of perspectives. It pinpoints a gradual, hermeneutic unveiling of the content of trauma.

Profound experience is often a poignant one and its very core: “depends, then, upon a fusion of the inheritance of what has been lived and is now held in both memory and tradition, with the promise of what that inheritance anticipates as coming, the as-yet-to-be-lived potentials within inherited experience” (Davey 328). There is an interesting connection between experience, the memory of it and “the as-yet-to-be-lived potentials within inherited experience,” which indicates the possible constellations of what may occur as predicated on that which was. The interplay of the remembered and the anticipated, which Davey indicates, brings to the mind Gadamer’s fusion of horizons,⁹ understood here as the fusion of the past and the future with the present in the role of mediator.

THE CORPOREAL INSCRIPTION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CURE

An attempt to understand and explicate the nature of post-traumatic syndrome, the state of a mental discord and deep suffering, often comes through a recourse to bodily experience, especially when the traumatic experience leaves its mark upon the body. In the trauma caused by either mental or physical affliction, the human body is the site both of feeling pain and of the possibility of its release—the body remembers the wound and is the potential ground for the healing process. The healing practice recognizes the interrelationship between the verbal and the physical aspects of trauma and the positivity of healing through the body, specifically in situations in which working through trauma via the narrative delivered by the wounded person does not suffice.

⁹ For an explication of Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons see e.g., Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

D. H. Lawrence's story "The Blind Man" is an engaging interrogation into the intricacies of a healing process which involves two basic levels of communication: speech and physical contact. The narrative embodies the relationship between human beings when conversation is not enough to communicate, and this peculiar insufficiency provokes both a deeply felt dilemma and a dubious kind of fulfillment. Dramatizing the hope to elevate pain due to the presence of the Other, Lawrence's story encourages us to transcend the immediate and facile understandings of human pain. Importantly, this story like Kipling's, was written after World War I and addresses the trauma of the war. For this reason, the way in which it thematizes trauma strongly resonates with the specificity of post-war traumatic syndrome. Set in the aftermath of the Great War, the narrative features a triangle: Maurice, the titled blind man, a war veteran, his wife Isabel, and Bertie, her acquaintance from the pre-war time for whom she feels suppressed affection. Maurice's predicament—his blindness—gives birth to a totally new way of perceiving the world: "It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it and possess it in pure contact. He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him" (Lawrence). At the story's climax, which occurs in darkness in the farm's barn, Maurice asks Bertie to touch his scars. The intimate encounter between Maurice, whose life has been marked by the loss of his sight during the war, and Bertie, who has only a secondhand experience of war atrocities, does not merely dismantle the binary opposition of light and dark, lack and fulfillment, intuitive knowledge and rational perception; it also invites us to seek a deeper understanding of the motivation behind human intentions, choices, and deeds in a situation of pain.

Maurice goes through the process of healing via organic contact with the world of nature. Fully engaged in the farm work which brings about consolation and accords with the predominant traits of his personality—primitivity and simplicity—he develops an exceptionally strong, sensual perception of the world: the only consciousness of his seems to be bodily consciousness (Ragachewskaya 50). The most bizarre meeting between him and Bertie showcases a situation in which language's awkwardness and failure to express sadness and misery collides with the highest level of the exigency to genuinely self-express, and in which bodily sensations (the reactions felt in the wounded body) are the only form of knowing, communicating, understanding and, possibly, also of healing trauma on a deeper level.

Asking Bertie to touch the scars on his face, Maurice seems to plead with the Other to partake in his wounds, to experience indirectly the pain he had felt. The import of physical presence in healing cannot be overestimated.

The research on bodily interaction in today's theory and practice of therapy is evolving as an important rediscovery of the fundamental, primordial, and irreplaceable role of touch in therapeutic treatment. An acknowledgement of the importance of physical presence to the wounded party—"Not only to interpret, but to bear bodily witness. Not just to talk, but to receive and 'hold' the suffering" (Kearney, "Healing Touch" 3)—is viewed as central to recovery. In the story, the act of touching causes the distance between the two men to shrink. In an attempt to come to terms with his pain, Maurice subconsciously succumbs to the mechanism of transference of his ailment onto the Other. The healing process which is to happen not in words but through the body is quite a challenge, however.

Although the interpretation of the story offered here may seem to depart from the prevalent ones which acknowledge Lawrence's skepticism regarding the official forms of Christianity,¹⁰ it shows how a hermeneutic investigation, which embraces the less obvious and the marginalized, allows a new light to be shed on Lawrence's fictional imaginings and his attitude to religion. The story's climactic point alludes to the Biblical scene of St. Thomas touching Christ's wounds (John 20:24–29) masterfully depicted in Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c. 1601–02). Figuring a surprise on the face of the doubting disciple, Caravaggio's exceptionally striking portrayal of disbelief rests on the intimate closeness of Thomas's frowning forehead and Jesus's holding his hand and guiding it into the wound (García-Rivera 120–23). However, Lawrence complicates the resonance of the Biblical story as the experience of touch in the narrative is not only an acknowledgement of the Other's pain, in which the revelation of truth is confirmed and sealed; it is also a deep recognition of one's own vulnerability and despair. Maurice's gladness and satisfaction stand in sharp contrast to Bertie's discomfort and horror:

"Touch my eyes, will you?—touch my scar." Now Bertie quivered with revulsion. Yet he was under the power of the blind man, as if hypnotized. He lifted his hand, and laid the fingers on the scar, on the scarred eyes. . . . Then suddenly Maurice removed the hand of the other man from his brow, and stood holding it in his own. "Oh, my God" he said, "we shall know each other now, shan't we? We shall know each other now." (Lawrence)

St. Thomas's stupefaction resounds in Bertie's, although it takes on a different meaning. Touch here is nourishing for the wounded and disparaging for the apparent healer who becomes stigmatized. The scene also encourages us to detect sexual undercurrents in Bertie's bafflement and

¹⁰ See e.g., Wright (21–35).

embarrassment, noted already in the early criticism of the story. Analyzing Lawrence's sketching of male characters, Herbert J. Seligmann highlights that "[t]hey remain virgin in iron constraint which prevents their finding ever again a love to replace the mother love they despair of. Such is the charming, graceful and cultivated Bertie Reid, whom the friendly, loving touch profoundly shocks" (7). Importantly, this story and other fictions by Lawrence focus on the representations of the male body rather than female, which is suggestive, as critics highlight, of the author's aesthetic admiration of maleness and probably his personal, appreciative attitude towards his own male body.¹¹ The ambivalent and highly ambiguous nature of touch in "The Blind Man" welcomes a hermeneutic interrogation which encompasses multiple and diverse psychoanalytic interpretations.¹² Significantly, Bertie, the potential healer is also a wounded healer who suffers from "incurable weakness," which "made him unable ever to enter into close contact of any sort" (Lawrence). Lawrence describes Bertie as "nothing"—"At the centre he felt himself neuter, nothing," which is evocative of the character's traumatic past. Undeniably, Bertie's fear of physical contact gives a new resonance to the role of touch in the story. Possibly, his predicament can be interpreted as denied homosexuality and the final touching in the narrative as the act of acknowledging and sealing of the rather discomforting or unapproved of proclivity (especially when one takes into account the time when the story was published).

The request for touch in the story strikes a sinister chord which disconcerts the affirmative aspect of human embodiment. There is something uncanny about the need to transgress the barrier separating the self from the Other and in the self's abandonment of the comfort zone in terms of physical closeness: "The experience of touching implicates that we are always both, touching the other and being touched by the other" (Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* 18).¹³ When persuasively, or almost forcefully asked to be acted out, touch deeply affects the surrendering party and becomes a painful experience. Does Maurice perversely (is his second name, Pervin, a signal?) ask for the touch to intentionally afflict the Other, or is his request a desperate call for understanding and approval? The possible answers multiply, and the query remains unresolved.

The narrative not only echoes and vitiates the healing message evoked in the touch after Christ's resurrection, but, in a similar vein, alludes to, follows and subverts the Biblical stories of healings which involve touch, with the

¹¹ Cf. e.g., Cowan (63–65). See also Becket (64–65) and Schultze (85–88).

¹² Cf. e.g., Schapiro (61–67). Schapiro emphasizes "[t]he failure of mutual recognition and the collapse of intersubjectivity into erotic domination and submission" (61). See also Ragachewskaya (79–84).

¹³ Cf. Freud (217–56).

episode of Christ healing a blind man at Bethsaida as the most significant (Mark 8:22–26).¹⁴ The indissoluble oneness of healing and touch in the Gospel (other than relating to the sense of sight, although inspiring us to search for the affinities between acts of healing in the Bible and Lawrence’s story) is vividly depicted, for instance, in the story of a woman suffering from hemorrhage for twelve years. The healing occurs when she touches Christ’s garments (Mark 5:25–34). Biblical intertexts abound in Lawrence’s narrative. Its rich symbolic meaning can be traced back to the Old Testament story of Jacob cheating Esau out of Isaac’s blessing (Genesis 27:1–29). Hearing the voice of Jacob, the blind Isaac doubts Esau’s identity but he gives his blessing on account of recognizing the first born by touch. As in the

[s]criptural narrative, the only mode of knowing and recognizing in “The Blind Man” is touch. The trajectory of the healing process leads meaningfully through a course of recognition. To recognize and to be recognized is shown as indispensable in the “I” and “Thou” relationship thought to be the basis for healing and believed to bring about an equilibrium, which, however, is not a stable one as the pattern of domination and submission forces its way into the apparent regaining of mental and bodily integrity. (Shapiro 67)

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In “The Blind Man” touching is both a cure and an incident of a lack of tact. Playing on the etymological meaning of tact (the Latin root word “tangere” means “touch”),¹⁵ the narrative poses questions rather than solves the enigma of touch (the word also connotes negative meanings).¹⁶ The inexplicable nature of what happened during the war compels Maurice to strive to search for a new possibility of understanding. However, this also generates the need to have his trauma witnessed, and since he stumbles against the impossibility of that, in an act of despair he engages the other human being to assume the role of a witness, to give testimony to what is beyond understanding, and whose unfathomable nature puts him in an unending circle of the need to explain. As Laub emphasizes, trauma’s “incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure . . . precludes

¹⁴ The Old Testament’s innumerable evocations of blindness (Genesis, Isaiah, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Samuel, to mention just a few books containing references to blindness) indicate both spiritual and physical darkness which recurs in the deep reaching messages in the portrayal of recovery from blindness in the Gospel: blind Bartimaeus regaining sight (Mark 10:46–52), a blind beggar (Luke 18:35), the healing of two blind men (Matthew 20:30).

¹⁵ See e.g., Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* (18); Kearney, *Imagination* (97–98).

¹⁶ Touch: “late 13 c. ‘make deliberate, physical contact with,’ from Old French *tochier* ‘to touch, hit, knock; mention, deal with’ (11 c., Modern French *toucher*), from Vulgar Latin *toccare* ‘to knock strike.’” (“Touch”).

its own witnessing, even by the victim” (65). To translate the event to the experience of the Other ends in failure—the unfeasibility of the task is deeply perplexing. The apparently unresolvable nature of trauma is emphasized in Levine’s and Frederick’s classic study thus:

Trauma occurs when an event creates an unresolved impact on an organism. Resolution is accomplished through working with this unresolved impact through the felt sense. Reliving the event in itself can be valuable, but too often it is not, traumatic symptoms sometimes mimic or recreate the event that caused them; however, healing requires an ability to get in touch with the process of the traumatic response. (128–29)

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Maurice’s formidable request is an expression of the one-of-a-kind yearning to recreate, to relive his trauma; however, as it is not approved of by the Other on the conscious level, genuine healing does not occur.

Maurice falls prey to the delusion of attaining understanding, of making the Other a witness to his trauma: “[W]e shall know each other now, shan’t we? We shall know each other now” (Lawrence). But Bertie does not confirm the validity of the anxious question and does not avow the need of the wounded party although he succumbs to the most unusual request. The knowledge which Maurice desperately seeks is the result of his quest to understand his trauma. Although the quiet life on a farm grants a possibility of establishing an equilibrium, the demon of the past needs to be exorcised, the traumatic event surfaces again in a time of seeming serenity and conciliation, and therefore calls for explanation. The unbearable loneliness of suffering prompts a request for an intimate contact in the hope of acknowledging the truth which is too painful to come to terms with: “Stories are very important, but they are not always sufficient. . . . Vital engagement with bodies sometimes seems necessary for more lasting healing to occur. It is not sufficient to recount one’s wounds, one also needs to touch and be touched” (Kearney, “Healing Touch” 13).

Emon Keshavarz notices that “The Blind Man” is saturated with the language of uncertainty, indecision, restlessness and vagueness—in short, it evokes a deadlock in conveying meaning and in understanding trauma. While Maurice dwells in physical darkness, his wife struggles in epistemological and linguistic darkness:

“Yes, I know. And yet—and yet—Maurice is right. There is something else, something *there*, which you never knew was there, and which you can’t express.” “What is there?” asked Bertie. “I don’t know—it’s awfully hard to define it—but something strong and immediate. There’s something strange in Maurice’s presence—indefinable—but I couldn’t do without it”. . . . “I’m afraid I don’t follow,” said Bertie. (Lawrence)

The unequivocal and multi-faceted senses of trauma, its reception by the Other, and the forced intimacy of healing in the story invite hermeneutic insights. A hermeneutic reading of Lawrence's narrative reveals that avowing the polyvalence of meanings, the hermeneutics of the wound does not provide ready answers, but rather, by investigating what is too overwhelming, it attempts to shed light on the most tangled and intimate aspects of the phenomenon of trauma.

EPIPHANY AND THE HEALING POWER OF CONVERSATION

The healing of traumatic experience, understood as profound experience, is often marked by some epiphanic moment which deconstructs the obviousness of what is and opens the possibility of understanding the reality of the self in a completely new way. The indispensability of epiphany in the healing process is effectively captured in James Joyce's short story "The Dead," which unlike the first two stories discussed here was published before the Great War and addresses a different problematic—it focuses on the evocation of sufferance caused by a lack of fulfillment in love. The theme of loss which binds the three stories analyzed in the present study takes on a different tone here. The loss is not that of the loved one in the wake of the war or the physical injury that occurs in warfare, but it is a bereavement acutely felt because of the death of the beloved and the painful feelings that arise from a mismatched emotional relationship. The story's narrative operates on many levels, the most engaging of which is the thematization of mourning and spectrality. It is no coincidence that the story's action opens on Twelfth Night, Epiphany Eve, commonly believed to be the night of ghosts' visitations, and features a spiritual recalling of a dead lover.¹⁷ The pivot of the story's action, a Christmas gathering, unveils the hidden desires and motivations of its participants;¹⁸ however, even more profoundly, it constitutes the background for a disclosure of an individual drama and the need to break through the silence of an unresolved inner conflict. The inimitable character of Joyce's story rests on the interplay of silence,

¹⁷ For the intricate connection between the Twelfth Night and a love story, see e.g., Shakespeare.

¹⁸ Cf. Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutics*. In his gloss on Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve*, Wierciński elaborates the significance of *conversation* understood as *conversion* and highlights "the importance of the intellectual debate for a surrender to the hegemony of pious sentimentality, the spiritual over the intellectual, and thus testifying to the discrepancy between the power of the intellect, which *di-vides* and the power of the spirit consolidating and bringing everyone and everything together" (*Existential Hermeneutics* 30–32).

conversation, epiphany and the ensuing transformation. The hermeneutic interpretation of the narrative involves a recognition of the dynamic of conversation which “is steered by the intermingling silences, epiphanies, and conversions. Inasmuch as silence breaks the continuum of the conversation in an unexpected fashion, so does epiphany with its essential prerequisite of suddenness destroy the division between the known and the unknown and contributes to the dynamism of conversation” (Holda 166).

The climax of “The Dead” treats us to a three-fold epiphany, if not more:¹⁹ the revelation of the past’s hidden truth, the unveiling of the intricacies of a spousal relationship, and a deeper understanding of reality in its truth and pretenses. After the Christmas party, the two leading characters, Gabriel and Gretta, his wife, retreat to a hotel room for the late night, but their departure is preceded by some incident; on leaving, Gabriel catches the sight of his wife transfixed by music—a song, “The Lass of Aughrim.” This seemingly trivial event spurs Gretta’s most tumultuous agitation. In the hotel room she suddenly pulls back the veil and reveals the youthful, romantic liaison she had with a boy named Michael, whom she believes to have died for her. Gretta’s confession prompts an epiphanic moment in which Gabriel acutely learns his unimportance despite being married to her. Traumatic in its character, Gabriel’s bitter epiphany—an event of recognition, the sudden understanding of the superficial reality of their relationship and his marginal and clownish position—becomes the space of the interpretation of the trauma of the Other.

Repressed for years, Gretta’s grief triggered by a song which reminds her of her girlish infatuation pours out in an uncontrollable narrative. The romantic but tragic story which lies dormant in her heart suddenly resurfaces. “The Dead” aptly embodies the element of latency which characterizes trauma and is well explicated by Levine and Frederick:

Symptoms can remain dormant, accumulating over years even decades. Then during a stressful period, or as the result of another incident, they can show up without warning. There may also be no indication of the original cause. Thus, a seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown, similar to one that might be caused by a single catastrophic event. (45)

Trauma is what remains when the event itself is no longer active in consciousness. Expressed in words for the first time, Gretta’s traumatic experience of the loss of a loved one becomes a cathartic narrative, followed by tears and fast falling asleep. Feeling himself to be an intruder

¹⁹ For more on epiphany in “The Dead,” see e.g., Orr (35–36) or Cixous (613–14).

on the mourning of the Other,²⁰ Gabriel listens to her story as a wounded healer, suffering from his painful discovery of the illusory nature of passion and love, and thus being negatively stigmatized. Playing the role of the analyst—Gabriel patiently asks Gretta (the apparent analysand) questions to help her unveil the content of the traumatic experience and release her trauma—he becomes the victimized party in this new constellation of affection and search for empathy.

The scene of Gretta's unexpected disclosure of her past is permeated with irony as the drama of memorializing her early fascination is juxtaposed with Gabriel's longing for his wife's response to the arousal of his desire. The incongruity of their longings produces a formidable effect. The absurdity of Gabriel's need for intimacy is amplified when he is unexpectedly compelled to partake in the recollection of the intimate bond between his wife and a man whom he at first assumes to be his rival. Gretta's emotional crisis gives rise to the third epiphany—Gabriel's deepened understanding of reality in its complexity, allurements and lost façade. This is a re-awakening to a transformed life (May 59), to being which includes and honors inner life, which allows one to remain in harmony with the mysticism of the universe and which does not delimit itself to external and petty things only. Surprisingly, while wounded himself, Gabriel faces the most demanding task of responding to Gretta's pain. Delicately caressing her hand and refraining from tactless words, he turns out to be an effective, wounded healer. As Kearney explains:

Wounded healers are those, in sum, who maintain such equilibrium in a subtle interplay of word and touch, narrativity and tactility, effect and affect. To have the "healing touch" means knowing when it is time to listen and when it is time to speak. When to draw close and when to draw back. When to hold and when to withhold. In the final analysis, it's a matter of tact. (*Imagination Now* 134)

Gabriel's healing touch betokens his tactful understanding of the trauma of the Other. The physical touch goes hand in hand with the spiritual one. The untouchable area of mourning is soothed and pacified by the appropriateness of bodily and mental touch.

²⁰ Analyzing a similar situation of confessing the love for a dead lover to a new partner in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Cathy Caruth draws attention to the manifold betrayal that pertains to the complex reality of the new relationship: "Telling the story of her love affair with the German, telling, specifically, the story of his death, is for the woman a betrayal of the loved one, a betrayal of the one who died, with the one who is alive and listens. What the woman mourns is not only an erotic betrayal, that is, but a betrayal precisely in the act of telling, in the very transmission of an understanding that erases the specificity of a death" (*Unclaimed Experience* 27).

Joyce explores trauma as a quandary in which the vacillating line between knowing and the not-knowing is its constitutive element. However, the discrepancy between knowledge and a lack of it is not just an epistemological issue, but an existential and ethical question which, if unresolved, bears on human conduct and has far-reaching consequences. The interplay of understanding and misunderstanding, concealment and unconcealment, which pertains to a traumatic experience calls for a hermeneutic interrogation, which allows for the location of otherwise undetectable areas of meaning of past experience, since it also acknowledges as legitimate those aspects of the narrated story which are evidently confusing or embarrassing.

The narration of trauma by a wounded party happens in a non-linear and often indirect way because the unveiling of truth causes pain and indicates vulnerability. Significantly, trauma involves a pattern of repetition examined by Freud.²¹ After Freud, Cathy Caruth effectively explores yet other constitutive element of traumatic experience which interlocks with the repetitive scheme—namely, latency:

The breach in the mind—the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not the direct perception of danger, that is, that constitutes the threat for the psyche, but the fact that the danger is recognized as such one moment too late. (“Trauma, Silence, Survival” 50)

Necessitating repetition in the form of a return to the wound, in its orientation toward a potential reopening of the past experience, paradoxically, trauma engenders an impasse in understanding. Trauma can be understood thus as the state of remaining silent about the harmful past until silence is broken and the scraps of memories are brought together to form a more coherent whole.

CONCLUSION

Hermeneutics of the wound interrogates the ways in which a human being is affected by trauma, how it dislodges vulnerability and how the vulnerability of the wounded party is reflected in that of another.

²¹ Richard Kearney investigates the fort/da paradigm in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory indicating that for the Vienna thinker the basic issue was to explore “how are humans so wounded that they prefer to return to their pain compulsively than follow their normal ‘pleasure principle’? His answer was the existence of a death drive (*thanatos*) that accompanies our life drive (*eros*) and sometimes overwhelms it” (“Healing Touch” 2).

Recognizing conversation and touch as two vital tools in a healing process, hermeneutic investigation of trauma sensitizes us to the human's being-in-the-world as a lingual and bodily being. It encourages us to take full cognizance of language as a vehicle of interpreting, explaining and understanding trauma. On the one hand, speaking trauma away in conversation brings us to a deeper and far more comprehensive grasp of it; on the other hand, though, it does not generate a possibility of complete understanding and healing. The undecidable, the uncertain and the vague pertain to the very character of a therapeutic conversation.

Assuming the elusive nature of language, the healing process makes use of the fissures, hesitations and repetitions in speech as they are the very territory in which the potential for a cure, and, thus, psychic equilibrium can be found. The state of balance which ensues as the result of therapy is not something stable, though. It is not achieved once and for ever in a solidified form; rather it is a hermeneutic space of dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the threatening and the hopeful, the challenging and the consoling. Even if the wound heals, the scar remains, as healing does not restore precisely what had been before. The processual nature of healing presupposes a reconciliation with the true self, which is not only (re)discovered but reborn. Reading *from* the speech of the wounded party, hermeneutics of the wound reads also *from* the afflicted body. Human bodily being is the locus of the physical and psychical sides of trauma. The inclusion of the human body as the terrain of interpretation and understanding trauma gives a fuller account of human vulnerability and directs attention to possible ways of healing.²² Just like the spoken narrative, the human body tells the story of the wound and is the site of a possible cure.

The short stories examined in the present study reveal some fundamental truths about trauma and the healing process, but also unveil those regions of meaning which are specifically disclosable via the indirectness pertaining to narrative. Trauma is a multi-faceted phenomenon and healing is not something which can be easily completed. Rather it is a process which does not always end satisfactorily but is open to new possibilities of surmounting human pain. Kipling, Lawrence and Joyce explore both language's possibilities and its insufficiencies (the powerlessness which remains deeply interwoven with the finite nature of human existence)²³ to

²² See e.g., Kearney and Treanor (editors), *Carnal Hermeneutics*—a cumulative comprehension of a variety of meanings which ensue from the human carnal embodiment. presented by diverse scholars.

²³ For the power and powerlessness of language to convey all that pertains to a human being's being-in-the-world cf. Gadamer (9–17). See also e.g., Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutica* (76–79).

account for trauma. The non-transparent nature of traumatic experience calls to hermeneutically employ the power of language in a healing process in the patient movement from *re*-pression to *ex*-pression, but also to deploy bodily contact to investigate that which is behind verbal expression. The renewed access and reevaluation of the self on the verbal and non-verbal level not only indicate the indissoluble oneness of body and soul but the true possibilities of healing recognized by carnal hermeneutics. The language of trauma in its very essence is the language of unfathomability. The acuteness of traumatic experience rests on its inalienable character. In many ways the survivor's post-traumatic stress is the effect of the difficulty of the traumatic event, in its enfolded character, being understood by the Other. Nevertheless, as the analyzed stories reveal, the possibility of recovery comes in the reconnection of the wounded party with his/her true self, which often occurs in the passage from disintegration to an integration of the reality of the self with that of another and of the outer world.

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Tragic Victims of Mania a Potu ("Madness from Drink"): A Study of Literary Nineteenth-Century Female Drunkards

ABSTRACT

Temperance literature, though widely popular in America and Britain between 1830–80, lost its allure in the decades that followed. In spite of its didactic and moralistic nature, the public eagerly consumed temperance novels, thus reciprocating contemporaneous writers' efforts to promote social ideals and mend social ills. The main aim of this paper is to redress the critical neglect that the temperance prose written by women about women has endured by looking at three literary works—two novellas and one confessional novelette—written by mid-nineteenth-century American female writers. These works serve as a prism through which the authors present generally "tabooed" afflictions such as inebriation among high-class women and society's role in perpetuating such behaviors. The essay examines the conflicting forces underlying such representations and offers an inquiry into the restrictive and hostile social climate in mid-nineteenth-century America and the lack of medical attention given to alcohol addicts as the possible causes that might have prompted women's dangerous behaviors, including inebriation. This paper also demonstrates the cautious approach that nineteenth-century female writers had to take when dealing with prevalent social ills, such as bigotry, hypocrisy and disdain directed at female drunkards. It shows how these writers, often sneered at or belittled by critics and editors, had to maneuver very carefully between the contending forces of openly critiquing social mores, on the one hand, and not being censored, on the other.

Keywords: female inebriation, temperance, social antagonism, patriarchy, sensational prose.

Temperance literature was a popular literary genre in the mid-nineteenth century; thousand of novels, short stories and confessions of reformed drunkards pertaining to this genre were published mainly in Britain and in America. Many temperance tales depict male drunkards, who after a long period of suffering and brutality, due to excessive drinking, manage to discipline themselves to stop drinking. Some of them joined temperance movements and started preaching against inebriation; others published confessions or autobiographical stories aimed at disseminating temperance propaganda.¹ Temperance tales depict women as either silent victims of intemperate husbands, or as responsible for not warding off the latter's drinking problems. Female inebriation was rarely discussed publicly, in spite of the fact that female consumption of alcohol and narcotics tripled between 1780 and 1820. According to William White, there was "an increase in other psychoactive drug use in the decades that followed. The latter was influenced by the lack of medicinal alternatives to narcotics, and by a patent medicine industry that aggressively promoted alcohol, opiate, cocaine, and chloral-laced products for women's 'troubles'" (52). Some patients, who consumed alcohol for medicinal needs, eventually became addicts.²

In spite of its popularity from the 1830s till the 1880s, the temperance genre has lost its appeal with contemporary critics, some of whom have considered temperance writings as overly sentimental and at times sensational.³ Probably, the best-known novels dealing with destructive inebriation and intemperance are Walt Whitman's *Franklin Evans* (1842), T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There* (1854) and Lyman Beecher's *Six Sermons on Intemperance* (1846), referred to by Sue Vice as temperance "Ur-Texts" (700).⁴

¹ According to James D. Hart, more than twelve percent of the novels published in America during the 1830s dealt with temperance, and their circulation was quite extensive (108).

² As early as 1726 the Royal College of Physicians of London warned about the harmful effects of gin consumption. Gin became a very popular cure and was used as a universal panacea. The petition states that gin is "not fit for business" and "too often the cause of weak, feeble, and distempered children, who must be, instead of an advantage and strength, a charge to their country" (*Annals* n.pag.).

³ Leslie Fiedler, for example, ridicules the genre, saying that "the abused woman, beaten or neglected by the drunken bully, has become so standard a fixture in the sentimental melodrama of life in America . . . that we can scarcely believe it to have been invented at any given moment" (263).

⁴ David S. Reynolds's and Debra J. Rosenthal's seminal collection of articles *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature* and Scott C. Martin's "'A Star That Gathers Lustre from the Gloom of Night': Wives, Marriage, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth-Century American Temperance Reform" are among few literary critical works dealing extensively with the temperance novel. Reynolds classifies temperance

According to Ruth Bordin, although more than seventy-five percent of temperance literature was written by female writers (48), very few critical studies have been devoted to the latter's writings, and no major study has been dedicated to female temperance prose, featuring female drunkards as the works' main protagonists.

The aim of this paper is to redress this critical neglect by looking at three literary pieces—two novellas and one confessional novelette—written by mid-nineteenth-century American female writers. I intend to show that besides complying with the extended temperance campaign, or riding on the wave of the growing popularity of didactic, moralistic and reform threads, widely circulating in mid-nineteenth-century literature, these works shed light on the “tabooed” phenomenon of inebriation among high-class women.⁵ The paper explores the conflicting forces underlying such representations, since, on the one hand, it seems that when dealing with female addiction to alcohol, the female authors of the works in question demonstrate genuine empathy towards their protagonists' struggle, but on the other hand, as I will show, there seems to be a sense of silencing the victims or marginalizing their tragic predicament. Finally, the paper examines whether the restrictive and hostile social climate and the lack of mental or medical treatments available to alcohol addicts instigated and perpetuated women's dangerous behaviors, including drunkenness.

Very few nineteenth-century female writers addressed the topic of female inebriation in their fiction. Rebekah Hyneman's⁶ novella *Leaves of the Upas Tree: A Story for Every Household* (1854–55), Caroline Lee

literature as being related to four main types: conventional, ironic, transcendental and dark (“Black Cats” 22–59). Though such a categorization may be viewed as somehow rigid, it helps us understand the volume and diversity of temperance literature. Streeby neatly differentiates between sentimental and sensational literature. For her, “sentimentalism generally emphasizes refinement and transcendence, whereas sensationalism emphasizes materiality and corporeality, even or especially to the point of thrilling or horrifying readers” (31).

⁵ Jozef Pecina notes that while early temperance novels, written in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, employ a moralistic and didactic style, the next few decades feature much more sensational literature that emphasizes vice, murder and violence, resulting from excessive drinking, and aimed at shocking the readers (Pecina 113–14).

⁶ Rebekah Hyneman was born in Pennsylvania in 1812 to Abraham Gumpertz, a Jewish-German storekeeper, and a Christian mother. She converted to Judaism in 1845. Her prose and fiction mostly depict Jewish protagonists. Hyneman's best known work is the poetry collection, *The Leper and Other Poems* (1853). In *Re-Dressing Miriam: 19th Century Artistic Jewish Women* (2012) and in “Rebekah Hyneman's *Leaves of the Upas Tree: A Tale of (In)Temperance and (Im)Mortality*” (2020) I analyzed at length Hyneman's less known literary works, which include short stories, novellas and several novels, and are mainly serialized in *The Masonic Mirror and Keystone*.

Hentz's⁷ short novella "The Victim of Excitement" (1857) and Maria Lamas's⁸ confessional novelette, *The Glass: or, The Trials of Helen More: A Thrilling Temperance Tale* (1849) serve as telling cases in point of female temperance prose that demonstrates how dysfunctional American families operate as microcosms in the ailing American society. These works depict well-educated, wealthy, high-society young women who resort to heavy drinking, thereby destroying their familial bliss and causing the deaths of their children. Conversely, most temperance novels, written by men, portray either working-class country male drunkards, whose harsh working conditions and weakness of character drive them to debased addiction, or young men, who upon arriving to a big city, resort to drinking. Many fail to find employment, some feel extremely lonely while others fall victim to city temptations. The motivation behind female drunkards' retreat into excessive alcohol consumption, however, remains vague and is almost never elucidated. In order to redress this neglect, it is necessary to investigate how female writers depict female addicts.

The main plot of Hyneman's *Leaves of the Upas Tree* centers on the intemperance of the well-esteemed Judge Morton, an educated and distinguished man, the pillar of the local community. The respectful Judge is actually, though stealthily, a heavy drunkard and a gambler, who loses his estate and subsists on the measly teacher's salary of his obedient daughter, Ada, whom he in the meantime abuses both mentally and physically. The novella depicts several other intemperance sub-plots, the most interesting of which is probably that of Marion, a beautiful Scottish lady who upon marrying her second husband, an American gentleman, arrives in the small American town, Atherton, whose mayor is Judge Morton. The reader soon discovers that Marion, as a young mother in Scotland, in a fit of insanity, probably after drinking excessively, unintentionally dropped her baby into the sea, causing his instantaneous death. Marion, while in America, is seemingly happily married for the second time, and most likely is on the way

⁷ Caroline Lee Hentz (1800–56) was born in Massachusetts, but spent most of her adult life in the West and the South, living in Ohio, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina and Florida. She is best known for her novel *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) in which she confronts anti-slavery allegations within the nation and chiefly those found in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which she believed shattered national accord and threatened national unison. Although Hentz wrote more than a dozen novels and published plays and numerous short stories in well-reputed magazines, she is mostly remembered for her polemical pro-slavery novel that has caused later critics to discredit her literary oeuvre. Her other works have been almost totally disregarded, in spite of Hentz's popularity among mid-nineteenth-century readers.

⁸ There is no biographical information about Maria Lamas. It might have been the pen-name of a female writer who did not want to reveal her identity. I assume that using a pseudonym may explain the novella's subversive nature.

to abstinence. Nevertheless, shamed and shunned by the local community members, who discover what happened, and spread the details of her past, she starts drinking again, and in a relapse into insanity flees from home and drowns in a river. Marion suffers from constantly changing moods, either acting as a perfect hostess and gentile wife, or showing aggression towards the servants and Mr. Felton's mentally disabled son. Though the narrator does not explicitly say that Marion might have committed a suicide, she reports Mr. Felton's musings on how Marion was "braving the darkness of the night . . . battling with the river, sinking perhaps forever, or faint . . . and yet unable to make herself heard" (Hyneman chapter XXIII).⁹

Marion's tragedy is referred to by the narrator in a non-committal manner. The narrator neither judges nor accuses Marion of immoral and debased behavior, as the Atherton's sewing club ladies do. Nevertheless, no attempt is made to delve into Marion's troubled psyche or to empathize with her inability to withstand the sorrow and guilt which have haunted her ever since she lost her child. Intoxicated women are often criticized for encroaching upon "the very ideal of womanhood as passive, respectable, and virtuous" (Zedner 2). As a woman living and creating within patriarchal society, as a Jew and as an artist, at times scrutinized by both Gentile and Jewish readerships and critics, Hyneman is thrice "the Other." It is this triple "Otherness" that might have caused her to abstain from overtly siding with Marion, although dealing with female inebriation is quite a bold move in itself for a mid-nineteenth-century female American writer.¹⁰

On the whole, female inebriation is either completely silenced or equated with mental illness. Parsons remarks that "[e]veryone was well aware that there were female inebriates, but their stories simply did not work their way into public discourse to the extent that those of their male counterparts did"¹¹ (11). Thomas Trotter's medical treatise, *An Essay*

⁹ Ferris N. Pitts Jr. and George Winokur, among others, published numerous studies on the connection between affective disorder and alcoholism. "Affective disorder is a mental disorder characterized by dramatic changes or extremes of mood. Affective disorders may include manic (elevated, expansive, or irritable mood with hyperactivity, pressured speech, and inflated self-esteem) or depressive (dejected mood with disinterest in life, sleep disturbance, agitation, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt) episodes, and often combinations of the two" ("Affective disorder"). According to Pitts Jr. and Winokur, "alcoholism and affective disorder share a common cause of death-suicide . . . approximately seventy percent of deaths by suicide are of individuals with recognizable alcoholism or affective disorder" (37).

¹⁰ In the introduction to *The Leper and Other Poems* (1853), Hyneman's only book of poetry, she refers to it as an "unassuming little volume"; she confesses that she "trembles" and fears that the audience would scrutinize it, as she comes "before them unknown and unnamed" (iii).

¹¹ Catherine Gilbert Murdock in her study, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940*, though contends that the stereotypes of Victorian women

on *Drunkenness, and its Effects on the Human Body*, published in 1804, is the earliest study by a British physician which classifies drunkenness as a disease. He asserts: “I consider drunkenness, strictly speaking to be a disease; produced by a remote cause, and giving birth to actions and movements in the living body, that disorder the functions of health” (Trotter 8).¹² I have argued elsewhere that Marion’s nervous feat may be the result of misdiagnosed postpartum depression, suggesting that

Marion’s emotional difficulties emerged right after giving birth. It was then that she went for the bottle, while suffering from severe mood changes and physical ailments, which led to her inexplicable escape from home with the baby in her lap. Typically, nineteenth-century doctors tended to blame women’s irrational behavior and physical and mental ailments on hysteria. . . . Nonetheless, almost no medical consideration was given to possible postpartum depression as a potential cause to a woman’s mental instability after giving birth. (“*Leaves*” 56)

According to Michael W. O’Hara and Katherine L. Wisner, “perinatal mental illness refers to psychiatric disorders that are prevalent during pregnancy and as long as one year after delivery” (4). It is possible that Marion was a victim of an undiagnosed perinatal disorder. Nevertheless, neither Marion’s doctor, nor her husband, shows sympathy or understanding. To silence the gossiping servants, the doctor spreads a rumor that Marion was bitten by a mad dog, and hence needs to consume alcohol as a medical cure. Regrettably, many women became addicted to alcohol and narcotics which were needlessly and irresponsibly prescribed by doctors as a treatment for nervousness or hysteria.¹³ Similarly to the doctor, Mr. Felton, Marion’s

as “abstemious” have caused many critics to presume that most upper-class women did not drink. She challenges this idea with evidence from table-setting guides, etiquette manuals and cookbooks, all of which show that alcohol was an essential part of hospitality in the nineteenth-century home (Gilbert Murdock 88).

¹² Several other contemporaneous medical researchers describe the straightforward connection between drunkenness and mental disease. Robert Macnish in *The Anatomy of Drunkenness* (1832) maintains that “[m]adness—this terrible infliction often proceeds from drunkenness . . . drunkenness, according to the reports of Bethlehem Hospital, and other similar institutions for the insane, is one of the most common causes of lunacy . . . one-half owe their madness to drinking” (156–57). James Cowles Prichard in his *Treatise on Insanity* (1835) claims that “amongst physical causes of madness, one of the most frequent is the immoderate use of intoxicating liquors. . . . It has been repeatedly observed that a large proportion of the cases admitted into pauper lunatic asylums arise from this cause” (204).

¹³ An anonymous article published on 6 November 1830 in the journal *Medicus* stated that “in many cases the habits of drinking may be traced to a needless medicinal use of strong liquors; among these might be classed perhaps a majority of the female tipplers, as with the gentle sex, custom or fashion does not authorize the habitual practice of intemperance” (“Communications” 14).

husband, is so concerned with his public image—being “so delicately sensitive on all subjects connected with himself, so super-refined in his ideas concerning women, to be made a theme for idle gossip . . . and the very writhings of his heart commented on by his inferiors, to a nature like his, the thought was misery” (Hyneman chapter XXIII)—that he cannot feel any compassion toward his ailing wife. For him, Marion’s inebriation is equated with just another unbearable flaw that a woman can fall victim to, namely, being “a Woman’s Rights’ advocate” (chapter XV). Both behaviors threaten the established patriarchal edict and prevalent social order. Mr. Felton’s “beautiful prize,” Marion (chapter XV), becomes “damaged goods” once she starts drinking excessively. The husband is well aware of her nervous breakdown. Hence, he supervises every move Marion makes, and sends servants to spy on her, saying, “Marion, . . . you know me; I never change. Where you are, is my place; rest assured of that” (chapter XVI). According to Rachel Ryder, “the idealized femininity was presented through the control evident in [a woman’s] body, character and social conditions. Conversely, the transgressive femininity was presented through a lack of control, abandonment of character, loss of attractiveness and the depravity of her social conditions” (14).

Hyneman, while trying not to explicitly side with Marion’s anguish, harshly criticizes Atherton’s rotten, merciless and corrupted society, a society which apparently supports the temperance mission and even establishes a temperance club. She neither spares her disapproval of Mr. Felton’s conduct when his hypocrisy, snobbery and ostentatious behavior are clearly condemned. Criticizing the “oppressors,” but not fully sympathizing with the victim, creates an interesting moment of tension which can be explained, as mentioned before, by Hyneman’s careful attempt to navigate through the various contradictory claims made by the domineering patriarchal authorities and by social or religious mores. Drunkenness, besides its association with mental conditions, was closely linked to sinful and morally-debased conduct. Openly siding with a drunkard may have jeopardized Hyneman’s reputation as a writer. Hence, Hyneman, like some of her contemporaneous female writers, was sometimes obliged to compromise her art; time and again she had to yield to public taste, and quite frequently she had no choice but to comply with the Victorian mindset that encouraged female domesticity and restricted artistic freedom.

Ironically, although many women actively participated in various temperance societies, and, according to Tyrell, “women were deeply involved in temperance agitation from the time of the American Temperance Society crusade (1826–36)” (131), their plight was mostly directed at eliminating liquor sales and alcohol consumption, and inflicting sanctions on drunk violent fathers and husbands. Their quest did not include the treatment of

female drunkards. Lewis Shiman explains how female temperance activists' "functions were what current society accepted as purely female activities: teas, bazaars, children's work and so on. In none of the major temperance organizations did women have important policy-making roles" (182).¹⁴ Bordin maintains that though female activists went against the abuses of the patriarchal method, they did not attack patriarchy itself (9).

Inebriation among women, and especially among high-strata women, was a taboo. Female participation in Temperance Societies in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s neither advanced women's rights nor promoted equality between the sexes. According to Berkley Fletcher, though women joined the American Temperance Societies in great numbers and signed the oaths, they were mainly given supportive positions in the movement's antebellum stage; the movement principally "addressed the needs of male identity and authority" (21).

The close association between temperance, church missionary and benevolent activities placed women within conventional, domestic and morally upright terrain. This may explain why Hyneman and Hentz, though depicting female drunkards in their fiction, which may already be regarded as quite a bold move, "play it safe" when referring to the symptoms, rather than tackling the root causes of the problem. Mental disorders, abuse, post-partum depression or other possible causes of a victim's addiction are never discussed. According to Reynolds and Rosenthal, nineteenth-century society viewed "inebriation as a sign of moral weakness and the drinker as a subject of moral defect" (3–4). Hence, instead of showing compassion towards the sufferers, the victim, male or female alike, is viewed as "defective" or morally flawed (a sinner) and thus should be either reformed or eliminated. Parsons asserts that while male drunkards

¹⁴ It should be noted that in spite of the emphasis women's Temperance Societies put on female moral abstemiousness, domesticity and "true womanhood," "it was from the women's Temperance Societies of the 1850s and from the Good Templars that many Midwestern suffrage leaders of the 1860s and 1870s came" (Tyrrell 151). WCTU (Woman's Christian Temperance Union), for example, was organized in 1873 in Ohio with the aim of creating a "sober and pure world" by temperance, purity and evangelical Christianity. According to Bordin, in addition to temperance activities, the WCTU members (all women) worked for prison reform, founded day nurseries and kindergartens, lodging houses for inebriate and "fallen" women and shelters for homeless men, hence promoting not just temperance causes but empowering low-class women (Bordin XVI). Several decades later, however, the WCTU gained more clout when embracing suffrage as a way to put their reforms to practice. "In 1873 and 1874, tens of thousands of women in nearly a thousand towns in 31 states marched on saloons and liquor outlets and voted with their feet to shut them down. The uprisings were collectively known as the Women's Crusade, and they led to the formation of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which eventually became both the largest women's organization as well as the largest temperance organization after the Civil War" (Harding 1292).

were granted some sympathy, the discussion of female drunkards unfolded differently and “with much less sympathy”; for instance, women drunkards were framed as completely “beyond the pale” of seduction (119).

Marion, a dysfunctional mother and a wife who shames her husband, has no reason to exist, as she failed to reform; she must die in order to repair the family’s damaged reputation. The same fate awaits Anne (Weston) Manly, the beautiful, educated and distinguished protagonist of Caroline Lee Hentz’s short novella “The Victim of Excitement.” The novella starts with a very lengthy and unusual introduction:

Intemperance is a vice which is generally considered of the masculine sex. In the pictured scenes of the ravages it has wrought woman is seldom introduced but as the patient victim of brutality, or as the admonishing angel of transgressing man. There are instances on record, however, of a sad reverse. Not alone in the lower classes of life, amid the dregs of society, but in higher walks, where intelligence, wit, beauty, and wealth, virgin worth, wedded love, and Christian grace, are all cast as unvalued offerings at the beastly shrine of intemperance. One of these fatal examples (of which, to the honor of our sex be it said, there are so few) once came under the observation of the writer. (Hentz 40)

The writer comments that women’s drunkenness is a dishonor to the female sex. Moreover, it is an indication of depravity, immorality and irrationality, a disgrace to familial respectability, and a major threat to society. A woman who drinks violates the code of moderation, a vital feminine trait. She loses femininity and womanly poise and becomes unattractive and disorderly. Moreover, she often becomes a dysfunctional mother and wife.

Mr. Manly is a prominent lawyer and “a very proud man . . . [who] had the air of one who felt himself too superior to the multitude to mingle in the general amusement” (40). He does not believe in love, maintaining that women are “vain, flimsy, garrulous, and superficial beings who win the smiles, and fix the attention of the many” (41). Eventually, he falls madly in love with Anne Weston, the belle of the town, admiring the “simplicity of her dress, its fitness and elegance . . . her voice [that] was singularly persuasive in its tones, . . . as the brilliancy of her mind, . . . the purity of her feelings and the goodness of her heart” (42–43). Obviously Manly does not know and cannot imagine that the virtuous Anne sometimes indulges in drinking, especially when she recalls the humiliation she experienced when a former follower left her to marry her best friend. When Anne recounts her tragic story to her best friend Emily, the latter, upon hearing the story, warns Anne against the destructive effects of inebriation. Emily, says the narrator, “felt that she had fulfilled her duty as a friend” (46). Nonetheless,

she shows no sign of genuine empathy or compassion to Anne's plight.¹⁵ Anne marries Manly, bears two children, and for the first five years marital bliss seemingly reigns in the Manlys' household. Then, probably haunted by past reminiscences, or depressed due to her taxing maternal, spousal and social responsibilities, Anne takes to the bottle again.

As a result, Manly, who cannot bear the shame, resigns from his prestigious post and moves the family to a remote town. He exerts domineering power over both Anne's body and her soul. She is constantly supervised to the point that the couple's new acquaintances, unaware of the former's past, accuse Manly of acting as a "domestic tyrant, and that his wife was the meek victim of this despotism. Some suggested that he had been convicted of crime, and had fled from the pursuit of justice, while his devoted wife refused to separate her destiny from his" (46). In the new town, Anne, for some time, abstains from drinking, but an unfortunate incident of tasting brandy (for cooking purposes), at the request of her cook, causes a disastrous relapse. Tragic consequences soon follow: Anne, drunk and unaware of her little daughter crawling to her bed, accidentally lets the toddler fall and get severely injured, which eventually leads to the child's death. Following the disaster, Anne's mental and physical health deteriorates and she dies in great agony. It is only at her deathbed that Manly shows slight signs of regret, but not true compassion. For him, Anne lost her worth, as her "features whose original beauty was so fearfully marred by the ravages of intemperance" (60), and a year later he marries Anne's best friend, Emily, a much less distinguished, but perfectly compliant and meek, woman. Anne, an intelligent, warm-hearted, talented, beautiful young woman, a devoted daughter and a genial friend, fails to reform. Trained to please her father and husband and comply with social demands, Anne takes the blame first for her thoughts, and later, for her actions, merely on herself.¹⁶ The night before her wedding she confesses that

the very qualities that won my admiration, and determined me to fix his regard, now cause me to tremble. I have been too much accustomed to self-indulgence, to bear restraint, and should it ever be imposed by a master's hand, my rebellious spirit would break the bonds of duty, and

¹⁵ Emily's reaction is quite surprising, if not disappointing, since in Smith-Rosenberg's 1975 seminal study on female friendship, she remarks that "deeply felt, same-sex friendships were casually accepted in American society. Indeed, from at least the late eighteenth through the mid nineteenth-century, a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society" (1).

¹⁶ Several studies show a connection between self-blame and depression, and self-blame and alcoholism. For example, Nuwan Jayawickreme et al. contend that "interpersonal consequences of AD (alcohol dependence) are significantly related to self-blame in women" (13).

assert its independence. I fear I am not formed to be a happy wife, or to constitute the happiness of a husband. (44)

Paradoxically, Anne, who since childhood has been disciplined to be submissive and to gratify her father's and friends' wishes, accuses herself of being egoistic and self-indulgent. A woman has no right to exercise free-will or any sort of autonomy without her "master's" consent. The title of the novella ironically emphasizes this grim predicament; Anne is "The Victim of Excitement" rather than a victim of the patriarchal and hypocritical nineteenth-century social order. Although alcohol was viewed as a stimulant, and a means of eliciting provisional excitement,¹⁷ its long-term consumption often led to addiction, which, in turn, may result in a mental condition, as mentioned before, and even to suicide.

Both Hyneman and Hentz view contemporaneous society as the chief culprit of women's degradation, but Hentz's message is harsher. Applying the tropes of what Rosenthal refers to as a "dark temperance" genre/sub-genre, Hentz describes in great detail the horrendous physical and psychological transformation Anne goes through, while Hyneman refrains from going into sensational and graphic details. From the psychological point of view, Anne's "[j]udgment—reason—at length, perception, vanished" (Hentz 52).

Physically, her condition is no better, as

the marks of intemperance, that, like the brand on the brow of Cain, single out its votaries from the rest of mankind, those revolting traces, were but too visible. . . . [She] saw the wild, haggard countenance. . . . The jewels with which she had profusely adorned herself, served but to mock the ravages the destroying scourge had made upon her beauty. (55, 56, 58)

She possesses "a wild and glassy stare" and her "original beauty was so fearfully marred by the ravages of intemperance" (60). The narrator equates Anne's misdemeanor to an unscrupulous murder. Anne is damned, a doomed sinner, like Cain; nevertheless, while Cain, though excluded from his kin, becomes a fugitive and is saved, Anne's sin is unpardonable in the eyes of her husband and society. A woman who transgresses social and familial conventions must face a tormented death. Paradoxically, the cause for Anne's transgression is tightly connected to society's expectations from and the roles it assigns to high-strata women, namely, actively participating in and hosting grand social balls and events, where wine, champagne and

¹⁷ In 1841, Walter Cooper Dendy, a medical doctor and researcher, wrote that "the effects of alcohol and opium are alike: the first degree is excitement; the second, reverie; the third, sleep, or stupor" (347).

women's cordial drinks were a must. The narrator casually remarks that before a large party of guests arrives, Anne "called for a glass of cordial, kindled up a smile of welcome, and descended to perform the honors of her household" (54). The woman's role is to entertain, to charm, to delight her guests and to serve alcohol. However, the thin line between socially accepted and disproportionate drinking is sometimes easily crossed. And, it is this fine line, which, when inadvertently transgressed, leads to a woman's downfall.

Maria Lamas's confessional novella, *The Glass: or, The Trials of Helen More: A Thrilling Temperance Tale*, published in 1849, is quite an exceptional work within the temperance genre. Lamas asserts that the tale is a factual story, told by a temperance reformer on her death bed, probably to justify some obscene and gruesome descriptions of the characters' physical and mental abuse and degradation. In this tale, a female protagonist, Helen More, tries to defy the conservative gender roles controlling women both in familial and social spheres. This attempt, bold and transgressive at the time, is doomed to fail, though the protagonist manages somehow, albeit for a short while, to shake the conventional social boundaries. Helen More, whose wealthy and strict father dies at an early age, is left to the care of an inebriated nurse who at the age of ten introduces Helen to alcohol. "I throve physically in spite of the neglect," says Helen, "but my moral culture, or rather luck of culture, implanted in my breast the seeds of a hundred foibles, which were to blossom and bear pernicious fruits in the after time" (Lamas 4). Helen's mother is a beautiful, high-society belle, who remarries soon after her husband's death and leads an active social life with her new husband, a cruel and abusive step-father and a drunkard. The neglected child is soon sent to a far-away boarding school, run by nuns, where her lively spirit and curiosity are subdued. After graduating from school and returning home, Helen, extremely beautiful, rich and haughty, viewed by many as "peculiar and piquant" (4), attracts hordes of distinguished suitors.

Continually ill-treated by a vicious step-father and neglected by a dysfunctional mother, Helen becomes a cynical and commanding young woman, a kind of "femme fatale," who takes revenge on her male admirers. She confesses that

any gentleman in my train should dare to disobey my commands or perform them with unwillingness, would have been a piece of presumption, to be rewarded by eternal banishment from the presence of Helen Moore. But no one seemed inclined to run so fearful a risk. My whims were attended to with the most profound respect, and I reigned the sole empress and an autocratice of a realm, whose population might be about two hundred fifty or thereabouts. (6)

Eventually, in an effort to assert domination, Helen, at one of the parties she organizes, convinces three non-drinking admirers—one of whom is her future husband—to drink until they become completely intoxicated. This move eventually leads to the future husband's financial and physical ruin. After several years of seemingly happy marital life, Helen's husband, a promising young lawyer, takes heavily to drink; this, in turn, leads Helen to drink behind closed doors. As a married woman, she depends financially on her husband, since once married, a woman's property is in the hands of the husband. Upon taking to the bottle, Helen's husband, Frederick, loses his clientele and prestige. Gradually, the couple loses their property and once Frederick leaves Helen after a row, she is financially ruined. From a feminist point of view,¹⁸ Helen's attempt to transgress male domination—forcing her husband to drink—is doomed to failure since her ostensible and short-term control does not empower her. The results of this transgression (a transgressive woman is considered one who ignores, rejects and/or declines the norms of nineteenth-century society) often lead to poverty, physical debilitation and loose moral behavior, which in turn, leads to aggression and vice. By ruining her husband, she wrecks herself. Helen cannot support herself financially, and though she tries to earn some money by doing various odd jobs, she never manages to stand on her feet. Rumors about her past destroy her chances of achieving financial and social independence. Deveaux rightly asserts that “women's ‘freedom’ does not simply refer to objective possibilities for maneuvering or resisting within a power dynamic but concerns whether a woman feels empowered in her specific context” (Deveaux 234).

This idea is perfectly in line with Barbara Leslie Epstein's criticism of temperance supporters. Like Helen, these female activists do not transgress male dominance. Because the WCTU put the family, and not women, at the heart of its ideology, it “assumed, rather than criticized, male dominance” (Epstein 133). In the same line, Parsons contends that most female members of Temperance Societies, after launching anti-drinking campaigns, attending protests and making rows at local saloons retreated to “sweet and docile” domesticity (153). Ironically, by marching into the public sphere, female temperance reformers, rather than gaining real power, aimed to restore the patriarch to his “pristine state” (Parsons 156).

Helen plays a dangerous game when pretending to be a “femme fatale,” who by transgressing the accepted boundaries (organizing wild drinking

¹⁸ For feminist criticism regarding female transgression, see Noble; Rubinow Gorsky; Gilbert and Gubar; and Avery. Virginia B. Morris notes in her book *Double Jeopardy* contends that “women guilty of . . . crime were at odds with the culturally nurtured image of acceptable womanly behavior, and they are punished as much for this as for the actual crime they commit” (9).

parties, flirting with young men, cajoling the latter to participate in drinking contests, etc.) destabilizes the established order. Her determination to defy patriarchal social norms does not give her the ability to define herself outside of women's restrictive roles. Slavoj Žižek, drawing on Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler, remarks on the concept of the "femme fatale," saying that "the threat of the *femme fatale* is thus a false one. . . . It is effectively a fantasmatic support of patriarchal domination, the figure of the enemy engendered by the patriarchal system itself" (14).

Similarly to Marion and Anne, Helen More, when completely inebriated and almost unconscious, loses her only child. While the death of Marion's and Anne's children, though undeniably tragic, occurred accidentally (the former drown and the latter fell from the mother's bed), Helen's son dies due to an unfortunate but deliberate move. Helen locks her son in a clothes cabinet as a punishment for misbehaving. She leaves the house to do some errands and buy drinks, and on returning home "was attacked with a fit of what . . . complaisant physicians called the brain fever, but what others have named mania a potu—the brain fever of drunkenness. . . . Thus I struggled between life and death, until at length skill triumphed and my life was saved" (Lamas 22). A few days after the incident takes place, when Helen finally recovers, she discovers that her child's dead body is locked in the cabinet. The description of the boy's dead body is graphic and extremely hard to digest. As is typical of sensational temperance literature, Lamas pushes the descriptions of cruelty and violence to the extreme. Upon opening the closet, Helen describes the terrible sight—"there bathed in his blood lay the mangled corpse of my child—murdered by his mother. There he lay, poor slaughtered innocent! Starved! Starved! His left arm gnawed to the bone—gnawed till the artery had been severed, and he had bled to death" (Lamas 22).

Helen herself is in a state of nightmarish phantasmagoria, imagining hellish scenes of hideous reptiles crawling over her body; the horrendous "toads crawled around and serpents slimed over . . . and every now and then there would come a scream, as of a child in mortal agony . . . what torments—what agonies of torment" (22). Indeed, Lamas insinuates that an inebriated woman is a degraded creature. Such sensationally graphic scenes are aimed at intensifying the readers' dismay at the savagery of intoxicated women. The drunken woman is a dreadful beast, as she violates the conventional responsibility of a woman to be an upright wife and a devoted mother.

In the article "Mania a Potu" (1874), Newington, a medical doctor and researcher, refers to the medical disorder named "Mania a Potu," characterized by delirium tremens and manic attacks. According to his description, the disease may lead to changes in the structure of the brain, dementia,

hallucinations and other severe syndromes, and in extreme cases, may result in a patient's death. Nevertheless, Newington, like most doctors of the time, does not address addiction as a condition stemming from psychological or mental difficulties. Instead, he asserts that the patients "always have minds that cannot concentrate themselves on the serious business; for them to work is hard; they must enjoy themselves; that they take the easiest and cheapest way of doing so; and that as drink can be got anywhere, they take a glass, and then begins the run" (Newington 495). Many contemporaneous physicians, instead of relying on scientific sources, were clearly affected by ideas propagated within popular culture *vis-à-vis* the conduct and appearance of drunkards. The sufferers are seen as guilty of irresponsible and hedonistic behavior, rather than as people in need of attention or support.

After losing her child, Helen is in total despair, suffering recurrently from delirium attacks. Without familial or communal care and empathy she leads a "mechanical" life "merely sufficient to satisfy animal wants" (Lamas 23). For some time, Helen, a proud, spoiled and wealthy woman, always served by numerous domestics, takes the initiative and operates some small business ventures; she then works for a bookseller, but eventually relapses to drinking. Penniless, she has nowhere to go, but to an Alms House. The lengthy descriptions of the physical and mental abuse of the inmates there are disturbing. The institution is no better than a prison. No medical or mental care is provided.¹⁹ The narrator provides multiple instances of the devastating effects of drinking on the lives of usually reputable people who reside there.

The Alms House is a vast Golgotha—a commonwealth of the dead—or what are those within its bounds but practicably dead? What vice, folly and suffering stagnates and festers within the walls. . . . A more perfect despotic could not exist than this confederation. . . . Degradation is the pedestal, sycophancy the shaft, and petty tyranny the capital of this column reared a monument to the vices, the errors, and the mischances of our social system. (25)

Helen does not hesitate to criticize the despotic, tyrannical and merciless nature of these "correctional" institutions whose aim is neither to ease the suffering of the patients nor to rehabilitate them; instead, the system's

¹⁹ It should be noted that the first medically-oriented inebriate asylum was opened in 1864. Four hundred of the first four thousand applications for admission were from women. The recognition of the special needs of the female inebriate quickly led to the opening of the first gender-specific treatment program, the "Martha Washington Home in Chicago" in 1869. Other specialized women's programs followed, including establishing the Temple Home in 1876 and the New England Home for Intemperate Women in 1879 (White 53).

goal is to oppress, subdue and silence the inmates. According to Foucault, society wishes to maintain order by silencing the mad (and the drunk), and thus uphold the construction of rationality, usually appropriated to men. The repression of the mad “operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence and an affirmation of nonexistence” (Foucault 4). Foucault’s inmates—subjugated, submissive, docile and powerless humans—are an emblem of medicalization gone wrong. Female inebriation is considered an even harsher offense than that of males. Since women are customarily regarded as the keepers of the familial unit, the misery of female drunkards evidently centers on their incapacity to perform motherly and wifely duties. Moreover, a woman’s sphere is her home; hence, drinking in public degrades and humiliates not just the individual but the whole community. Helen is eventually saved and released from the Alms House by one of her former suitors, the only one among the three who did not become a drunkard. He and his wife bring Helen to their house, where she is tenderly nurtured and taken care of. Nevertheless, there is no happy end here, since Helen, though saved from the ill-treatment and humiliation at the Alms House, is constantly haunted by horrifying images from the past:

A series of tableaux, so terrible, passes before me; and my sleep is filled with presences too vivid to be deemed phantoms . . . more dreadful than either of these—more heart-rending than all—is another scene. Heralded by the screams of a child, in extreme suffering the boy whom I have murdered comes before me—his little arms gnawed in the extremity of hunger—and his blood-bedabbled clothes telling of a mother’s crime! Woe! Woe! Unutterable woe! (Lamas 30)

CONCLUSION

The chief contention of temperance literature is that drunkenness brings about personal and societal devastation or, in some cases, leads to reform. Using various sub-genres, such as the confessional and “dark-temperance” (Lamas’s *The Glass: or, The Trials of Helen More: A Thrilling Temperance Tale*), the moralistic/sentimental (Hyneman’s *Leaves of the Upas Tree*), or the sensational/sentimental (Hentz’s “The Victim of Excitement”), and employing various rhetorical devices that epitomize the Victorian love of melancholic drama and encourage a strong emotional response, nineteenth-century women writers depict the destructive consequences of intemperance. Using these sub-genres and tropes (such as provocative scenes, losing one’s inheritance, neglecting social and familial duties, the fall of the capable young man/woman and the tragic death of the drunkard’s child, mainly characteristic of “dark-temperance novels” and confessions

in Lamas's case, or domestic fiction that depicts scenes of distress and emotional excess in Hentz's novella, or moral rhetoric devices aimed at promoting moral reformation in Hyneman's case) temperance writers aim to avert the social and communal turmoil that threatens middle and high-class codes and undermines social and economic stability. Reynolds rightly asserts that this literature "deemphasized the remedies for vice while probing the grisly, sometimes perverse results of vice, such as shattered homes, sadomasochistic violence, eroticism, nightmare visions, and the disillusioning collapse of romantic ideals" (*Beneath* 59).

Hentz, Hyneman and Lamas are not feminists in the modern sense of the word; therefore, their literature should not be considered according to the principles of radical feminism, or criticized for not challenging prevailing nineteenth-century gender roles. Nevertheless, exceptionally, Lamas's protagonist, Helen More, exhibits noncompliance with socially accepted norms which encourage women's total meekness and subordination.

Moreover, these writers' works endorse a social undertaking of pointing out society's immorality, hypocrisy and contempt toward dangerous behaviors, in Hentz's and Hyneman's case, and disregard of unspeakable atrocities, in Lamas's case. These writers' disillusionment with contemporaneous society's tainted morals is evident, but as female writers writing in mid-nineteenth century America, often marginalized or excluded from the literary canon, which is chiefly dominated by male publishers, editors and fellow-writers, they needed to navigate very cautiously between the competing pressures of manifestly scrutinizing the social order, on the one hand, and gaining a wide readership, on the other. Therefore, Hyneman and Hentz are careful not to overdo social critique. Lamas's tale is much more subversive, as Helen More tries, though unsuccessfully, to transgress the accepted social codes. These writers' contributions to the temperance genre are important in spite of the almost total neglect of their work. Their major achievement lies in successfully linking the major topic of temperance with contemporaneous cultural, social and political issues. Hence, temperance literature sheds light on wider concerns, while adhering to the restrictions imposed by accepted nineteenth-century literary conventions.

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LITERARY CONTINUITIES

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The Gospel of Divine Mercy in *King Lear*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses Shakespeare's preoccupation with the Christian notions of divine love, forgiveness and justice in *The Tragedy of King Lear*. In my reading I employ Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological reflection on the givenness of love and Hans-Urs von Balthasar's theology of Paschal mystery. I take issue with the Marxist and existentialist interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedy which prevailed in the second half of the 20th century. My aim is not a simple recuperation of the "redemptionism" of the play, but an in-depth consideration of Christian allusions in the play which may tie love and forgiveness to justice and throw light on the ending of *King Lear*.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, gift, mercy, forgiveness.

In memory of Professor Dorota Filipczak

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The reader's first encounter with the greatest Elizabethan playwright is usually connected with his treatment of revenge. One of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *Titus Andronicus*, is, perhaps, also the bloodiest tragedy he ever wrote. Schoolchildren get to know Shakespeare by reading the story of innocent love destroyed by family feud, *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's best-known work, *Hamlet*, includes all the elements found in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*: insidious crime, madness, revenge and a stage performance which serves the avenger's dark purpose. Some people, when they see Mel Gibson starring as the Danish Prince in Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation (1990), may be inclined to say: "At last, the right man for the task . . . the actor who played Mad Max should do the job better than Laurence Olivier." The enduring popularity of revenge stories reveals the adamant logic of evil, which a contemporary philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, has neatly described in the following way:

For evil, which appears to me only in its attack against me, calls for only one response—my own attack, intended to suppress it in return. Suppressing the cause of the evil, amounts, first of all, to pleading my cause against it. At the last, the desire for revenge responds to each evil. (2)

Because we all are only too well acquainted with the indisputable facticity of the pain inflicted on us by evil—the pain "short of all delusion," as Marion says—we are all potential avengers, and this is why we are inclined to take the avenger's side.

At the same time, however, careful readers of Shakespeare must quickly realize that over the course of his oeuvre the Bard strives to tell us something completely different from what is told by the authors of Roman, Elizabethan and Hollywood revenge stories. State violence and private revenge bring Titus's world to ruin; the families of the star-crossed lovers are reconciled in mourning over their deaths; and Hamlet is forced to learn that even Cain's crime cannot be avenged with impunity, for "whosoever slayeth Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over" (Gen. 4:15). In her contribution to a volume of essays published under the meaningful title *Love and Forgiveness for a More Just World* (2015), Regina Schwartz stated that "throughout the corpus of Shakespeare, revenge is suspect" (54). This argument was developed in her book *Loving Justice, Living Shakespeare* (2016), where she claims once again that Shakespeare not only warned his audiences against revenge, but pleaded for justice restored by love:

“Shakespeare’s plays not only condemn revenge, they endorse forgiveness. In Shakespeare . . . forgiveness is tied to the recognition or rediscovery of love” (113).

Perhaps the play which best exemplifies such an abundance of merciful love is *King Lear*. Schwartz surely captures the spirit of the play when she writes: “While the play is not set in a Christian context, the endorsement of the biblical tradition that elevates love to the highest good is unmistakable” (*Loving Justice* 47). This statement shows that the shift toward an emphasis on the metaphysical void and overwhelming despair in the interpretations of *King Lear* which occurred in the second half of the 20th century was neither final nor conclusive. Existentialist, sceptical and materialist readings may have suited the spirit of their time, but they certainly failed to do justice to Shakespeare’s text. This does not mean that we may now turn a blind eye to the severity of Lear’s predicament by simply recuperating the “redemptionist” interpretation of the play, but we should certainly take into account its Christian context, and address Shakespeare’s treatment of the chief paradox of Christianity, which is the scandal of the Cross. In this article, I aim to focus on Shakespeare’s portrayal of love, justice and forgiveness, drawing on theological reflection on the mystery of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS LOVE?

First and foremost, *King Lear* warns us against abuses of love. The first act of the play is structured around the contest designed by a king who does not know that devotion cannot be measured by public declarations and who forgets that true love does not boast, deal perversely, think evil or seek its own, and is not easily provoked to anger (1 Cor. 13:4–8). In the beginning of the play we also meet Gloucester, who unabashedly admits his preference for pleasure-seeking, adulterous love over marital constancy. In contradistinction to Lear’s and Gloucester’s false notions, Cordelia and the King of France point to a genuine understanding of love. Lear’s youngest daughter resolves to “love and be silent” (1.1.62), suggesting the priority of deed over words in love; her future husband formulates an important negative definition of love, highlighting its uncompromising totality; its categorical dismissal of all conditions or expectations; and its absolute demand to sacrifice everything that may turn the lover’s attention away from loving: “Love’s not love / When it is mingled with regards that stand / Aloof from the entire point” (1.1.241). True love should be unconditional, unqualified and unadulterated. It opposes everything which violates its purity or threatens its wholeness. The person who loves must

be perfectly honest before herself and others; must be committed to love itself and nothing else, not even to the object of her affection, so as to avoid idolatry. The same admonition against mingling pure substance with base additions resounds in the Fool's condemnation of preachers' empty verbosity and brewers' dishonesty, "when priests are more in word than matter / when brewers mar their malt with water" (3.2.81–82), which may allude to Goneril's and Regan's love contaminated with flattery and self-regard. This leads us, in turn, to the scene when Lear casts off his clothes as "lendings" which characterize "sophisticated," i.e. contaminated humanity (3.4.104). In human society, clothes make the man, as the proverb goes: the king, the priest, the artisan and the peasant are each recognized by their attire. But naked Edgar, whom Lear calls "the thing itself," shows the universal misery of the fallen human being as: "a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.105–106) in need of divine mercy. In the Bible, the just are not naked, but clothed in grace; they wear robes "washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). The adjective "forked," usually construed here as denoting a two-legged creature because of its similarity to a two-pronged fork, is also reminiscent of the serpent's "forked" tongue, and thus ties human material and spiritual destitution to the curse of Original Sin. Accordingly, the events in the play show the destructive influence of greed, avarice, pride and selfishness on the human understanding of love.

The Gospel contrasts human love with Christ's *logion* about the unconditional generosity and copiousness of divine charity:

Love your enemies . . . that you may be children of your father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? . . . Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matt. 5:43–48)

Yet instead of an obvious reference to the Gospel, Shakespeare offers a clue so discreet, so unobtrusive that it can easily be overlooked, but when it is acknowledged, his play overwhelms us with an intimation of immeasurable love. So *King Lear* portrays love which neither entails great passion, nor can be reduced to an abstract idea or moral imperative, but manifests itself in tenderness "whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (1.1.154–155). Once again, the reader may connect Kent's words with St. Paul's great Hymn to Love, where the apostle says that without charity he would be "sounding brasse or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1), but the connection is so subtle it must wait for our recognition to shape our perception of the play. Shakespeare's portrayal of the third daughter as the embodiment of love—her name, Cor-delia is suggestive of the ideal or perfect heart (Foakes

155)—may refer to the symbolic value of the number three, which in many cultures is associated with completeness, wholeness and harmony. This harmony is destroyed when the king banishes Cordelia and gives the coronet, which had been intended for her, to Albany and Cornwall, encouraging them to “part” it between them, and the two men simultaneously grasp at the diadem because they cannot divide it literally, which foreshadows the ensuing chaos in the kingdom. The play’s focus on the purity of love also explains Cordelia’s unyielding repudiation of her sisters’ conformism in act 1. Goneril and Regan flatter their father on his demand, and in accordance with courtly routine. But it is precisely in such compliance with the ways of the world that love cannot compromise. Taking into account Christian tradition, we may furthermore associate Shakespeare’s definition of love as the “entire point” and “the thing itself” with the biblical name of God as revealed in Exodus 3:13, “I am who I am,” and recall also that in Christianity “love” is another name for God (1 John 4:8).

In the course of the play, both Gloucester and Lear are brought to utmost misery because of their own betrayals of true love, suffering the consequences of their folly and following the path outlined in Jean-Luc Marion’s description of the adamant logic of evil. Lear rages against his two wicked daughters, swearing to take revenge, but, quite remarkably, he cannot define the character of that revenge. He gives vent to his anger and despair in a series of broken, chaotic sentences: “I will have such revenges on you both / That all the world shall—I will do such things— / What they are yet I know not, but they shall be / The terrors of the earth” (2.2.467–469). The key phrase here is “I know not,” as if Lear wanted to show that no words can render his pain and no punishment can compensate for his suffering. The entire world seems too small to harbour his pain, and so we watch his yearning for revenge pass beyond all limits. The protagonist’s self-absorption is also visible in his complaint that he is “a man / More sinn’d against than sinning” (3.2.59–60), which alludes to Reformation concern with Original Sin, but which may also be seen as a distorted echo of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.”

Gloucester, on the other hand, seems resigned to despair, but if we return to Marion again, we shall hear the philosopher recognize in suicide the ultimate act of revenge: “Revenge can, like a flood engulfing the universe, reach every man, make of all humanity, and even God, a culprit and an adversary. . . . He who commits suicide bars himself from the possibility of reconciliation” (11–12). Had he carried out his desperate plan, Gloucester would thereby have committed sin against love—this is at least how Christianity interprets premeditated and voluntary self-slaughter—but the loving care of his son, Edgar, prevents the disaster.

LOVE AND MERCY

Love triumphs once again when Cordelia forgives her prodigal father. In the Bible, mercy is symbolized by the father's hurrying to welcome the lost son. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows that mercy is farsighted, kind, swift-footed and welcoming: "[W]hen he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and, and had compassion, and ranne, and fell on his neck" (Luke 15:20). The gifts bestowed on the returning son, the robe, sandals, and especially the signet ring, symbolize the love that God lavishes upon a repentant sinner. Through these gifts the Prodigal is restored to his status as son, and Cordelia insists that her father is restored to his royalty by making servants put a "fresh garment" on him before we see him again on stage (Snyder 362).¹ Untidy appearance was suggestive in Shakespeare's theatre of mental disarray, but in the case of *Lear* the "fresh garment" denotes more than the end of his folly: it is a token of redemption and a foreshadowing of the new creation proclaimed in the book of Revelation. This eschatological perspective, as I shall argue, is crucial for a reading of *King Lear*.

Critics who draw our attention to the echoes of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Shakespeare's play have also noted the precedence of grace in the moment of reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, and the correspondingly absolute character of the forgiveness offered by the king's youngest daughter. When Lear's beloved daughter cuts short the king's complaint about the wrongs inflicted on him by her elder sisters with the soothing "no cause, no cause" (4.5.55), she is expressing two things simultaneously: not only that Lear should no longer blame himself for the offences which he committed in the past, but also that love needs no alleged reason, "no cause," to forgive. Wilson Knight argues that Cordelia "represents the principle of love" in the play (124). John Francis Danby, who conducted an allegorical exegesis of the text, claimed that "tropologically she is Charity who suffereth long and is kind" and "anagogically the redemptive principle itself" (201). It may be worth noting in this context that the word "anagogy," which refers to the spiritual sense of an allegorical text, connotes an upward movement: climb or ascent, thereby suggesting that in the act of reading the reader's thought are lifted to heaven. Since anagogy denotes the last of the four senses of scripture and relates to the glorious mysteries to be revealed at the end of time, Danby linked Cordelia to Christ the Redeemer. In a similar vein, Richard Matthews noted that Lear's youngest daughter should be viewed as a symbol of the "love unquantifiable, love unpredictable, love unreasonable" which embraces the

¹ The reader may note here the connection with the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22.1–14, where a guest not wearing a wedding garment is removed from the celebration. I thank Jean Ward for bringing this allusion to my attention.

world of the play (28). We may also recall here Joseph Holmes Summers's illuminating remark that love is Cordelia's "astonishing essence" (113; cf. also Battenhouse and Battenhouse 464). In our day, other critics add further evidence in favour of a Christian interpretation of the play. Robert Lanier Reid brings to our attention "medieval dramas and narratives of Christ's Passion" as "prototypes for the tortured body that is central to *King Lear*" (74). Similarly, R. V. Young reminds us that Cordelia, like Christ, was hanged on a tree and quotes the testimony of an unnamed gentleman, who tells Lear that she "redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her two," suggesting that "twain" which is usually interpreted as referring to Goneril and Regan, may also denote Adam and Eve, responsible for the "general curse" of Original Sin. Last but not least, Young points to the scene of reconciliation, which, in his opinion, brings "hope for mortals who find that their own efforts to rectify the world by adhering to the law written in their hearts and exercising their own natural virtues are insufficient" (272). I doubt, as Lanier Reid does, whether Shakespeare would evoke "these powerful epiphanic images of the Passion—which Louis Martz finds central to Renaissance devotions and religious lyrics—only to enforce the most profoundly sceptical nihilism" (74), so I propose to call *King Lear* a *tour de force* of Christian theodicy, which resolves the problem of immeasurable suffering by an appeal to the immeasurable love of the triune God.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

Drawing our attention to Shakespeare's Christian upbringing and outlook, Regina Schwartz argues that "Shakespeare's understanding of justice flows not only from classical conventions, but also from biblical tradition, where forgiveness enables just restoration of an injured moral order and where love is bound to justice" ("Revenge, Forgiveness, and Love" 56). This is evident in the indictment directed by Cordelia against her elder sisters, when she pities her exiled father, saying: "Mine enemy's dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire" (4.7.36–38). The focus falls here on the unforgivable inhumanity of Goneril and Regan, but what seems particularly relevant in Cordelia's utterance is the fact that she describes her anger as "fire," suggestive of divine wrath against the unjust. We may consider this utterance as inconsistent with Cordelia's image as the embodiment of patient, enduring and forgiving love, but in fact it only confirms that Shakespeare's play is informed by the Christian idea of "love bound to justice." One of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, Hans-Urs von Balthasar pointed out the risk involved in an expurgated,

sugar-coated understanding of divine mercy when he wrote: “[I]f we are going to dismiss language about the wrath of God as ‘anthropomorphism,’ then the language of God’s ‘mercy’ or ‘patience’ must also disappear for the same reason” (62). Balthasar concludes by saying that divine love “would be merely flaccid without God’s angry displeasure toward the unloving” (62).

The Greek god of the sky, Zeus, was believed to hurl lightning bolts at liars and people who broke their oaths; in the Bible, one of Job’s friends speaks about the thunder of God’s voice which strikes fear into the heart of man (Job 37:3–4). The entire third act of *King Lear* takes place during a raging storm, but the rain, thunder and lightning affect the victims of injustice, not the perpetrators. Small wonder that the exiled king begins to question the ways of providence, asking Edgar to consider the “cause” of “the thunder.” Some critics have interpreted this as a possible allusion to Aristophanes’ mockery of divine justice in his comedy, *The Clouds* (Cantor 231). Yet instead of embracing Aristophanes’ barefaced disbelief, Shakespeare’s play challenges the audience with a portrayal of the humanity which does not love Love.

Judy Kronenfeld has interpreted Cordelia’s outburst as indicative of the general “neglect of charity in the world of the play” (174). Parents do not love children; children do not love parents; the rich do not show charity to the poor. *King Lear* shows a world populated by “poor naked wretches”; “houseless heads”; men, women and children with “unfed sides”; and vagabonds so badly dressed that their shabby clothing becomes quintessential “looped and windowed raggedness” (3.4.30–31). Both Lear and Gloucester begin to acknowledge the misery of the poor when they endure poverty themselves, but their reflection is rooted in Aquinas’s doctrine of charity, which demanded that goods beyond one’s need to keep oneself and one’s family (*bona superflua*) should be given to those in need. Lear declaims: “Take physic, pomp, / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them / And show the heaven more just” (3.4.33–36); and Gloucester echoes: “So distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough” (4.1.73–74). Yet at the same time Lear admits that as a king who had the means to relieve the poor, he has “ta’en too little care of this” (3.4.32–33).

Marxist critics who stress this deficit of elemental charity in the play reduce the notion of “charity” to human compassion (at best) or institutionalized philanthropy (at worst), and focus on Shakespeare’s condemnation of social inequality. Jonathan Dollimore argues, for instance, that “the society of *Lear* is structured in such a way that to wait for shared experience to generate justice is to leave it too late. Justice is too important to be entrusted to empathy” (192). Although the Gospels condemn the moral chaos of the world, where the princes and “they that

are great” exercise dominion over the biblical *anawim* who bow down under the pressure of poverty, starvation or disease, Marxism rejects Christian doctrine in favour of immediate, revolutionary change. Most revolutions legitimize drumhead trials. In the face of outright injustice, any injunction to patience about the presence of evil in this world, such as the one included in the biblical parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24–43), is considered as offensive toward the victims of mistreatment. Christians accept the prospect of a life-long waiting for justice; an earnest revolutionary does not believe in divine justice, providence, or the Day of Judgment. So in Dollimore’s account, Christian mercy, pity (*eleos*) and forgiveness always come too late. They are belated, insufficient, and therefore deeply unsatisfactory gestures. And yet, as has been noted, Shakespeare’s Gloucester quotes Aquinas on charity, not Karl Marx on proletarian revolution. Although the call for social justice is clearly a vital issue in *King Lear*, the play is principally an apology for the kind of love and forgiveness embodied in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which Christians regard as an all-sufficient satisfaction for the sins of humankind.

LOVE TO THE END

The connection between *King Lear* and the story of Christ’s Passion has been recognized by many critics. Stanley Cavell stated that Cordelia resembles Christ at the crucifixion (73). Jan Kott interpreted Shakespeare’s play as a foreshadowing of the absurdist “mockery of all eschatologies,” comparing *King Lear* with Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (116). Although Kott did not state this explicitly, we should remember that Beckett’s play constantly alludes to the drama which took place on Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. We may think, for instance, of the evocation of Christ’s words on the Cross, already evident in the first sentence uttered on stage in *Endgame* (“Finished. It is finished”). We may also note that the setting of the play is a room with two windows which is reminiscent of the interior of a human skull; and the two characters’ names indicate the nailing to the cross: Ham points to the hammer, whereas Clove (French: *clou*), Nell (English: “nail”) and Nagg (German: *nagel*) are the nails. More recently, David K. Anderson argued along similar lines that “the Easterless tragedy of *King Lear* never moves beyond Golgotha” (279), leaving the characters and the audience in the dark, or perhaps we should rather say, in the grave. Interestingly enough, however, none of these interpretations admits a Christian reading of Shakespeare’s play despite drawing parallels with the narrative of Christ’s Passion, which in the Christian story leads from Good Friday to the dawn of the Resurrection.

Taking the play into their own times, these critics assign a lower profile to Shakespeare's treatment of divine love and forgiveness. As I have already argued, I find such readings partial and misleading. There is no doubt that Shakespeare's *Lear* astonishes us with the apparently absurd death of Cordelia, but the emotional appeal of this ending cannot overshadow other important elements present in the final act of the play. When Lear enters the stage with the body of Cordelia in his arms, Kent poses a question which may be understood as an ironic, meta-textual comment on Shakespeare's departure from other versions of the story: "Is this the promised end?" Edgar echoes Kent's anguish, but interprets the mention of "the promised end" as referring to the end of times described in the New Testament Book of Revelation. He asks: "Or image of that horror?" Finally, Albany, who alone has not abandoned his faith in divine justice, cries out to heaven for vengeance: "Fall, and cease" (5.3.262–264). The fact that a little earlier Goneril's and Regan's bodies were brought on stage—an arrangement without parallel in the entire Shakespeare corpus—points to the vision of Doomsday conveyed in the Book of Revelation, and foreshadowed in St. Paul's appeal to Timothy: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (4:1). What seems particularly striking in this scene is the "freezing" of action and movement, as if we were really witnesses to "the end of time," since time entails movement and change. Yet although this grim *tableau mort*—for it hardly deserves to be called *tableau vivant*—has little to do with the ultimate triumph of good over evil envisioned in the Book of Revelation, since the innocent perish together with the wicked, the promise of divine justice is not absent from the play.

Of course, it is only natural that at the end of the play we, like Lear, hope against hope to see Cordelia live, speak and smile again thanks to some fortuitous "chance." But while we would prefer a happy ending, Shakespeare's conclusion proves entirely appropriate for this play about love and forgiveness. Nor is it entirely devoid of hope, although this hope has nothing to do with facile and short-lived consolation. We are confronted with the memory of the hour when Jesus cried from the cross: "God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46); the Son felt abandoned by the Father and the gaping wound opened in His heart. When the old king realizes that his daughter cannot be brought back to life, he utters words which sound like the dirge of funeral bells: "O Thou'lt come no more. / Never, never, never" (5.3.306–307). In the Folio version the word "never" is repeated five times, in a possible allusion to the five gashes made in Christ's hands, feet and side. R. A. Foakes asserts that the repetition of "never," which fills the entire line, brings Lear and the audience "to face death not only as the loss of all that is worth cherishing,

but as utter oblivion” (78). Yet it might also be understood as reminding us of the Passion story, in which death on the cross was not the last word.

The playwright’s engagement with the mystery of the crucifixion prompts us to take a brief detour into the realm of theology, which may help us move beyond the emotional appeal of the tragedy and overcome the myopic scepticism that excludes or even denies its eschatological dimension. In Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogue*, we find a passage which links Christ’s death on the cross to the mystery of unlimited divine charity. When the Seraphic Virgin implores Christ to tell her why he permitted his side to be “pierced and parted,” her divine Interlocutor responds: “My longing for humankind was infinite, but the actual deed of bearing pain and torment was finite and could not show all the love I had. This is why I wanted you to see my inmost heart, so that you could see that I loved you more than finite suffering could show” (138). As Hans-Urs von Balthasar’s argues, the decisive element in this vision is the “final, limitless, divine wound, a bleeding that pulses with life from the other side of death” (63).

Shakespeare included an allusion to the pierced side of Jesus at the crucifixion (John 19:34–37) in Act 4, when Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, expresses his pity towards the old king wandering on the heath with the sad exclamation “O thou side-piercing sight!” (4.6.85) (McDonald 158), and it has been pointed out that “Lear’s empathetic defence of Tom . . . matches the allegory of the Passion in Southwell *Spiritual Exercises*” (Lanier Reid 73). Edgar’s name, composed of the Old English words *ead*, “rich,” and *gar*, “spear,” likewise brings to mind the holy spear that pierced the side of Jesus after his death on the cross.² Viewed in the light of Balthasar’s reflection concerning divine love, such subtle hints in the play to the tragedy of the cross prompt us to take another look at the tableau at the end of Shakespeare’s play which some critics have associated with visual portrayals of Christ’s Passion. Katharine Goodland has argued that Shakespeare may have had the Pietà in mind when he presented Lear with the body of Cordelia in his arms (47–74, cf. Young 272). In Christian faith, however, the cross is not a token of death, but a symbol of love to the end. It reminds us that death was *not* the end of God’s compassionate love. Disallowing a superficial understanding of divine justice, the apparently incomprehensible ending of *King Lear* points to the love symbolized by the cross. The visual allusion to the Cross as a symbol of love, forgiveness and reconciliation allows us to see glimpses of hope in the apparently hopeless world of *King Lear*. Yet instead of presenting us with a straightforward morality play about the necessity of forgiving, the

² I am grateful to Fr. Norbert Lis OP for his illuminating comments on Edgar’s role in the play.

playwright confronts his audiences with a love which cannot be embodied on stage because any attempt to represent it would verge on idolatry. This love embraces us, though we cannot grasp it. It lives, breathes, suffers and bleeds for us, endlessly. *King Lear* can also be read as an apology for radical, endless forgiveness—offered “seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21)—which transcends the mercantile exchange expressed in the formula “measure for measure,” and the retributive logic of tit for tat. The play shows that it is always just and possible to forgive. It is just and good to love genuinely, entirely, “to the end.”

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Griselda's Afterlife, or the Relationship between Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* and the Tale of Magic

ABSTRACT

Some influence of Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, also known as the story of the patient Griselda, on Shakespeare, and particularly on *The Winter's Tale*, has long been recognized. It seems, however, that the matter deserves further attention because the echoes of *The Clerk's Tale* seem scattered among a number of Shakespeare's plays, especially the later ones. The experimental nature of this phenomenon consists in the fact that Griselda-like characters do not strike the reader, especially perhaps the Renaissance reader, as good protagonists of a tragedy, or even a problem comedy. The Aristotelian conception of the tragic hero does not seem to fit Griselda because there is no "tragic fault" in her: she is completely innocent. It was thus a bold decision on the part of Shakespeare to use this archetype as a corner stone of at least some of his plays.

Keywords: Chaucer, Shakespeare, patient Griselda, tales of magic, women's social position.

According to Helen Cooper, “medieval material appears in all kinds of unexpected forms and places” (5). I might only add that the same seems to be true of the submerged stratum of folktales which Douglas Gray called “phantoms lurking behind the written texts which have survived” (1). The present study attempts to show, on the basis of fragmentary evidence, the truth of both perceptions. It is not my intention to seek an answer to the question of how much Shakespeare was influenced by specific medieval texts or by the narrative patterns characteristic of folktales, or the question of whether we are dealing with conscious borrowing on the part of the poet, or rather with parallels of which he was unaware. To quote Cooper again, we have to contend with “the continuing dynamism of the medieval within [Shakespeare’s] work” (16), and the present study is devoted to examining some aspects of that dynamism.

The reputation of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, one of the *Canterbury Tales*, is severely tarnished because of its alleged antifeminism and its apparent endorsement of the principles of female passivity, silence, submissiveness and abject obedience which are embodied in the heroine, the “patient Griselda,” as opposed to the male arrogance and arbitrary rule, embodied in Griselda’s tyrannical and unnatural husband, marquis Walter. The latter, allegedly uncertain as to his wife’s loyalty, puts her to a series of tests which involve his taking away of her children ostensibly with the purpose of killing them, and eventually his apparent rough termination of the marriage with Griselda by sending her back to her father, and later employing her as a common servant obliged to wait on Walter’s new wife. Griselda suffers all those unspeakable humiliations and psychological tortures with apparently perfect equanimity and infinite patience. Eventually, it turns out that the children are alive and that the new wife is in fact Griselda’s daughter whom Walter has no real intention of marrying, especially because he loves, after all, his old wife Griselda, of whose patience and wifely obedience he is now fully convinced. The heroine accepts his sudden change of heart in a spirit of gratitude and perfect satisfaction. Even Chaucer himself clearly felt unhappy about the message of the tale, so he distanced himself from it both through the words put into the mouth of the tale’s narrator, that is the Clerk, and in Chaucer’s so-called envoy, where, in a direct authorial commentary, he advises, albeit in a rather ironical manner, that contemporary women follow a contrasting course of action to the one adopted by Griselda, becoming, that is, kind of anti-Griseldas:

Ye archewyves, stondesth at defense,
 Syn ye be strong as is a greet cammaille;
 Ne suffreth nat theat men yow doon offense,
 And sklendre wyves, fieble as in bataille,

Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde;
Ay clappeth as a mille, I yow consaille. (1195–1200)

James Sledd summarized in explicit terms the negative reception of *The Clerk's Tale*¹ by asking a question: “[W]hy alleged cruelty and criminal stupidity are represented either without proper abhorrence, or even with the praise that should be reserved for virtue, we are asked, it is said, to tolerate an intolerable tyrant, and to admire a dolt” (166).

One might think, then, that for a sophisticated writer such as Shakespeare, renowned for the psychological complexity of his characters, the rather crude story of Griselda and Walter, which offended even the 14th-century sense of political and moral correctness, will hold little attraction. And yet the situation was, apparently, very different. The motif of a seemingly loving husband (or lover), who at some point turns brutally, and without good reasons, against his wife (or lover), or who turns away from her, is actually one of Shakespeare's favourite ones. Probably the most famous version of it appears in *Othello*, where the husband puts his innocent wife's patience to the ultimate test, simply by murdering her, and the murder is not a make-believe one, like the murders in *The Clerk's Tale*, but a real one. But the motif in question is already evident, in a less savage form, in one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which Proteus, seemingly very much in love with Julia, who reciprocates his feelings, suddenly falls in love with Sylvia, and no longer has any time for Julia, even though he eventually returns to her in a repentant mood. The motif can also be seen in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Claudio is very easily made to believe, quite wrongly, that his fiancée Hero is unfaithful to him, so he breaks, in a particularly scandalous and public way, his engagement, and it takes a long time before he sees his mistake and is reconciled to Hero. Further traces of the motif can clearly be seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where it is the male lovers, Demetrius and Lysander, who suddenly change their attitudes and start loving the girls whom they so far used to be indifferent to, and become indifferent to the ones they apparently loved, while the girls, Hermia and Helena, remain constant in their affections. In probably the most famous play by Shakespeare, that is *Hamlet*, we observe Hamlet's unreasonable anger towards his girlfriend Ophelia. When the protagonist finally rediscovers within himself his love for Ophelia, it is too late, the girl is dead, and her death can be attributed, in a high degree, to Hamlet's hurting her feelings in many ways, both directly and indirectly. One of the late plays, *Cymbeline*,

¹ All quotations from Chaucer in the present article follow Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer*.

presents a character named Posthumus, though he is sometimes also called Leonatus, who is prepared to believe a piece of slanderous gossip about his perfectly innocent wife Imogen, whom he even attempts to kill before he sees through the web of lies entangling him.

In another late play, *The Winter's Tale*, we encounter Leontes, the king of Sicily, who, somewhat in the manner of Othello, conceives an irrational jealousy concerning his wife Hermione, imagining that she has betrayed him with his best friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia. This leads to Hermione's apparent death and the king's attempt to have his, and Hermione's, daughter Perdita killed. Fortunately, unlike in *Othello*, no permanent harm is done, the daughter is found again and the wife also returns, in a most bizarre fashion, as a statue that turns out not to be a statue at all, but Hermione herself. By that time, Leontes, long cured of his jealousy, is fully prepared to welcome his almost miraculously resurrected wife back, having considered her dead for many years. This is not the end of the list. The motif can also be found, for example, albeit in a heavily changed form, in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo believes all too hastily in Juliet's death (just as Leontes believed in the death of Hermione) and kills himself, thus also indirectly causing the death of his beloved.

A natural question is whether this motif, i.e. the motif of a slandered and often forgotten, or wrongly considered dead, wife can be traced back to *The Clerk's Tale*, or rather the tale of the patient Griselda, which Chaucer inherited from his Italian forerunners Boccaccio and Petrarch, who also wrote tales based on the same narrative pattern. The pattern in question is naturally derived, in its main features, from folklore, as has long been discovered (Griffith; Cate). In terms of Antti Aarne's and Stith Thompson's index of types of folktale, we are dealing here with AT 425 (The Search for the Lost Husband), one of the most important types of tales about supernatural husbands and wives, commonly referred to as Cupid and Psyche tales because the Roman 3rd-century writer Apuleius, in his book *The Golden Ass*, containing the story of Cupid and Psyche, gave us a classical version of such narratives. The clandestinely supernatural character of Griselda's husband could no doubt account, at least partly, for his unpredictability, wildness and readiness to turn against the theoretically beloved woman. In one important respect, however, the Cupid and Psyche tales are clearly different from *The Clerk's Tale* and from Shakespeare's plots, apparently inspired by *The Clerk's Tale*. In the former, the estrangement of the husband is caused by the wife's breaking of a taboo; in Apuleius the taboo consists in the prohibition to look at the husband; another typical taboo consists in keeping the love affair with the supernatural husband secret. In the latter ones, there is no rational explanation for the husband's strange and unnatural behaviour because the wife is completely innocent

and cannot be seriously accused of having broken any prohibition. We must draw, then, a rather paradoxical conclusion that the literary versions of the type, at least those written in keeping with the spirit of the patient Griselda tales, are more crude and psychologically improbable than the typical folktale versions.

At this point it is perhaps a good time to consider the value of *The Clerk's Tale's* and also of Shakespeare's plays' putative connection with the tales of magic. This value can be overestimated, which is what James Sledd suggests in his essay "*The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics.*" Concerning *The Clerk's Tale's* hypothetical origin in the Cupid and Psyche tales, he comments on it rather sceptically, even though he does not question the possibility of such a link:

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Griselda is the moral wife of an other-world lover, and only when this fact is understood can the problems of her story be resolved. No one can question this statement of the origin of the Griselda story. One can ask exactly what follows from it, and what does not. It has not been clear to me that the story is so improbable as Griffith and Cate seem to believe, or that to understand Chaucer's version one must keep looking over one's shoulder at a folk tale on which Chaucer knew nothing. (164)

Indeed, stories about supernatural husbands, or lovers, do not contain some essential elements of the patient Griselda story, such as the lack of any taboo that the heroine breaks or can break, and thus they have a limited power to explain the mysteries of *The Clerk's Tale* or the closely related stories told by the great Italian writers of the 14th century, Boccaccio and Petrarch.

The title of Sledd's essay, "*The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics,*" is an obvious allusion to a much older essay by J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,*" so it might be supposed that Sledd follows the main line of Tolkien's thought. To some extent, this is true. Just like Tolkien, Sledd is worried by the kind of criticism that explores the context of the poem, its sources and backgrounds, while having little to say about the poem itself. As Tolkien says: "But I have read enough, I think, to venture the opinion that *Beowulfiana* is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one. It is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem" (Tolkien 5). *Beowulf* is, of course, a vastly different poem to *The Clerk's Tale*. But, just as *Beowulf* is often associated with the three monsters that the hero fights with, so *The Clerk's Tale* also has its monsters (though, unfortunately, it does not feature a monster fighter); it is not only Walter, the unnatural husband of Griselda, who deserves this appellation, but also Griselda herself, whose

extraordinary (even by medieval standards) patience and wifely obedience make us also think of her as sheepish, in the sense of being excessively meek and submissive. Hence, Sledd talks about “that monster Walter and his monstrous wife” (163), even though the word “monster” appears here only in a figurative sense because both Walter and his wife are outwardly young and attractive. Also monstrous, in a sense, are the critics who yield to the temptation of treating works of art as quaint antiquary collection pieces, no longer capable of affecting the minds and hearts of modern readers or viewers. They may also be monstrous in their habit of lightly dismissing or condemning works that are too different from modern sensibilities or tastes.

It is difficult not to notice, however, that Professor Sledd's praise of *The Clerk's Tale* is also heavily qualified:

I think one can say without undue solemnity that *The Clerk's Tale* deserves and demands consideration, not as a monument to a departed taste, but as a tale whose admittedly limited values still can be perceived, though perhaps not deeply felt, and it is part of my thesis in this moderately solemn paper that in the present century the tale has suffered because outstanding scholars have too hastily condemned it. (161)

I would argue that not only has the tale been too hastily condemned, but also its folklore connections have been too hastily dismissed. A comparison between the Griselda story and Cupid and Psyche tales reveals the former as a radicalized version of the latter. If, in Cupid and Psyche, we are ready to sympathize with the predicament of the young heroine, how much more sympathy is evoked by Griselda, whose sufferings are even greater, and yet, unlike Psyche, she has done nothing to deserve her husband's displeasure? Among a pre-modern audience, likely to take for granted the principle of wifely obedience, Griselda might have inspired, first of all, pity and sympathy, rather than the revulsion which is so typical of modern reactions to her almost preternatural patience.

This intuition is confirmed by the fact that a version of the Griselda story was included in Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*), a book finished in 1405, shortly after Chaucer's death. The author, often called a medieval feminist, because of her vigorous defence of the reputation and dignity of women, was not, apparently, put off by a tale that few modern feminists would like. But she changed it a little: “De Pisan's retelling of the Griselda Story, however, leaves out a crucial aspect of Walter and Griselda's marriage: the prenuptial agreement of obedience” (McCarthy 9). As a result, the value of Griselda's sacrifice is enhanced because she does more than merely being true to her

word. Some measure of obedience was no doubt implied by the social status of a wife, if we mean the way this status was commonly understood in the Middle Ages, but the fact that Griselda, in most versions of the story, takes a special and extraordinary oath of obedience shows that this “normal” obedience was not regarded as unconditional. The motif of this prenuptial agreement may well be a remnant of the taboo that the heroine in tales about supernatural husbands promises to respect. Her breaking it later is hardly surprising; all kinds of vows, within the logic of the fairy tale, are there to be broken; fairy tale characters, both female and male, who say they will not do something can be counted upon to eventually do it all the same, which is one of the ways in which the action of the fairy tale advances (Lüthi 70). What is surprising is that Griselda keeps, very untypically, her vow and yet is punished as if she had broken it. De Pisan goes a step further and makes her Griselda bound by a promise she never gives, in this way pushing the limits of her loyalty to her husband. Griselda may serve, then, as a paragon of virtue and as evidence that women are capable of greater virtue and greater sacrifices than men. This argument, from the modern point of view, is hardly acceptable considering that Griselda’s virtue consists, first of all, in total submission to the will of her husband, but de Pisan naturally did not follow the standards of modernity. As for the principal characteristic of Griselda—that is, her patience—Christine says the following:

[W]ho could recite the great benefits of this virtue [i.e. patience]? It is exemplified in the life of Our Lord, who is the veritable author of this virtue. Those who are patient may be called the true sons of God, and indeed the Gospel calls them blessed, for the Kingdom of Heaven is rightfully theirs. (De Pisan 140)

2

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is certainly, of all his plays, the most similar to *The Clerk’s Tale*, even though it also owes a lot to its most immediate source, Robert Greene’s *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. It is from Greene that Shakespeare most probably took the motif of sexual jealousy which motivates king Leontes’s turning against his wife Hermione, and the motif of banishing the king’s youngest child, a daughter, who is raised in a family of shepherds and eventually, after many years, finds her true father again. Unlike in Shakespeare, she is not, however, reunited with her mother, who died long ago, and is irrevocably dead, unlike Leontes’s wife, Hermione, who is only reported to be dead. The motif of the daughter (in Greene,

her name is Fawnia; in Shakespeare, it is Perdita) becoming reunited, first of all, with her mother is strongly reminiscent of the Griselda story. Also, the fact that Perdita's father, Leontes, unlike Fawnia's, Pandosto, lives on, instead of committing suicide, makes the plot of *The Winter's Tale* similar to *The Clerk's Tale*. As has been recognized by Grace Annelise McCarthy: "Perdita and Leontes's reunion with Hermione more closely resembles the end of any given Griselda story than does Pandosto" (29).

From a folkloric point of view, however, the problem is that the Cupid and Psyche stories do not contain the motif of the heroine's children, so the part of the plot where *The Winter's Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale* most conspicuously converge is not warranted by the typical tales about supernatural husbands. However, there may be another, and closely related, type of folktale involved here. Concerning the character of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* it has been said that "[s]he is one of the same company as Miranda and Marina, and the youthful sons of Cymbeline" (Stokes 252). This statement includes a vision of the structural unity of Shakespeare's late romances, i.e. of *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. This unity is based on the narrative structure known in folklore studies as AT 707 (The Three Golden Sons), reckoned by Stith Thompson to be "one of the eight or ten best known plots in the world" (121), in which one of the main motifs is that of lost children who, just like Miranda, Marina, Guiderius, Arviragus and Perdita, are later almost miraculously restored to their parents. This motif is paralleled, both in the folktales in question, and in Shakespeare's romances (with the exception of *The Tempest*), by the story of a lost, usually slandered and banished, wife who, having undergone a period of death-like exile or imprisonment, is finally exculpated and reunited with her child, or children. Occasionally, she is also reunited with her rather ineffectual husband, who often has a hand in his wife's misfortunes—usually, however, through his helpless passivity and gullibility, rather than malice, because the wife is usually calumniated by her envious and wicked elder sisters, or by a hostile mother in law. The calumny usually consists in saying that the heroine has given birth to animals rather than human children, so she must be an evil witch or malicious fairy. The husband normally fails to defend his wife and does not realize that animals have been substituted for normal children, who are taken away to be killed, but they are eventually saved by a kind-hearted servant or another character, such as a miller, or a fisherman. The two central motifs of the slandered wife and of the lost and restored children are clearly discernible in all of the plots in question. What makes *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Winter's Tale* special in the context of the stories about slandered wives, however, is that the main guilt for the heroine's and her children's persecution cannot be placed on her, or her husband's, relatives,

or on any other third party; rather, it is the husband himself who must take the blame, since all the actions undertaken against the heroine are initiated and masterminded by him.

In *Cymbeline*, for example, a part of the blame for the husband's, that is Posthumus's, unnatural behaviour toward his wife, Imogen, can be apportioned to the husband's false friend Iachimo, who, like Othello's Iago, unjustly accuses Imogen of adultery. Leontes from *The Winter's Tale*, like Chaucer's Walter, is fully and solely responsible for the suffering and misfortunes he causes; he is, we might say, Othello and Iago (or Posthumus and Iachimo) in one.² However, unlike Walter, he eventually feels sorry for the pain and misery he has inflicted on his wife, even though he expresses his apology in a very brief and laconic way: he just mentions his "ill suspicion" (5.3.149)³ that made him turn against his angelic wife, and also against his best friend, Polixenes, both of whom he wrongly accused of having an illicit love affair with each other, and also made him expose his and Hermione's daughter Perdita to certain death. His more contrite attitude is appropriate considering that his deviant behaviour is devoid of any rationalization, even such an unconvincing or misguided one as Walter's desire to test the full extent of his wife's patience, or Othello's obsession with the lost handkerchief.

We may generalize that in Shakespeare the motif of the heroine's accusation of being a supernatural creature that bears unnatural, inhuman children is replaced by the remotely related motif of unfounded sexual jealousy, which is represented, in *The Winter's Tale*, just as in *Cymbeline*, or *Othello*, as an invasion of alien and beastly forces that threaten and undermine the whole fabric of being, bringing in a perspective of total chaos. Sexual jealousy is of course structurally similar to the suspicion of "unnaturalness": both are motivated by the fear of an alien, uncontrollable and unpredictable element, a fear that turns the fearing one into the feared, or, in other words, a prejudice that turns the accuser's accusations against the accuser himself.

If Posthumus in *Cymbeline* compares his alleged rival to a boar (*Cymb.* 2.5.16), Leontes, Posthumus's counterpart in *The Winter's Tale*, compares Polixenes, his imaginary rival, to a spider:

There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge

² Harold Bloom describes Leontes as "an Othello who is his own Iago" (639).

³ All the quotations in the present article from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* follow Bevington's *William Shakespeare, The Late Romances: "Pericles," "Cymbeline," "The Winter's Tale," "The Tempest."*

Is not infected; but if one present
 Th'abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
 How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
 With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (*Wint.* 2.1.39–45)

Both characters conjure up visions of hateful and dangerous creatures to suggest that their wives allowed themselves to be possessed by forces alien and hostile to mankind. Thus, Posthumus and Leontes make themselves equal to the wicked female relatives that usually persecute and slander the heroines of similar tales. They suggest that a very strong taboo has been broken, but this is merely a cover for their own incapacity to distinguish between the order of reality from that of unreality, or rather their tendency to impose the latter upon the former, i.e. to build a self-consistent world based on a lie, which of course means the breaking of perhaps the most important of all taboos.

Leontes's hidden sense of guilt manifests itself in his juxtaposing himself with a whole series of animals, suggesting that unnaturalness—the fact of not being true to one's nature, one's roots or one's calling—may be a feature of *his* character rather than of his wife's:

Come, captain,
 We must be neat; not neat, but cleanly, captain.
 And yet the steer, the heifer, and the calf
 Are all called neat. (*Wint.* 1.2.122–125)

The image of the steer with its horns is obviously connected with the traditional idea of the cuckold's horns (Bevington 357), which does not exhaust the significance of the above passage, but which directs our attention to the dehumanizing aspects of the social concept of the so-called cuckoldry. A cuckold has "horns," i.e. he is ridiculous without realizing why people laugh at him, although the horns also mean that the cuckold is a hybrid creature, partly human and partly beastly. Leontes is naturally a cuckold in a rather different sense than the usual one. Instead of being a victim of adultery, he is himself an image of it, in the sense of betraying his wife and reality in general, with pernicious figments of his imagination. Leontes confirms, in this way, the stereotype of the supernatural husband, who, not so much in typical fairy tales, but rather in legends and romances, is often associated with savagery and wildness, such as the elf-king in *Sir Orfeo*, and occasionally even with the devil himself, as in the Middle English romance of *Sir Gowther*.

Antigonus, the character devoured by the bear, also has interesting ideas concerning the question of adultery. Even though he eventually believes in Hermione's innocence, there are shadows of doubt crossing his mind that make him appear to be Leontes's double:

If it prove
 She's otherwise, I'll keep my stables where
 I lodge my wife. I'll go in couples with her;
 Than when I feel and see her no farther trust her.
 For every inch of woman in the world,
 Ay, every dram of woman's flesh is false,
 If she be. (*Wint.* 2.1.134–139)

The Queen's supposed falseness can then serve as a pretext for treating all women as animals, and all marriages as scandalous cases of exogamy, as "going in couples" with dogs. Antigonus does not stop at this, and also applies his furious logic to his three daughters:

Be she honor-flawed,
 I have three daughters—the eldest is eleven,
 The second and the third, nine and some five—
 If this prove true, they'll pay for't. By mine honor,
 I'll geld 'em all ! Fourteen they shall not see
 To bring false generations. They are co-heirs,
 And I had rather glib myself than they
 Should not produce fair issue. (*Wint.* 2.1.144–151)

Antigonus's grim and somewhat grotesque threat to deprive his daughters of generative powers is certainly one of the ugliest motifs in the play, suggesting that Leontes's irrational jealousy can be infectious and result in similar outbursts of hostility against innocent women.

In a rather curious tale by the Grimms, *The Two Girls, the Bear, and the Dwarf*, the two girls in question are persecuted and imprisoned by a malicious and ungrateful old dwarf whose life they have saved. The dwarf has to be killed by a bear with whom the girls have a sexual relationship of some kind. The moment the bear kills the dwarf it turns out that the latter was an evil enchanter, while the former is his victim, a prince turned into a bear who can now regain his human form having disposed of his tormentor (Thompson 100).

I do not want to suggest that a story of this kind lies directly behind the mysterious motif of Antigonus's three daughters. And yet the tale of magic in question corresponds quite faithfully to the lines of conflict that emerge in *The Winter's Tale*. In the play the girls can also be thought to have been set free by a bear who destroys their father, a father who, at least potentially, has designs on his daughters' sexuality. Antigonus's mind works mimetically, when he envisages treating all women as animals, he immediately sees himself as their animal companion; by the same token, he can think of depriving his daughters of generative powers only in

connection with castrating himself. Like Leontes, he is inexorably attracted to and repelled by visions of extreme exogamy, but Leontes is right when he suspects the sincerity of Antigonus's sentiments; they are too faithful and sycophantic a copy of his master's madness:

You smell this business with a sense as cold
As is a dead man's nose; but I do see't and feel't
As you feel doing thus, and see withal
The instruments that feel. (*Wint.* 2.1. 152–154)⁴

If we look now at the closest existing analogue to *The Winter's Tale*, Robert Greene's *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, we notice that neither a bear, nor a creature with a similar function, appears in Greene's text, nor is there a character that could be compared to Antigonus, or any equivalents of Paulina or Autolycus. The unfortunate baby girl, later known as Fawnia, is set adrift at her father's behest by anonymous shipmen (Salzman 167). *Pandosto* contains, however, a motif that is interesting from our point of view, but only faintly suggested in *The Winter's Tale*, namely that of incest. In Greene's tale we have Pandosto (an equivalent of Leontes) falling in love with Fawnia (an equivalent of Perdita) before he learns about her identity. Pandosto feels unnaturally attracted to Fawnia, but he also turns immediately against her as soon as he discovers that she cannot be persuaded or bullied into loving him, and is ready to have her executed, together with her lover Dorastus (an equivalent of Florizel). This motif seems quite Shakespearean: if it had been included in *The Winter's Tale* it would have helped to identify Leontes as an essentially endogamous figure, similar in this respect to all tyrants, and similar to Antiochus, the openly incestuous king from *Pericles*. Needless to add, there is also an element of incestuous desire in Antigonus's wish to "unsex" his daughters, i.e. to make them incapable of uniting with other men and bearing children. Above all, however, the motif of Pandosto and Fawnia is a good example of the changeability and unreliability of erotic love itself, which is certainly one of Shakespeare's favourite themes, handled perhaps most extensively in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

On the other hand, the inclusion of that motif would probably have made *The Winter's Tale* too grim a play to allow the necessary happy ending. Indeed, the ending of *Pandosto* is unhappy rather than happy; the jealous king's wife does not come back to life, and he himself commits suicide, unable to bear the burden of his sins and the memory of their

⁴ An interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* as a thoroughgoing analysis of mimetic jealousy can be found in René Girard's *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*.

consequences.⁵ In *The Winter's Tale*, it is only the death of Mamillius, Leontes's male heir, and that of Antigonus, that are irreversible and confirm the adequacy of Greene's ambiguous subtitle, *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. An allegorical figure called Time also appears in Shakespeare's play and introduces himself as a force that "please some, try all, both joy and terror" (*Wint.* 4.1.1), which is compatible with a rather ambiguous, or at least not consistently tragic, interpretation of time emerging from the late romances.

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The motif of incest brings us back to Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, where, as we may remember, Griselda is forced to wait on her cruel husband's new, much younger, wife, who turns out to be her own, and Walter's, daughter. Walter knows very well that his young bride is his daughter and he does not seriously intend to marry her, but Shakespeare's Leontes does not know at first that Perdita is his daughter. A moment before he sets his eyes on her, not having seen her for sixteen years, and is so favourably impressed that he calls her a goddess (5.1.130), he contemplates finding himself a new wife (5.1.55–70). He decides against this idea frightened by the prospect of his old wife visiting him as a ghost and urging him to murder his new wife, rather like Old Hamlet's ghost urging his son to kill his mother's new husband, the difference being that Leontes is Young Hamlet and Claudius in one, so the ghost of Hermione, his old wife for whose (apparent) death he feels responsible, should rather urge him to murder himself. Indeed, Greene's Pandosto, the equivalent of Leontes, having been responsible for his wife's real death, does commit suicide. As to the prospect of Leontes marrying Perdita, his own daughter, it is quite real considering that not only is Leontes fascinated with her, but he can also quite easily disregard the fact of her being engaged to Florizel, the son of Polixenes, because Polixenes is very much against the marriage between Florizel and Perdita.

Just as in the tales about slandered mothers and their abandoned children brought up by animals or in a lower class environment (AT 707), Perdita eventually comes to her mother's rescue and helps restore her to her former position. In doing so, and in being who she is, she also repairs her father's reputation, so that his great sins can be forgiven. One of those sins is no doubt the inclination toward incest, his sexual desire of his daughter, the motif that the student of folklore will find in a more developed form

⁵ There is also a suggestion in Greene that Fawnia dies soon after the death of her tragic father (Salzman xviii–xix).

in AT 706 (The Maiden Without Hands), where the heroine escapes from home to thwart her father's intention to marry her. By marrying Florizel, Perdita also restores the broken friendship between Leontes and Polixenes. In achieving all of this she is assisted by Antigonus's widow Paulina, who prepares the apparent resurrection of Hermione.

Perhaps *The Winter's Tale* should have been called *Hermione, Perdita and Paulina: The Triumph of (and over) Time*. Indeed all three female characters share some features of the patient Griselda, who also weathers all kinds of adversities. If they can be treated as a collective Griselda, then the character is, in her Shakespearean avatars, no longer a paragon of patience. Appearing as Paulina, the persecuted wife's closest friend, she is not satisfied with Leontes's expression of remorse and regret when he realizes that his suspicions concerning his wife were groundless. She accuses him of tyranny and sees no chance of redemption for him:

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But, O thou tyrant!
 Do not repent these things, for they are heavier
 Than all thy woes can stir. Therefore betake thee
 To nothing but despair. A thousand knees
 Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,
 Upon a barren mountain, and still winter
 In storm perpetual, could not move the gods
 To look that way thou wert. (3.2.207–213)

But, curiously enough, it is Leontes who shows patience at this moment. Instead of reacting angrily to Paulina's harangue, he meekly concurs with her words:

Go on, go on
 Thou cant not speak too much. I have deserved
 All tongues to talk their bitt'rest. (3.2.214–216)

In this respect, he behaves like the heroes of the tales about supernatural wives—AT 400 (The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife)—where the person to break a taboo and to repent for it is the husband, not the wife, and the virtue of patience is expected from him.

The scene of Hermione's revival may be, at least partly, explained by referring to the inner logic of the play: its artificiality corresponds very well to the artificiality of the scene with the bear at the end of Act 3. The bear serves the purpose of removing a character, while the statue trickery brings another character back to a full life after a period of hiding and shadow-like existence. The bear seems to stand here for the suddenness and irreversibility of death, while the statue stands for its reversibility, or

rather the possibility of making up for one's apparently fatal faults and atoning for one's sins. Leontes's exclamation on the sight of the revived Hermione: "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating" (5.3.109–110), is thus highly appropriate: "eating" is here the opposite of "magic" because the latter is a process of bringing back what the bear of time has apparently managed to devour.

It is true that the scene of the double recognition, of Hermione by Leontes, and of Perdita by Hermione, is prepared and controlled by Paulina, Antigonus's widow, whose relative freedom of action is certainly ensured by her husband's having been conveniently removed by the bear. Remarkable indeed is the way in which the finding of Perdita is coupled in Paulina's mind with the loss of Antigonus:

But O, the noble combat that twixt joy and sorrow was fought in Paulina!
She had one eye declined for the loss of her husband, another elevated
that the oracle was fulfilled. She lifted the Princess from the earth, and
so locks her in embracing as if she would pin her to her heart, that she
might no more be in danger of losing. (*Wint.* 5.2.76–79)

Perdita thus plays the crucial role of a character who triggers an entire chain of events. Without her also being recovered, the "resurrection" of Hermione would have been pointless. It is the return of Perdita that shows that the powers that govern the universe, and of which the bear was an emissary, are no longer angry with Leontes. The latter recognizes this even before he becomes fully aware of Perdita's identity, as is evident in the following words addressed to Florizel and Perdita:

The blessed gods
Purge all infection from our air whilst you
Do climate here! (*Wint.* 5.1.168–170)

Perdita also plays quite a prominent role in the scene of Hermione's "rising from the dead." She is particularly eager upon seeing the supposed statue (cf. 5.2.95–104), and she treats it as a living person, not a piece of stone, long before it becomes obvious to anybody else, save, of course, Paulina:

And give me leave,
And do not say 'tis superstition, that
I kneel and then implore her blessing, Lady.
[*Kneeling*]
Dear Queen, that ended when I but begun,
Give me that hand of yours to kiss. (*Wint.* 5.3.43–46)

Thus Perdita defines herself as the one that carries the burden of continuing Hermione's life and duties, and bears out the true version of the events, confirming her mother's innocence and saintliness. Perdita's gesture is partly religious, even idolatrous, especially from a Protestant point of view, and it ascribes to Hermione the paradoxical life of gods and goddesses venerated in statues.

It is customary to view the scene with Hermione's statue as derived from the myth of Pygmalion as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text that Shakespeare must have known either in the Latin original or in Arthur Golding's English translation. The problem is that Leontes, unlike the mythical Pygmalion, does not contribute in any way to the creation of the statue that later comes to life. Another difference is that in *The Winter's Tale* the figure has never actually been a statue, only a living woman who pretends to be a statue. In a number of ways this scene resembles the motif of resuscitation appearing in AT 311 (Rescue by their Sister), that is in Bluebeard tales. Bluebeard kills his wives and hacks them into pieces, as they all break his prohibition not to open a forbidden chamber in his palace. One of those wives, however, proves cleverer than her predecessors. She puts together the dismembered bodies of the dead wives, who are also her sisters, and the moment she does so they come back to life; later she avenges herself on the monstrous husband. The resuscitation of the sisters by their female relative—that is, a character analogous to Paulina or Perdita—in Grimm's *Fitcher's Bird*, is presented as follows:

Both her dear sisters lay there in the basin, cruelly murdered and cut in pieces. But she began to gather their limbs together and put them in order, head, body, arms and legs. And when nothing further was wanting the limbs began to move and unite themselves together, and both the maidens opened their eyes and were once more alive. Then they rejoiced and kissed and caressed each other. (Grimm 218)

Bluebeard figures are, clearly enough, extremely vicious versions of supernatural husbands, who punish their wives' breaking of a taboo by immediate death, instead of the more usual series of difficult tasks at the end of which a reconciliation and reunion is possible. Leontes comes close to being the ultimate Bluebeard, considering that he almost manages to kill his wife in spite of her having broken no taboo. Walter, the husband of the miserable Griselda, also has the makings of a Bluebeard figure: instead of murdering his wives, he murders (apparently) his wife's (and his own) children. Leontes, it must be remembered, brings about the death of his son Mamillius, who dies from sorrow at seeing his mother's plight (there is no resurrection for him). Leontes is also on the point of ordering his newly

born daughter to be thrown into the fire, and at the last moment decides to commute this sentence to the child's being abandoned "in some remote and desert place" (2.3.213), which of course in practice equals death, and the fact that in this case it does not is nothing short of a miracle. Leontes's guilt is naturally not alleviated by this miracle being quite common in fairy tales and romantic tales featuring the motif of children, or young people, being banished and exposed to the elements. We may be reminded of the Middle English tale of *Emaré*, about a young woman put out to sea in a rudderless boat by her unnatural father, whom she refuses to marry.

Another possible analogue to the story of an almost miraculously resurrected wife is the myth of Alcestis, on which a play by Euripides was based. We have there the motif of a wife, i.e. Alcestis, who returns from the land of the dead, having sacrificed her life for that of her husband, Admetus. She, to some extent, resembles a statue rather than a living woman, in that, after her miraculous return, she refuses, or is unable, to speak.⁶ It may also be argued that the death of Alcestis is caused by her husband's egoism; she would not have to die if he, like ordinary people, reconciled himself to the necessity of his own death. And yet the whole story does not contain the motif of an estrangement between husband and wife: they are shown as a loving couple, an embodiment of marital bliss. Robert Graves treats the story of Alcestis as an allusion to the ritual of sati (Graves, *Volume 1* 225), the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husband, usually associated with India, but probably also existing in pre-historic Europe, as is evidenced in another Greek myth, that of Capaneus and his wife Evadne, who indeed threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, but the ritual is not explicitly mentioned either in the Greek myths, or in the European cultural tradition.

Griselda's single-minded devotion to her husband is perhaps remotely reminiscent of Alcestis and Evadne. Both Griselda and Alcestis owe a debt of gratitude to their husbands: Griselda is a peasant woman whose social status is greatly enhanced by her marriage to a rich and powerful aristocrat, while Alcestis, although a daughter of a king, would have probably never got married if her husband Admetus had not fulfilled the near impossible task, set by Pelias, Alcestis's father, of yoking together a lion and a boar to a chariot.⁷ Alcestis may be thought of as a female equivalent of Orpheus,

⁶ There is a painting by the German 18th-century painter Johann Heinrich Tischbein entitled *Herkules entreißt Alkestis dem Totengott Thanatos und führt sie dem Admetus zu* [*Hercules Saves Alcestis from Thanatos, the God of Death, and Restores Her to Her Husband Admetus*], where Alcestis looks indeed almost like a white marble statue.

⁷ The father who demands, from his prospective sons in law, the fulfilment of very difficult tasks before he agrees to his daughter's marriage may easily be suspected of incestuous intentions, a motif that can be seen in the Middle English romance *Sir Degaré* and Shakespeare's late play *Pericles*.

who tried to bring his wife Eurydice back from the Underworld, even though she does not follow her husband to the land of dead. She succeeds, however, where Orpheus failed, by her decision to offer her own death as a means of saving the life of her husband. The function of Orpheus is fulfilled, in the case of Alcestis, by Hercules, who is motivated by pity, sympathy and admiration, rather than by erotic love. Both Griselda and Shakespeare's Hermione may also be said to have saved their husbands, Walter and Leontes, but they save them from themselves, rather than from any external danger, as they succeed in overcoming, by means of their exemplary wifely loyalty, their husbands' beastly brutality.

In conclusion, a folkloric analysis of *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Winter's Tale* repays one's effort, as it allows one to see these texts in connection with particular archetypal patterns that make certain crucial elements of their plots stand out in relief. The story of the patient Griselda may in this way be shown as having been creatively developed and deepened in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare, generally speaking, preserves the motif of the wife's infinite patience, embodied in the character of Hermione, but he adds the figure of Paulina, a female monster-fighter, who in many ways is an alter ego of Hermione, and who combines patience with resourcefulness and a determination to resist evil even if it is represented by a patriarchal authority.

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Mesmerization with the Lights On: Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”

ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe’s eerie short story “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” is a particularly noteworthy example of the sublime, a psychological state in which one is overwhelmed by the magnitude of that which is perceived by the mind. Valdemar exemplifies the sublime in that his death has somehow been suspended in time because he was under hypnosis as part of a medical experiment at the moment of his passing. However, the story also draws particular attention to the means by which insight into the nature of death is acquired by the hypnotist who narrates the story. For a more comprehensive understanding of the sublime experience, one may turn to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and the postmodernist work of Slavoj Žižek, which lead to the conclusion that the dramatic chain of events in “Valdemar” is an example of the sliding signifier, and, moreover, that the instability of the signifier may explain the sublime effect.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, the Sublime, Jacques Lacan, Immanuel Kant, Slavoj Žižek.

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” is Edgar Allan Poe’s celebrated short story in which a dying man is hypnotized (or “mesmerized,” in nineteenth-century parlance), consequently goes into a sort of death-like trance for several months, murmurs upon being brought partially out of his trance that he is indeed deceased and that his current situation is an unspeakable horror, and finally collapses into a stinking puddle of slime when fully de-mesmerized.¹ The story was enormously popular when published in the 1840s, and today is often analyzed by postmodernists who typically focus on language issues such as Valdemar’s enigmatic statement “I am dead.”² I would like to take the argument in a different direction by refocusing on both the words of Valdemar, as well as his ultimate dissolution as a representation of the sublime and the Lacanian sliding signifier. In other words, the narrative builds to a conclusion in which the narrator realizes that our own bodies will inevitably run down and that we are helplessly subject to an irrevocable universal law. However, it is more than a static image of a corpse in decay, as well as the articulation of the words “I am dead” that creates the sublime experience, so in effect I hope to employ the sliding signifier to demonstrate how the story achieves its dramatic linguistic effect.

This approach is justified because the story is told from the point of view of the hypnotist himself, which means that our own perception of the words “I am dead” are different than they would be if the story were in third-person. If the story were narrated from an omniscient point of view, the talking corpse would undoubtedly be frightening, but would not provide the perspective of a living witness to the events. With first-person narrative, the reader is forced to realize that the newly acquired knowledge of death is an act of living, while dying remains a mysterious function of the Other. What exactly does Valdemar mean by saying “I am dead”? The answer is important, but one must also take into consideration that the answer will come only through the filter of the narrator’s consciousness. Therefore, one productive pathway toward reconciling the experience is thus to approach

¹ The story is widely anthologized and readily available online. In this paper, all quotations are taken from the three-volume *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* edited by Mabbott.

² Jacques Derrida, for example, includes an analysis of “Valdemar” in *Speech and Phenomena* that focuses on Valdemar’s statement “I am dead” and the meaning of the first-person pronoun “I” in the context. Roland Barthes considers the statement “I am dead” to be a “scandal of language” because it “isn’t descriptive, isn’t constative, it yields no other message than its own utterance” (10–11). Jacques Lacan, who will be discussed much more substantially in this paper, cites “Valdemar” only glancingly in “The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956” as an analogy of “how the association created by Freud metaphorically lives on in its collective being, but here it is a voice that sustains it, the voice of a dead man” (406).

the narrator's point of view in terms of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, and, particularly, his concept of the sliding signifier.

A linchpin in Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis, the mirror stage refers to the early point in our lives when we first perceive that the comfortable unity of experience we are born into is deceptive in that we are discrete individuals. This is the beginning of our notion of the self, but a very complicated one because at this stage we are also confronted with the inevitability that our presence in the world is a construct. As Lacan explains, the result is "the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" ("Mirror" 76). Seeing ourselves as discrete entities thus bears a relationship to seeing others in the world, and this interchange between ourselves and our refracted presence has some interesting implications in relation to "Valdemar."

For one, the Lacanian mirror stage enormously complicates any suggestion that the sublime experience of witnessing Valdemar's dissolution is a simple "fear of death" because the Kantian sublime is not a simple panic at the thought of bodily destruction, but rather a mental state in which one actually reflects on this very mental state itself as it is influenced by the sublime object. The question of the symbolic comes into play because the hypnotist is obliged to trust his visual and aural observations in order to figure out what is going on with his hypnotic subject. What I am suggesting is not a biological response, but an intellectual apperception of the biological response made possible by a combined visual and aural experience. As Philip Shaw explains in his book *The Sublime*, Lacan's approach to the sublime addresses "the void at the heart of symbolization" (135).

Furthermore, this interpretation does not slight Poe's aesthetics in the least. One of Poe's most famous remarks concerned poetic depictions of the death of a beautiful woman, and the work in which these words appear—"The Philosophy of Composition"—also defines Poe's notion of beauty.³ In the familiar essay, Poe writes that "[w]hen, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect." Granted, "Valdemar" is far from a depiction of the beautiful that we find in Poe's essay, but surely the effect of the appearance of Valdemar to the

³ The entire quotation is as follows: "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?' Death—was the obvious reply. 'And when,' I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious—'When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover'" ("Philosophy").

narrator is a crucial detail that should be contextualized.⁴ The death of Valdemar is not particularly melancholic, given that he is terminally ill, is at the end of his productive life, seems reconciled to his fate, has no one to mourn him, and is neither beautiful nor a woman. What we are left with is the concept of death, and more precisely, a dynamic depiction of the concept of death, and this should be taken into consideration in any discussion of Poe's aesthetics. It is in this vein that I approach "Valdemar" as a story that is far from a contemplation of the beautiful, but neither is it a simple revelry in the gruesome. In fact, I think that the bright distinction of "Valdemar" in this regard is the very fact that Valdemar not only articulates his existential state with the words "I am dead," but then proceeds to visually drive home the point with his subsequent collapse into a putrescent mess. As Theodor Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*, "[a]esthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze" (241). If the body of Valdemar is the "artwork," then it becomes clear that a time-integration is necessary to bring about the entire sublime experience. The mere mouthing of the words is not enough: instead, the words followed by the rotting of the body must be integrated to provide the entire experience.

"Valdemar" as the story of a speaking corpse that subsequently collapses into putrescence is thus a dramatic example of the sublime in that the possibility of an alternate reality of an afterlife is simply bigger than anything that we can comprehend, and of the proper character to remind us of and dazzle us with our own cognitive limitations. The sublime, in fact, has been defined by Philip Shaw as "the moment when thought trembles on the edge of extinction" because of the sheer power or magnitude of the object confronting us, and because we are aware of our own smallness relative to the object (148). In the case of Poe's story, the object is the sight of a rotting corpse, but the words coming from the mouth of the deceased are quite beyond our understanding. In a sense, we understand that there are things which we do not understand, which is a rough generalization of the Kantian sublime as developed in the *Critique of Judgement*.⁵

However, a focus on the Kantian sublime brings us back to Lacan because it is the narrator's viewpoint rather than the corpse's experience that dominates our perception, although there would be nothing for

⁴ Moreover, Dan Shen has argued that a fundamental difference exists between the aesthetics of Poe's poetry and his fiction. Whereas the former indeed treats of beauty, Shen explains, the best way to approach Poe's tales is by understanding precisely what he meant by "truth."

⁵ I employ the British spelling of the word "judgement" because my quotations are taken from the Oxford edition. Like most Americans, I customarily write the word as "judgment."

the narrator to view if not for the corpse. Hence, we must deal with the intersubjectivity of the encounter, and this is where Lacan comes in. As Sean Homer explains in his useful guidebook *Jacques Lacan*, the Hegelian notion of the dialectic is an integral component of Lacan's mirror theory. "Dialectics are a mode of philosophical thought that stresses the interconnectedness of phenomena and the unity of opposites," Homer writes (23). "It was Hegel's great insight, contends Lacan, to reveal how 'each human being is in the being of the other'" (24). In other words, if the narrator's lack of knowledge about the nature of death is the "thesis" and the death-experience of the corpse is the "antithesis," then the "synthesis" is the narrator's newfound understanding.

If the narrator were merely looking on at death articulating itself, then Lacan's mirror stage would probably be adequate to explain the phenomenon. The mirror stage assumes that every individual differentiates himself by learning to look at the "other" as a reflection of himself, which results in the formation of one's ego.⁶ The problem is that the ego is a sort of entity-under-construction that is pliable in one way, but fixed in another in that it is the individual's employment of the imaginary as a means of mentally constructing a world beyond himself. But this imaginary construction is subject to subsequent input from the world, and this is where the symbolic becomes an issue. As Lacan states in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'": "The teaching of this seminar is designed to maintain that imaginary effects, far from representing the core of analytic experience, give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them" (6). The solution is to turn to the symbolic. But to complete the thought on the imaginary, it is always a qualified understanding that allows the narrator to think that he can apprehend the nature of Valdemar's fate simply because he learned long ago how to imaginatively respond to the "other." The fact remains that the narrator is simply not the deceased. Therefore, the narrator's imaginative response is predicated on his very limitations as a healthy individual who is not dying. We needn't assume that he is separated from some ethereal realm of death-in-life, but rather from the source of the dynamic nature that performs as a built-in limitation of our physical continuance. The actual experience of the narrator and other witnesses of the Valdemar communication from the Beyond is thus an inherent conflict between the fragility of human life and the much more powerful notion that such fragility is built into the very fabric of reality. This, in Kant's words, "raise[s] the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace,

⁶ Homer defines the uncapitalized word "other" as "imaginary others" who "as reflections of ourselves . . . give us the sense of being complete whole beings" (70).

and discover[s] within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (91).

In this sense, Kant provides us with an adequate overview of the sublime moment of the encounter with Valdemar that can be summed up in the imaginary, but only if we stop with a single image. The question is what Lacan brings to the table, and my answer is that we can find the key in one of his most celebrated essays: “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious.”

“The Instance” goes far in explaining indirectly why the experience of the narrator in “Valdemar” is complete only with the full apprehension of Valdemar’s dissolution. Explaining that the signifier is not tied in a one-on-one relationship with its referent, Lacan states that “[w]hat this structure of the signifying chain proposes” is “the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for truth” (420–21). Lacan’s example is the metonymy “thirty sails,” which most readers immediately recognize as a statement that 30 ships are the referent. But as Lacan explains, most ships in the pre-mechanical era had far more than one sail apiece, which in turn leads to the assumption “that the connection between ship and sail is nowhere other than in the signifier, and that metonymy is based on the *word-to-word* nature of this connection” (421). Applied to “Valdemar,” this means that the narrator’s experiences are varied and not merely a monolithic revelation of the nature of Valdemar’s death.

Therefore, “I am dead” is a sliding signifier because the understanding of death that is imparted to the narrator and other witnesses in “Valdemar,” despite the strange nature of the plot, is actually a mainstream explication of the afterlife. If there is indeed a life after bodily death, then it follows that an ethereal realm must exist for the spirit to dwell, or else the realm of death is merely another physical part of the universe of material and normal biological function. But if such a realm indeed exists, then a normally functioning biological entity is by definition excluded from it while still alive, unless there is some spectacular communication between the real world and the realm of death as depicted in “Valdemar.”

Thus, the realm of death is not only separated from us, but also powerful enough to evoke the dynamical sublime because we can do nothing as human beings to control it. Whatever the rules of the afterlife (if it exists), and whichever entities are ultimately in charge, we living humans are aware that those forces are more powerful than ourselves and thus worthy of all the respect that a sublime object can raise in us, while still not evoking a simply primitive dread of the unknown. This is because we “know that we do not know” in the case of an afterlife that communicates by way of the dead Valdemar, and because such an experience exercises our reason to

the utmost. If we merely panicked at Valdemar's communication, then the experience for us would be no more than panicking before the witch doctor we do not understand. That we exercise our reason in grappling with that which is more powerful than ourselves is the essence of the sublime.

But even if the preceding explanation covers the breathtaking moment in which we react primitively to a dead body saying "I am dead," it does not adequately cover all the dimensions of Poe's story. After all, "Valdemar" is narrated by a mesmerist with scientific credentials—or at least he would have us think so—and in a manner so as to further complicate what might be described as the "Gothic" elements that would normally appear in a story concerning a voice from the other side. In other words, there are no possessions or hauntings to draw a shocked reaction from either reader or from the individuals who witness Valdemar's "case." Granted, the story has its eerie elements, but the primary emphasis is on the nature of death, and especially on our mental reaction to certain unsettling observations about death. In short, the story invokes the sublime, but also possesses a dimension by which the narrator's role and circumstances are employed for a purpose.

However, it is the instability of the signifiers and signifieds that are the key to the narrator's experience. The specific allusions to science and indirect cultural references to traditional conceptions of the afterlife are not nearly as important as the fact that the signifiers can never be assigned to any of these conceptions in particular. As Lacan explains, "[i]t is by touching, however lightly, on man's relation to the signifier . . . that one changes the course of his history by modifying the moorings of his being" ("Instance" 438). In other words, the narrator is compelled to confront the Other, which Homer defines as the symbolic order itself (70).

The first place in the story where we may find this very instability is the title. Roland Barthes in "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe" makes much of the wording of the title in asserting that the very word "facts" inevitably invites the conclusion that the story will be an "enigma."⁷ I would add that the title also refers to empirical observations that perhaps involve some sort of objective scientific or medical study. "The facts in the case" thus leads us to assume that the story will have something to do with medical science as a process of tweaking out the otherwise resistant facts about the workings of nature through controlled

⁷ I should also credit Barthes with the notion that the story implies a melding of interests. "This alloy is in fact cultural: the mixing of the strange and the scientific had its apogee in this part of the nineteenth century to which Poe roughly belongs," Barthes writes; "The supernatural took a scientific, rationalist alibi. Such is the *cri du coeur* of this positivist age: if only one could believe *scientifically* in immortality! This cultural code, which, in order to simplify, I have called scientific code, will have a major importance in the whole narrative" (4–5).

experiments, or else through objective observations of a patient's natural condition. In effect, the story could also be viewed as an anticipation of the sort of medical experimentation that goes on today, in which a patient who will likely die soon from a terminal illness is given the option of trying a new drug that may or may not work—or that may even make the patient worse. The benefit to the patient is the possibility of a cure that would otherwise not occur, while the benefit to the medical community is a trial-run with a new drug or treatment that may prove to be of benefit if it can just be tested on an acceptable number of human subjects. Another scenario is the situation in which a terminally-ill patient is asked if he will agree to postmortem tests or something of the sort in order to provide one last service to the humanity he leaves behind. This latter scenario is more similar to Valdemar's situation.

Therefore, the title of the story, as well as the rhetorical style of the narrator, establish a scientific veracity that, as previously mentioned, complicates and perhaps even distorts the elements of horror and terror that another writer might well favor in any recounting of a voice of the dead. But one may also consider that the narrator is in the business of mesmerizing people. This is not to say that he earns his living through mesmerizations, although such a conclusion is neither supported nor contradicted by the text. But by "business," I mean that one can also assume that perhaps the mesmerizer is an amateur scientist in much the same manner that Benjamin Franklin was in the "business" of characterizing the nature of the electric charge. The narrator tells us only that his "attention, for the last three years, had been repeatedly drawn to the subject of Mesmerism," and due to the use of passive voice, we are not even certain whether he is the experimenter to whom he refers: "[I]t occurred to me, quite suddenly, that in the series of experiments made hitherto, there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission:—no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis*" ("Facts" 1233). If the narrator is referring to his own experiments, then he naturally has absolute knowledge of what he has and has not done in the way of experimentation, although one might consider it a bit strange if he takes his own actions or omissions as "remarkable." If he is referring to the world of hypnotists, then it is difficult to imagine how he could possibly know that no one has yet tried to hypnotize a person at the point of death because to do so would be to prove a negative. If he is talking about the published literature, then the wording could be improved by his stating as much, but doing so would perhaps inject a bit too much anticipation of the horrors to come. In other words, to say that no one has done the experiment means that the report leaves open the possibility of a mundane and predictable ending that would be similar to the vast majority of other scientific experiments. To say, on the

other hand, that there have been no published reports of individuals being hypnotized just before death would perhaps announce that a supernatural story is to ensue: “We’ve heard no reports of vampires in that cemetery” means, of course, that there may indeed be vampires in the cemetery. To tie Lacan back into this analysis, the point is that the “facts” of the title itself are as slippery in terms of the relation between signifier and signified as is the word “I” when referring to the individual.

At any rate, the words of the narrator thus convey an absolute minimum of the standard elements of horror, and also set a tone of scientific veracity. But the narrator is also striving to establish his credibility, and this is the crux of my argument. The biologically sublime object is not centered merely on our realization that our lives are finite, but also on the social value of successfully manipulating the parameters by which life is measured. Also, the narrator reminds us that the question may not be how to determine the value of a life, but how one may gain entry into the set of competencies by which the living and non-living worlds are in communication. In addition, he indirectly reminds us that the conventional terms of understanding in the Judeo-Christian world, as well as in other traditions (that is, the talk of cities of gold or eternal bliss, or, by contrast, the grim warning that one will not take his wealth with him when he dies) all emphasize the materiality of this world and the non-materiality of the next. And finally, he proposes the novel possibility of a new mediator-presumptive in all this.

However, the very instability of the scientific stance of the narrator is predicated on the fact that he is dealing with the Other. He may indeed have discovered a way of becoming a mediator who can delve more closely into the experience of death than anyone has previously done, but he is still alive and Valdemar is still the one who has died. Hence, he is not interacting with an imaginary “other,” but in fact with the symbolic order itself because there is no “other.” In sum, the narrator engages in a commerce of mediation, but it is a transaction that can never actually be completed because if one gets too close to the mediation between life and death, the effect collapses, just as the measurement of a subatomic particle’s position and momentum collapses the wave function in quantum physics.

To invoke Slavoj Žižek, whom Philip Shaw credits with a full elaboration of Lacan’s ideas of the sublime, the narrator is in effect stating that he is aware of the separation between the supernatural realm of death and physical reality, but that there is nonetheless a benefit to be derived if one acts as if the connection somehow exists. Quoting directly from Žižek:

This immaterial corporality of the “body within the body” gives us a precise definition of the sublime object, and it is in this sense only that the psychoanalytic notion of money as a “pre-phallic,” “anal” object is

acceptable—provided that we do not forget how this postulated existence of the sublime body depends on the symbolic order: the indestructible “body-within-the-body” exempted from the effects of wear and tear is always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority. (12–13)

The end-result is a “formal order which supplements and/or disrupts the dual relationship of ‘external’ factual reality and ‘internal’ subjective experience,” Žižek continues (13). “I am dead” also evokes the sublime object as a symbolic overdetermination in that the role of the narrator/hypnotist/mediator is a hopeless enterprise because the communication between the living and the dead cannot be mediated by someone who simply thinks that it is his job to do so. Just as Žižek describes the longstanding fascination with the sinking of the *Titanic* as symbolic overdetermination because it portended chaotic events to befall Europe in the twentieth century (74), the “Valdemar” narrator’s role is likewise overdetermined because humans simply cannot arbitrarily decide that the role of mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead will be a position of gainful employment.

This is not to state emphatically that there is no afterlife or that there is no hope of communicating with the dead, but merely that modern humans are likely to approach the question with a certain amount of awe, and, as Kant would observe, are moreover likely to do so while cognizant of their being mentally dazzled by the very magnitude of the question. What they fail to achieve is the awareness that their desire for such a mediation is an object that can never be approached, because (to once again borrow Žižek’s phrasing) it is an “ideological figure” of an enhanced value to life that “is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system” (49).

Returning once again to the words of the narrator, what precisely does he hope to accomplish in hypnotizing a man near death? As a good scientist, amateur or otherwise, and in much the same formatting as one would find in the introduction to a modern paper in *Science* or *Nature*, he states his goals very precisely:

It remained to be seen, first, whether, in such condition, there existed in the patient any susceptibility to the magnetic influence; secondly, whether, if any existed, it was impaired or increased by the condition; thirdly, to what extent, of for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process. (Poe, “Facts” 1233)

The narrator is therefore not promising any sort of communication between the world of death and the world of the living, but merely a closely-focused gaze at the physical details of the process of dying. For all we know at this point, the narrator draws a bright line between life

and death, and would perhaps even postulate that any activity from the presumably dead is a contradiction in terms and that the deceased is, in fact, not yet deceased. What the narrator promises, instead, is a tantalizing and never-explained observation that the arresting of the “encroachments of Death” is “immensely important” in the “character of its consequences” (“Facts” 1233).

If the narrator’s goal is one of disinterested scientific inquiry, supplemented perhaps by his desire to perform some socially valuable good, then is he successful in his goals? The answer is that his three conditions are conclusively determined. First, he discovers that a person near death can indeed be hypnotized; second, he finds that Valdemar, at least, can be put in a very deep and very successful hypnotic trance; and third, he determines that the duration of a hypnotic trance at the point of death can apparently go on indefinitely and that the dead body is incorruptible until the hypnotist releases the body from the trance. Moreover, the experiment is falsifiable in that failure to hypnotize the subject near death would be obvious because the subject would merely display the usual and predictable signs of death and consequent bodily decay.

Whether the narrator is successful in arresting death is, naturally, a decided no. In fact, a traditional reading of the story is that death is inevitable and that humans who figure out some technological way to confound its normal course will inadvertently unleash some horrific nightmare, such as a body that collapses in “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity” (“Facts” 1243). But to return to Lacan, the question is a bit more complicated. What is the social necessity that the narrator addresses? Is it society’s need for a stable order in the physical world that also has dominion over the communication lines with the afterlife? If so, then are the complicated details of Valdemar’s death a means of allowing for a repetition that will permanently enact a change in the symbolic order? This possibility also efficiently explains why Valdemar has to be reanimated, only to decompose dramatically and horrifically at the end of the story. In order to meet the necessity of altering the symbolic order so that the fictional society of the story can come to grips with a world in which hypnotism can indeed change the timing of death’s final dissolution, Valdemar must exit the world in a truly dramatic fashion. After all, the story begins with the narrator’s observation that “I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion” (“Facts” 1233). If the Valdemar episode is a change in the symbolic order of Poe’s fictional world, then the narrator/hypnotist’s rhetorical style of scientific-sounding veracity can also be explained in his function as a herald of the changes to come.

Nonetheless, the social function of the narrator and his relation to the sublime might well elicit a “so what” attitude in a reader, except that the fate of the living Valdemar is indeed of sufficient magnitude to overwhelm the imagination. We are in awe of the narrator in his role simply because we are subdued by the inexorable fate of Valdemar himself. Valdemar is dying of tuberculosis, or “phthisis,” as the narrator diagnoses his condition in his ongoing program of providing himself scientific and/or medical veracity. The very precise description of Valdemar’s final travails is simply intended to show his inexorable decline and imminent death. If the question of how Valdemar is related to infinity is especially pertinent now that he is about to somehow join in that infinity, then the answer to such cosmic questions also draws attention back to the narrator as mediator. The enclosure of Valdemar’s experience within a report, in fact, insulates the narrator from interrogation by the reader. In other words, the reader is less likely to pore over every enigmatic statement or nuance in the narrator’s account in attempting to ascertain whether the report is indeed reliable in recounting a voice from the realm of death. We are told again and again that the casebook study is a reliable medical report, and the minuteness of description throughout the brief story is sufficient to discourage our suspicion of the narrator.

From this perspective, the plethora of details on the state of Valdemar’s lungs is merely intended to show that the discrete changes in his internal tissues are more than modern medicine can successfully address. But whether or not the precise observations of Valdemar’s internal organs would require modern lung X-rays and microbiological assays and the like, the fact remains that the “ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered a month before” is indicative of the biological sublime because the doctors, in their own way, are just as overwhelmed by the progress of the disease as is Valdemar; the only way the doctors have attained a bit of power for themselves over nature is their very precise prediction of Valdemar’s estimated time of death: “M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday)” (“Facts” 1235–36).

However, to return to the point that the story primarily invokes sliding signifiers, I will draw attention to the very minor detail of the narrator’s returning to address his subject once again as “M. Valdemar.” As Roland Barthes notes, the “M” is stated for a good reason:

Saying “M(onsieur) Valdemar” is not the same thing as saying “Valdemar.” In a lot of stories Poe uses simple Christian names (Ligeia, Eleanora, Morella). The presence of the “Monsieur” brings with it an effect of social reality, of the historically real: the hero is socialized, he forms part of a definite society, in which he is supplied with a civil title. We must therefore note: social code. (4)

At this point in the story, the narrator has referred to Valdemar first as “M. Valdemar,” then as “M. Ernest Valdemar,” another three times as “M. Valdemar,” once as “Valdemar” immediately after relating a note that Valdemar has signed in the same manner, and then consistently as “M. Valdemar” for the remainder of the story, including in all direct quotations when he addresses the patient. There is too much of the narrator and his social role to conclude other than that Barthes is correct in his estimation: the “M.” is indeed indicative of a social code—and, to develop the argument, of a further codification of the narrator’s function in apprehending sliding signifiers. The question of whether Valdemar is subject to death, after all, is mundane insofar as all humans must eventually die, which leads to the conclusion that the question of whether there is indeed a realm of death is equally mundane if we contemplate for a moment the true meaning of the term “afterlife.” In fact, there must be a point literally “after life” that follows the experience of death.

However, the question of whether an individual has succeeded in breaching the gap between living and death, even if only in terms of communication, is a different matter. Therefore, one must conclude that there is an element of the uncanny in the narrator (of whom we know very little), as well as in the dead Valdemar. Once the plug is pulled, so to speak, Valdemar decomposes and ceases to occupy the world in any recognizable human form. The narrator undoubtedly has a social function, but it is a strange public role that he performs—one in which he seemingly drifts between the social world of worried rumor and clients politely referred to as “monsieur,” as a scientist of marked ability and as a trusted shaman. The narrator’s social role also explains one final conundrum: why does he bring Valdemar out of the trance? More pointedly, why does he do so, and why does he *tell us* he has done so? The first answer is seemingly straightforward because the dead Valdemar has told the narrator that his present situation is intolerable: “For God’s sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or quick!—waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!” (“Facts” 1242). However, the situation is in fact ambiguous, for Valdemar has actually said that the only situation he cannot abide is the state of being raised out of his trance to the point where communication can take place. He therefore wishes either to be returned to a deep trance, or else to be brought entirely out of the trance and suffer the consequences.

One might also note that “I say to you that I am dead” could mean that Valdemar has not been conscious of the several months that have transpired since his last communication exchange with his hypnotist. “I say to you” could in fact mean that he thinks (if such a word can be used for a dead man) that he said the original words “I am dead” just seconds previously. The implications are that the lapse of time means more to the

narrator (and the reader) than it does to Valdemar, and that the several-month state of Valdemar as being a corpse in suspension is a fact that awes only those of us who still dwell in the normal state of human existence.

To get back to the question, the narrator chooses the latter course of action and elects to bring Valdemar out of the trance, but his explanation is once again couched in the maddening bureaucratise of the passive voice: "I was thoroughly unnerved, and for an instant remained undecided what to do. At first I made an endeavor to re-compose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him" ("Facts" 1242). I say "passive voice" because the best we can do in unpacking the narrator's words is to break them down into two sentences: "I tried to re-compose the patient" and "The re-composition was defeated by total abeyance of the will." Whose will was responsible? The narrator has already informed us that Valdemar when healthy was a good hypnotic subject, but not a perfect one because of his strong personality, so we are simply not able to determine whether Valdemar's old recalcitrance has once again returned, or whether the narrator has finally lost his nerve—or some combination of the two. Once again, if we look at the details of the exchange between the two men very closely, we find that our ability to reason out the "facts of the case" is indeterminate.

At any rate, the narrator proceeds with bringing Valdemar out of his trance: "I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him. In this attempt I soon saw that I should be successful—or at least I soon fancied that my success would be complete—and I am sure that all in the room were prepared to see the patient awaken" ("Facts" 1242). Here, it becomes obvious that the narrator possesses at least some of the knowledge already possessed by the dead Valdemar: both are laboring under the mistaken assumption that an awakening from the trance will be at least a momentary return to life. If this were not the case, then Valdemar would presumably have said, "either put me back to sleep or bring me out of sleep and let me die." By extension, one can also infer that Valdemar does not have any supernatural knowledge of death that has come to him by dint of merely being dead. The answer to Stephen Dedalus's question of who told King Hamlet in the afterlife that he was a victim of murder is simply, in the case of Valdemar, that no entity or principality has told him anything at all. But even if Valdemar is indeed being sly and is merely trying to get the narrator to hasten his death and stop the torment, we are still confronted with the indeterminacy of death's true nature, of the possibility of a separate realm where dead souls abide, and finally, whether the narrator can indeed prolong the death of an individual while "awake." In other words, we are once again in just as much a state of perplexity as the public for whom the narrator is composing his case-notes. Therefore, the question of why

the narrator relates the story is because that is his social role; but the explanation only reinforces his own sublime role as an uncanny participant in a function that can never be explained or understood.

In conclusion, the reading of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” that I advocate is predicated on the assumption that the details of Valdemar’s death can best be approached in terms of the Lacanian sliding metaphor, and furthermore is enhanced by Žižek’s notion of the sublime object. In other words, the existential situation of Valdemar as he approaches death and then apparently undergoes some sort of life-in-death reality, coupled with the role of the narrator in showing us that his social role is necessary in making some sense of the Valdemar affair, demonstrate that our having to deal with an unstable symbolic order defeats our ability to rely on reason as an ultimate arbiter. Without both the age-old mystery of life as demonstrated by Valdemar’s experience, and the scientific veracity of the narrator’s role as purveyor of a reproducible phenomenon, we would be faced with the choice of either a moral tale about the wisdom of not playing God, or else a different moral tale incorporating a “man versus nature” theme. Instead, the combination of the two sources of the sublime provides a hybrid tale in which science is indeed the backdrop, but our sense of awe is engendered as much by the realization that society nurtures a will to control life’s destiny as it is by the very physical nature of that destiny.

Here, the question is not whether reality is structured in such a way that an awesome undertaking is always doomed to failure, but whether we interpret symbols in such a way that we are at least partially conscious of the stakes involved. Thus, we are aware that we are unaware, but are still unable to fully apprehend this lack without a collapse of the sublime object. However, this is not to say that full awareness collapses the ethereal dimension in which Valdemar somehow simultaneously dwells as he maintains some form of bodily life-in-death, but that we collapse that which serves us socially as the enticing “if only” when we become fully aware that the sublime object is a symbol rather than a reality—and a sliding symbol at that.

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One Hundred Frogs in Steve McCaffery's *The Basho Variations*

ABSTRACT

The article discusses Steve McCaffery's *The Basho Variations* with a focus on various modes of trantranslation/transcreation/transaption of Matsuo Bashō's famous frog haiku. The emphasis is placed on the complexities (of the processuality) of trantranslation which deliberately alters, distorts and reimagines the source text. The intercultural and intertextual quality of McCaffery's poems is discussed in the context of multilevel references to classical Japanese aesthetics of haiku writing. The comparative reading of McCaffery's and Bashō's texts foregrounds the issue of events, or "frogmentary events," and the importance of the role of the reader in completing poetic messages.

Keywords: haiku, frog, Steve McCaffery, Matsuo Bashō, translation, transcreation, trantranslation, event.

“The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen
and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.”
(Stein 497, 500)

“*Haiku* shows us what we knew all the time, but did not know we knew;
it shows us that we are poets in so far as we live at all.”
(Blyth, *The Genius of Haiku* 63)

“to see what lies / below / the lines”
(bpNichol, *The Captain Poetry Poems*)

370 INTRODUCTION

This article looks at Matsuo Bashō’s famous frog haiku, and shows how it still inspires avant-garde poets in Canada. It shows how Steve McCaffery playfully and subversively writes through the seventeenth-century poem. In my analysis of this peculiar transcultural phenomenon I place emphasis on the complexities of transtranlation/transcreation/transaption which alters, distorts and reimagines the source text. The (cultural and textual) in-betweenness is seen (or heard?) in multilevel references to classical Japanese aesthetics of haiku writing, but is also manifested in allusions to Bashō translations by Allen Ginsberg and Alan Watts.

Brian Henderson notes that in the radical poetry of McCaffery and bpNichol “signs are ‘events’ we are to experience rather than traditionally read” (1–2). In my transactive reading of Canadian experimental poems, I link the philosophy of “frogmentary events” with classical haiku aesthetics where the power of suggestion plays the key role, and where the poem must be completed by the reader. Bashō famously said that “the haiku that reveals seventy to eighty percent of its subject is good. Those that reveal fifty to sixty percent we never tire of” (qtd. in Yasuda 128). If this holds true for traditional haiku poems, then we may expect that their verbivocovisual avant-garde incarnations will offer extra challenges for the reader.

One of the aesthetic categories in classical Japanese *haiku* is called *yūgen* (“profound mystery”) which, as Eliot Deutsch puts it, “teaches us that in aesthetic experience it is not that ‘I see the work of art,’ but that by ‘seeing the I is transformed’” (32). In Jeffrey Johnson’s view, *yūgen* is the key aesthetic category both in classical haiku and its avant-garde incarnations (16, 19–28). It is certainly in operation in Steve McCaffery’s *Basho’s Variations* which can be seen as an homage to Bashō but also to the avant-garde experiments of bpNichol and Dom Sylvester Houédard.

ON “FROG COMPETITION”

There are many surprising affinities between Bashō's haiku and contemporary Canadian poetic experiments. As Masako Hiraga and Haj Ross point out (27), Bashō's haiku was written at a gathering called *karwazu awase* (“frog meeting”), or as Haruo Shirane calls it, a “frog competition” (*Traces of Dreams* 17, 124), which was later edited and published by Senka, one of Bashō's disciples (Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 16). For the Japanese, the communal setting and dialogic responses to previous poems in *haikai* sequences are part of Bashō's poetic tradition, but many Western readers often forget that Bashō's *hokku* was the first poem in a long exchange in the form of linked verse. Shirane discusses this issue in his *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*, and particularly in his article “Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths”; he notes that “the exchange, which continued to juxtapose and exchange various points of view, extended for 24 rounds and involved 41 poets” (*Traces of Dreams* 17). I mention all this because Mike Borkent discovers a similar dynamics in Barwin and beaulieu's *frogments from the frag pool: haiku after Bashō*; he argues that the collection might be examined as a contemporary intertextual *karwazu awase* inspired by this initial gathering (195). In his insightful discussion of visual responses to Bashō's haiku, Borkent shows many fascinating parallels in terms of imagery building, composition, and games of sense activated by the two Canadian poets, whose collaborative project has been inspired by Steve McCaffery's *Basho Variations*. I would only add that the way I see it *frogments from the frag pool* is a *karwazu awase* in a double sense: first, it is a collaborative project, and second, it makes multimodal references to Bashō's immanent poetics. McCaffery's poetic project cannot be called a *karwazu awase*, but the idea of working along what Shirane calls “vertical axis”—a reference (often parodic) or an allusion to, a twist on earlier poetry, from either the Japanese or the Chinese tradition (Shirane, “Beyond the Haiku Moment”)—is certainly in operation. More than that, McCaffery applies one more technique taken from the Japanese tradition; the “vertical axis,” understood as “cultural memory, a larger body of associations that the larger community can identify with” (Shirane, “Beyond the Haiku Moment”), is activated not only in his playful references to Bashō's haiku, but also by widening the perspective of reading through the haiku by means of opening a number of intertextual (both literary and cultural) associations. The notion and practice of ex(change)/linkage will be immensely important here.

In his book *Traces of Dreams*, Shirane discusses the two axes: the horizontal (focusing on the present, the contemporary world), and the vertical (leading into the past, to history, to other poems):

Bashō believed that the poet had to work along both axes. To work only in the present would result in poetry that was fleeting. To work just in the past, on the other hand, would be to fall out of touch with the fundamental nature of *haikai*, which was rooted in the everyday world. *Haikai* was, by definition, anti-traditional, anti-classical, anti-establishment, but that did not mean that it rejected the past. (Shirane, “Beyond the Haiku Moment”)

For Shirane, any discussion of Bashō’s poetics (and responses to his writing) that does not take into account humor, transgression of established rules of poetry writing, and the emphasis on the innovation is in effect more or less reductive. Bashō was a master of “seeking new poetic associations in traditional topics” (Shirane, “Matsuo Bashō’s *Oku no Hosomichi* and the Anxiety of Influence” 182). As Koji Kawamoto notes, “[t]he key to [haiku’s] unabated vigour lies in Bashō’s keen awareness of the utility of the past in undertaking an avant-garde enterprise, which he summed up in his famous adage *fueki-ryuko*, which can be roughly translated as ‘permanence and change’” (“The Use and Disuse of Tradition in Bashō’s Haiku and Imagist Poetry” 709). Bashō’s notion of the new “lay not so much in the departure from or rejection of the perceived tradition as in the reworking of established practices and conventions, in creating new counterpoints to the past” (Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 5). Bearing the idea of creating new literary and cultural counterpoints in mind, we can see McCaffery poetic experimentation as a fascinating continuation in the spirit of Bashō. But let us see first how it worked in Bashō’s poem.

It should be noted that in terms of its imagery—and particularly *kigo*, the seasonal word—Bashō’s poem was revolutionary and innovative, for, as Shirane argues, it worked “against the established conventions of the frog topos” (*Traces of Dreams* 17). The preface to *Kokinshū*, the first imperial anthology, describes “listening to the warbler singing among the blossoms and the song of the frog dwelling in the water” (Kawamoto, *The Poetics of Japanese Verse* 76). Bashō’s image of the frog departed from that poetic ideal:

According to one source, Kikaku (1661–1707), one of Bashō’s disciples, suggested that Bashō use *yamabuki ya* (globeflower!) in the opening phrase, which would have left Bashō’s *hokku* within the circle of classical associations. Instead Bashō worked against what was considered the “poetic essence” (*hon’i*), the established classical associations, of the frog. In place of the plaintive voice of the frog singing in the rapids or calling out for his lover, Bashō gave the sound of the frog jumping into the water. And instead of the elegant image of a frog in a fresh mountain stream beneath the globeflower (*yamabuki*), the *hokku* presented a stagnant pond. (Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 15; see Crowley 57)

Commenting on the technicalities of imagery building, Chen-ou Liu stresses “the transformative power of the newness created by parodying established practices and cultural associations” (54). Yosa Buson (1716–83), one of the greatest masters of haiku, and Bashō’s admirer, composed the following meta-commentary which clearly affirms establishing a new perspective:

jumping in
and washing off an old poem—
a frog (qtd. in Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 15)

Shirane refers to Ogata Tsutomu’s opinion that Bashō’s haiku is not only about the frog as such, but a peculiar invitation to his *haikai* partners, suggesting the following: “The frog has always been regarded as a creature that sings, especially in fresh streams, in the spring, but I want to look at the frog differently. Wouldn’t you be interested in doing this together?” (Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 16). And when we look at the number of McCaffery’s poems in *Basho Variations*, we can be sure what his answer would be.

And before I begin my discussion of McCaffery’s poems, let me quote two more poems-responses to Bashō’s haiku. Clearly, both of them are parodies. The one written by Buson could be read as “a commentary on the pitiful situation of the haiku community of his day” (Liu 55):

Inheriting one of our Ancestor’s verses:

the old pond’s
frog is growing elderly
fallen leaves (qtd. in Liu 55, Crowley 55)

The one written by Ryōkan (1758–1831), the noted Zen priest-poet, is much closer in mood to McCaffery’s experiments:

a new pond—
not even the sound of
a frog jumping in (qtd. in Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* 17)

TRANSCREATIONS, TRANSAPTIONS OR TRANSTRANSLATIONS?

According to Hiroaki Sato, the author-editor of *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English*, there are more than 135 English versions of Bashō’s frog haiku. Here is the original poem in transcription and four

translations. The first two translations are made by two esteemed scholars of Zen Buddhism and Japanese aesthetics. Both Suzuki and Blyth wrote about the frog haiku extensively. Blyth's translations and commentaries¹ influenced many innovative English poets, including Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Rexroth and Allen Ginsberg.

Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomū
mizu no oto (qtd. in Sato 118)

Into the ancient pond
A frog jumps
Water's sound! (translated by D. T. Suzuki; qtd. in Sato 154)

The old pond;
A frog jumps in,—
The sound of the water. (translated by R. H. Blyth; qtd. in Sato 154)

The old pond,
A frog jumps in:
Plop! (translated by Alan Watts; Watts)

The old pond
A frog jumped in,
Kerplunk! (translated by Allen Ginsberg; qtd. in Sato 164)

The first pages of McCaffery's *Basho's Variations* immediately foreground the issue of (double?) intersemiotic translation; here we find two versions of the frog haiku—one from Scotland (by Dom Sylvester Houédard), and one from Canada (by bpNichol)—and Watts's and Ginsberg's expressive translations seem much closer to them in terms of aesthetics.

I am calling them “versions,” as it would be difficult (and risky) to term all of them translations, as some English-speaking poets creatively play with the notion of a faithful translation, and they deliberately alter, distort and reimagine the source text. We can speak of a considerable number of creative transpositions, or “transcreations” of Bashō's frog haiku rendered into English by bpNichol, Steve McCaffery (but also by Gary Barwin and derek beaulieu in their collaborative project *frogments from the frag pool*); one could even argue that they constitute a separate sub-genre.

“Transcreations,” the term bpNichol and McCaffery (the Toronto Research Group) adopted from Haroldo de Campos, foregrounds “the creative dimensions of translation as a form of writing” (Godard,

¹ See Blyth, *A History of Haiku, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings up to Issa*.

"Translating Apollinaire" 208); translation here is viewed as "a project for transformation and renewal" (208). The link with twentieth century experimental writing (both avant-garde and, to use Marjorie Perloff's term, *arrière-garde* texts) is of utmost importance; Barbara Godard notes that for bpNichol and McCaffery, just as for "Pound, Stein and Valery, 'the translative act is an act by words upon words,' one which enables the poet to 'borrow entirely his content and invent entirely his form'" (Toronto Research Group 81; Godard, "Translating Apollinaire" 208).

In his most perceptive discussion of Barwin and beaulieu's *fragments from the frag pool*, Mike Borkent coins the term "transaption." He refers to Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptations as "palimpsestuous" and "inherently double- or multilaminated works" that do not value "proximity or fidelity to the adapted text," but rather foreground "(re-)interpretation and (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 6, 148, 172), and he argues that some texts (like those written by Barwin and beaulieu) "can exhibit features of both types of intertextual relation, thereby straddling the borders of translation and adaptation" (Borkent 190). A peculiar combination of "textual experiences of fidelity and repetition (translation)" and "experiences of doubling and re-interpretation (adaptation)" (190) is at the core of his analyses; Borkent searches for the borderland between translation and adaptation to show how Barwin and beaulieu construe certain characteristic features of the content and style of Bashō's haiku. My attitude in reading McCaffery's poems will be similar.

Interestingly, the source text for McCaffery's (and some of Barwin and beaulieu's) transcreations is not necessarily Bashō's Japanese haiku, but its concrete re-writings by Dom Sylvester Houédard and bpNichol, which is why terming them transtranslations is also quite justified. In his article titled "Rewriting and Postmodern Poetics in Canada," John Stout tries to capture the essence of transtranslation: "Rejecting the notion of a faithful translation, a transtranslation takes liberties with its source text by making a lack of respect for faithful reproduction of pre-existing meanings and forms into a productive aesthetic strategy" (93). In Stout's opinion, the phenomenon of transtranslation has become a notable trend in Canadian poetry ever since bpNichol published his text *Translating Translating Apollinaire* (that happened in 1979, but the fact that the book was republished in 2013 might be indicative of how influential this piece still is, especially for avant-garde artists).

One could argue that the practice of rewriting in Canadian poetry is part of a larger phenomenon. In *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957–2003)*, Pauline Butling expands on Fred Wah's notion of "re poetics" and writes what follows: "Re posits lateral, spiral, and/or reverse movements rather than the single line and forward thrust

of avant-gardism. . . . A *re* poetics involves rewriting cultural scripts and reconfiguring literary/social formations. The goal is to *change*, not conserve, past and present constructions” (21). It should be noted that in contemporary Canadian poetry this process of “changing” is often playful, fluid and rhizomatic, similarly to *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, a project which, as Pauline Butling stresses, “disrupted notions of meaning and authorship” (68). The term rhizomatic is not a coincidence here, as both Butling and Barbara Godard draw links between *Translating Translating Apollinaire* and theories by Deleuze and Guattari, especially those pertaining to the porousness of authorship and the enfolding/unfolding of meaning. I shall come back to this “strand of narration” in the latter part of this essay. The first publication of bpNichol’s open-ended collaborative project included not only his own “translations”/transcreations/transtranslations, but also those by other writers (Dick Higgins, Steve McCaffery, Richard Truhlar, Douglas Barbour and Cavan McCarthy, to mention just a few). When discussing Steve McCaffery’s *Basho’s Variations*, we need to see them “in alignment” with bpNichol’s school of transmission; instead of traditional practice of translation as from one language to another, these artists are mainly interested in inventing other modes (such as Nichol’s “sound translation,” or his “walking east along the northern boundary looking south”). As Henderson aptly notices, “all these versions of the poem compose a kind of ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,’ but without the blackbird. . . . But they are certainly play—play that renders language opaque except as far as vectors of change can be followed from one version to another” (29). Henderson stresses that as the “Translating Translating” in the title suggests, “we are urged to look into the writing, not out from it to conventional meanings” (29). McCaffery’s book can be considered a major contribution to this eccentric (non)genre, and it will definitely make the readers look into the writing. Similarly to *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, *The Basho Variations* foregrounds the relation between the play of form and sense (but also (non)sense) in the shifting meanings that are produced with each rewriting/writing through (see Godard, “Translating Apollinaire” 210).

PRESENCE, ABSENCE AND “FROGMENTARY EVENTS”

Let me come back to Brian Henderson’s argument about signs as “events” we are to experience rather than traditionally read in McCaffery’s and bpNichol’s poetry. “In short,” he says, “it is a transformation of what reading is that such poetry demands” (2). As McCaffery himself explains: “[A]n issue formulates itself between a reading (of words) and a perceiving

(of events within a zone of syntax) in which to read is to risk association, in which association in itself is to risk encounter with chaos" ("Notes" 42). Thus, "reading becomes perceiving," Henderson concludes (2). I think that in reading poems by bpNichol and McCaffery one needs to learn how to see, how to notice signs that are there, even if they are to some extent invisible. I am interested in the philosophy of the event in Bashō's haiku and its truly playful (often verbivocovisual) re-readings which form something that we may call "frogmentary events."

Steve Odin notes that in the Japanese tradition of aestheticism we may speak of "a variety of highly refined, elegant, and pervasive qualities of atmospheric beauty such as *aware* (sad beauty), *yūgen* (profound mystery), *wabi* (rustic poverty), *sabi* (loneliness), *shibumi* (elegant restraint), *mu* (negative space), *iki* (chic), and *fūryū* or *fūga* (windblown elegance)" (99). Many critics agree that in classical Japanese haiku *yūgen* plays a special role. As Eliot Deutsch puts it, *yūgen* "teaches us that in aesthetic experience it is not that 'I see the work of art,' but that by 'seeing the I is transformed'" (32). But how does it work?

In his informative *Zen and the Japanese Culture*, D. T. Suzuki begins his discussion of the quality of *yūgen* by referring to the meaning of the word itself; we learn that it is a compound word *yū* (meaning "cloudy") and *gen* (meaning "impenetrability"), and the combination meaning "mystery," "unknowability," "obscurity," "beyond intellectual calculability" (Suzuki 220). As I have already mentioned in the introduction, Jeffrey Johnson views *yūgen* as the key aesthetic category both in classical haiku and its avant-garde incarnations. It is certainly in operation in McCaffery's *Basho Variations*. In order for us to grasp the importance of *yūgen* both in the frog haiku and in Canadian transcreations/transaptions/transtranlations, we need to come back to D. T. Suzuki and his detailed description of the complexity of *yūgen* dynamics:

An object so designated is not subject to dialectical analysis or to a clear-cut definition. It is not at all presentable to our sense-intellect as this or that, but this does not mean that the object is altogether beyond the reach of human experience. In fact, it is experienced by us, and yet we cannot take it out into the broad daylight of objective publicity. It is something we feel within ourselves, and yet it is an object about which we can talk, it is an object of mutual communication only among those who have the feeling of it. (221)

And as if this description was not enough, Suzuki goes on to say that *yūgen* "is hidden behind the clouds, but not entirely out of sight, for we feel its presence, its secret message being transmitted through the darkness however impenetrable to the intellect" (221); he immediately adds though that "it would

be a great mistake if we took this cloudiness for something experientially valueless or devoid of significance to our daily life” (Suzuki 221).

In his article titled “Rewriting and Postmodern Poetics in Canada: Neo-Haikus, Neo-Sonnets, Neo-Lullabies, Manifestos,” John Stout argues that “in haiku, an object seen in a particular moment in time shocks the perceiver into a new awareness of life’s mystery and strangeness” (89). We can only guess that in neo-haikus the idea of shocking the perceiver might be even more intense. Stout notes that McCaffery “stretches the haiku well beyond its traditional limits, turns it inside out, and reimagines it in fundamental ways” (89). Interrogating language, playing with the possibilities of form are crucial here, but the most important thing, in Stout’s opinion, is taking lyric poetry into new territory. The issue of perceiving presence/absence, and perceiving events will become a crucial element of the processuality of reading.

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THE BASHO VARIATIONS AND MCCAFFERY’S PUNS

Since the beginning of his career, McCaffery has conceived of his translative project as an attempt to see “what is to be gained from a break with the one-dimensional view of translation” (*Rational Geomancy* 27). McCaffery describes the two coordinates of his project as “injunction and transgression respectively” (8x8 44). Even though he maintains the original intention of the source text, his translations usually foreground some marginal piece of the original work: “Rather I try to take a deconstructive approach [to translation] by locating certain areas of suppressed preinscription within the source texts and then bringing these preinscriptions to an inscriptive surface: the target texts. This frequently resulted in radically different texts, but were all authenticated by these suppressed preinscriptions” (8x8 45).

As I have already mentioned, McCaffery’s collection offers new and surprising, mind-bending versions of Bashō’s haiku. Even the titles give us an idea of McCaffery’s range of forms and discourses: “THE GASTRONOMIC BASHO” (for Daniel Spoerri), “THE GOLF COURSE AND ANIMAL RIGHTS BASHO,” “THE SUPREMATIST BASHO” (for Kasimir Malevich), “THE PRESBYTERIAN BASHO,” “THE HINDU ARYAN BASHO,” “THE DINGBBAT BASHO,” “A LEWIS CARROLL BASHO” (for Jean-Jacques Lecercle). The last is comprised of two lines which (just like any other poem in the collection) contain the essence of McCaffery’s exercises in style:

Alice through the Looking-Pond
 where no word means the same thing twice

Words and proliferation/dissemination/fluidity of meaning, achieved (?) or maybe (dis)/(un)covered (?) once Alice “swims” through the Looking-Pond? Perhaps Alice does not have to do anything in order to go through the Looking-Pond; perhaps her reflection in the Looking-Pond (the Pond that Looks) does the trick. . . . Nothing is certain here, no fixed image/scene is given. The readers must activate their “imaginative empathy” (Addiss 12) in order to enter the scene. We are not given 50-60% of the image content that needs to be complemented by the reader (Suzuki); this is definitely less than 50%.

The mystery and lack of “countours” may take other forms. The fluidity of meaning and processuality of reading is even more pronounced by the fact that some minimalist poems are three pages long (each subsequent page is occupied by only one word). Also, page numbers are not given—but who needs page numbers in a book which attempts to poetically affirm the non-dualistic framework of mind which favours interdependency over clear-cut definitions?

Speaking of poetic visionaries equally strongly attracted to the idea of non-duality, the book opens with three poems: Matsuo Bashō's frog haiku in transcription, Dom Sylvester Houédard's famous “frog / pond / plop” and bpNichol's “fog / prondl / pop.” What follows is an astonishing number of multimodal transtranslations. The collection might be titled *Translating Translating Basho*, as each of these texts brings new preinscriptions to an inscriptive surface.

Quite surprisingly, *The Basho Variations* is categorized by the Canadian Cataloguing and Publication data as a work of translation. In an interview with Ryan Cox, McCaffery offers a comment regarding this peculiar categorization. He says:

[I]t's an interesting categorization that I'm happy to live with. Certainly, translation and creative translation, maverick translation, has been a long interest of mine, which I developed both with Dick Higgins when we developed the notion of the allusive referential, and with bpNichol in some of the first research reports of the Toronto Research Group. Can you creatively mistranslate?

The answer to this question is obviously: Yes!

The poem which opens the collection, titled “PROEM: THE LOGIC OF FROGS # 383” (dedicated to Dick Higgins), contains this passage:

- what happens here?
- a translation? or an allusion?
- perhaps the translation of translation itself?

So many question marks in only three lines of the first p(r)oem. McCaffery's translative commitment is to the absent, the latent, the silent,

was it the frog or the pond
that jumped into the poem?

did the poem hold one
or both of them?

how many frogs can a single poem hold?
how many poems to each pond?

“was it the frog or the pond / that jumped into the poem?”—what a thought-provoking question! This text belongs to a group of poems which attempt to question not only the course of events in the poem by Matsuo Bashō, but also playfully discuss the philosophy of the haiku as a poem about a particular event. I would argue that McCaffery subtly shifts the emphasis from what happened (the first two lines) to extratextual matters, especially in the last two lines. This brings me back to Stout’s argument about taking lyric poetry into a new territory. Innocent as they may seem, McCaffery’s simple questions open more links to Bashō’s haiku and its philosophy than one would imagine at first glance. Mindful reading of his poems (we should not be deceived by their apparent simplicity!) reveals hidden depths, usually in the form of “question marks.” These highly intertextual games of sense contain (multimodal: verbal, visual and sonic) references to various (literary, visual) texts of culture but also science (for instance cognitive science in “THE GHOST OR BOUMA SHAPE BASHO”).

McCaffery’s exercises in reading comprehension may manifest as an ingenious blend like the one in a poem titled “TO MAX ERNST: ALL MY LOVE BASHO,” or a complex structure of a frog-soliloquy such as one we find in “HAMLET’S BASHO.” “TO MAX ERNST: ALL MY LOVE BASHO” writes through Bashō’s haiku by making references to Houédard’s translation:

f r o g
p o n d
p l o p

(Untitled poem by Dom Sylvester Houédard)

Mike Borkent aptly notices that this poem “dramatically reduces Bashō’s haiku to its key sensorial focus, enacting Houédard’s understanding of visual poetry as ‘Constrictive (contractive) constructive & coexistential’” (199). In Borkent’s view, Houédard reduces each line to its central, four-letter element, and lines them up in order to introduce “a sense of the letters

interacting both vertically and horizontally” (199). More than that, the emphasis placed on the letter “o” and other circular typographic elements (like the final word “plop”) “further reflects the ripples on the pond’s surface and the final onomatopoeic phrase of Bashō’s haiku” (Borkent 199). In McCaffery’s poem, the emphasis on the letter “o” (“mizu no oto” in the original) is even more pronounced, it seems. If Houédard’s composition foregrounds the immediacy of poetic image—we can see all three words at once; they form a grid which activates a sense of symmetry and parallelism between words and letters (Borkent 199)—McCaffery decides to slow down the pace of reading. His poem is three pages long! Each word appears in big capital letters, centre-justified on separate pages, and the third page features a mysterious word “loplop” which obviously echoes Houédard’s “plop” sound, but more importantly it is preceded by two letters and thus the music of “plop” metamorphoses into the name of a birdlike character featured in prints, collages and paintings by Max Ernst. Through the heightened emphasis on the visual and the aural in this poem, “reading becomes an exploration of possibilities—sonic, lexic and/or iconic” (Henderson 1–2). In a way, by jumping into the pond the frog changes into a bird-like creature.

The same (?) frog enters a metaphysical meditation on the nature of action or rather non-action in “HAMLET’S BASHO.” And, surprising as it may be, we are coming full circle to Bashō’s revolutionary gesture towards the frog. As Liu puts it, “[i]nstead of giving ‘the song of the frog,’ Bashō focused on the water sound of a diving frog. . . . In juxtaposing these two seemingly incongruous worlds and languages of *ga* (elegance) and *zoku* (vulgarity), Bashō humorously inverted and recast established cultural associations and conventions of the frog” (54). As a result, he created a “parody of classical poetry that refers to the frog as expressive of romantic longing” (Crowley 57). McCaffery reverses the scheme, and plays the game in the opposite direction. In his two-page long poem, the frog enters the scene in Shakespeare’s play, and we read the most elegant song of the frog, a sort of soliloquy. Here is the beginning:

To
 jump
 or
 not
 to
 jump,
 that
 is
 the
 ques
 tion;

The poem reads vertically in the sense that most lines consist of one word (or syllable) in the manner of an ideogram. By following the frog's inner voice speaking, the readers' eyes move downwards, plunge in a way into the frog's inner world of troubles, as it speaks of suffering "the / waves / and / ripples / of / out / rage / ous / wa / ter." "HAMLET'S BASHO" reads vertically also in a metaphorical sense mentioned by Haruo Shirane; by moving along the vertical axis, McCaffery links the moment before the jump in Bashō's poem with Hamlet's indecision concerning his next move. The two columns of fragmented so-li-lo-quy fill the silence before the jump, and given the context of the play, the readers are not even sure whether the actual jump will take place ("To / swim, / per / chance / to / drown, / aye / there's / the / rub").

The focus on silence, the lack of words, the uncertainty and mystery of the scene features prominently in "THE GHOST OR BOUMA SHAPE BASHO." Here, McCaffery uses the theory of bouma shape to accentuate or foreground the notion of latent meaning of words and the play of visible/invisible or present/absent that are at the core of Bashō's poem. This poem is one of three poems which have been accompanied by notes at the end of the collection. McCaffery provides readers with the information about the term "Bouma Shape" as "used in cognition studies to refer to the sub-optical silhouette surrounding an individual word." Some typographers argue that, while reading, people are able to recognize words by deciphering boumas, which is seen as a natural strategy for increasing reading efficiency. McCaffery's poem unfolds on three subsequent pages; the readers can see the first two pages side by side, and in order to see the mysterious page three, they need to turn the page. This act simultaneously reveals and conceals the message of the poem. How does it work? Each page offers a new version of the same scene. Page one features three words: frog, pond, plop centre-justified in a relatively big size (but not in capitals), forming a sort of pillar of words; each word is surrounded by empty space. The second page presents the same words surrounded by boumas. Page three, the most mysterious of them all, shows only the contours of meaning, or three emptinesses, three meaningful spaces waiting to be deciphered:



It is no coincidence that this open-ended poem marks the end of the collection, leaving the reader at a loss concerning the actual action of the frog, the significance of the whole scene, and how the poem may res(pond) to Bashō's haiku. One possible reading is that McCaffery suggests that the frog has disappeared into itself, or as Barwin and beaulieu put it:

o
 frog leaping
 into the centre of
 itself (Barwin and beaulieu 76)

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CONCLUSION: 'TRANSLATION AS FOLD?'

It seems that the idea of developing extraordinary reading efficiency and embracing the challenges that we encounter while reading complex transtranslations/transaptions is what informs McCaffery's collection as a whole. Let me refer to one more poem by Barwin and beaulieu from *frogments from the frag pool*, clearly inspired by McCaffery's *Basho Variations*. It opens their collection and by means of a minimalistic design conveys the idea of multi-faceted, all-embracing (all-encapsulating) transtranslation:

(every(all at(toge(frog)ther) once)thing)
 (Barwin and beaulieu 7)

The frog is at the centre of the design, but it is enfolded in/by a number of "brackets"/"ripples" of meaning, "ripples" of sense creation. Everything, all at once, all cultural associations together, all games of sense in operation, simultaneously. With each poem readers face a different perspective of looking at the same scene from Bashō. This poem best sums up the processuality of transaption in McCaffery's *Basho Variations*.

In her discussion of bpNichol's *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, Barbara Godard speaks of a "configured logic" (configuration as information) as not given *a priori*, but rather made in the process "wherein an idea is grasped as 'form-in-sense'" (Godard 210; Drucker 169). Godard links this process(uality) with what Deleuze and Guattari have to say about translative reworking, and which has (hopefully) been made visible in my analyses of written-through frog haiku: "[I]he text is potentiality without a unified essence or identifiable centre" (Godard, "Translating Apollinaire" 210); it manifests only in "planes of consistency" and "lines of flight" as an "abstract machine of assemblage in which it undergoes

molecular change according to the charged vectors of desire” (Deleuze and Guattari 19). Godard adds that “language and textuality are events in this rhizomatic ‘logic of the AND . . . AND . . . AND’ (Deleuze and Guattari 36)” (“Translating Apollinaire” 210).

This is how we come full circle to my initial argument about the philosophy of “frogmentary events” in McCaffery’s translations of Bashō’s haiku. Now we can link the processuality of experiencing “events” in *Basho’s Variations* with the workings of translation seen (and functioning) as “fold.” Translation as fold intertwines “outside with inside in multi-directional movements of folding, unfolding and refolding” (Godard, “Translating Apollinaire” 210–11). “As fold,” Godard argues, “translation sets up a different geography of relations than ‘the abyss-in-need-of a bridge,’ one of variation and amplification rather than dualism and opposition, producing ‘change in the place of meaning’” (“Deleuze and Translation” 60). McCaffery’s poems seem to embody the dynamics that Godard so vividly describes. As a result, mindful readers have a chance to catch a glimpse of a Japanese literary practice that may be lost in translation, but found in trantranslation (see Borkent 210).

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Conceptualizing In-Text “Kshetra”: Postcolonial Allahabad’s Cultural Geography in Neelum Saran Gour’s *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*

ABSTRACT

Literary renditions of cities have always gravitated towards the spatial imagination and its ethical counterpart outside the textual space. This paper explores the multicultural geography of the North Indian city Allahabad (recently renamed *Prayagraj*) observed through Neelum Saran Gour’s postcolonial narratives *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, projecting the narrative alignment of spatial aesthetics and cultural ethics. Interrogating the spatial dimensions of a “narrative world” within narrative theory (Ryan) and its interdisciplinary crossover with cultural geography (Sauer; Mitchell; Anderson et al.), the article seeks to examine Gour’s literary city not simply as an objective homogeneous representation, but as a “kshetra” of spatio-cultural cosmos of lived traditions, memories, experiences and collective attitudes of its people, in the context of E. V. Ramakrishnan’s theoretical reflections. The article proposes new possibilities of adapting the Indian concept “kshetra” to spatial literary studies; its aim is also to suggest a new source of knowledge about the city of Allahabad through a community introspection of “doing culture” in the texts, bringing into view people’s shared experiences, beliefs, religious practices and traditions as offshoots of the postcolonial ethos. The article aims to re-contextualize the city’s longstanding multicultural ethics in the contemporary times of crisis, which may affect a shift in the city’s relevance: from regional concern to large-scale significance within ethnically diverse South Asian countries and beyond.

Keywords: “kshetra,” cultural geography, Allahabad, multiculturalism, postcolonial.

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's assertion that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (22) has been the subject of scholarly interest since the 1980s, particularly within humanistic geography¹ and related fields of research. The "epoch of space" is a relatively recent subject of academic discourse in the discipline of geography. On the other hand, the aesthetic representation of space in literature, particularly through textual organization of the narrative, dates back to ancient times and was brilliantly applied in Plato's *Republic* and Saint Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*. The city of London in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, London and Paris in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, "Dublin" in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and "Wessex" in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* are further iconic instances of textual representation of space in literary works. In the Indian context, too, many prominent Indian English novels, such as *Twilight in Delhi*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, or *Madras on Rainy Days* demonstrate a fascination with literary geography and reflect its Indian perspective, even if it is mostly limited to the mention of metropolitan cities. However, certain aspects of realities and representations of Indian cities, situated beyond the established metropolitan urban culture, urgently need to be examined as extensions of postcolonial debates (King 389). Contemporary postcolonial Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour brings to light such overlooked realities of the North Indian city Allahabad² through her narratives *Allahabad Aria* (2015) and *Invisible Ink* (2015).

Neelum Saran Gour is an eminent Indian English author whose career spans over thirty years. She received the prestigious Hindu Literary Award for fiction in 2018. Gour was born and bred in Allahabad and her identity—in the personal, professional and artistic sense—is rooted in this city. The writer's visual and cultural sense of the city's geography has been reflected implicitly, and at times explicitly, in her fictional narratives for decades. Despite forming such an illustrious body of work, her spatial narratives have not received adequate scholarly attention. Recent research (Niven;

¹ Humanistic Geography emerged in the 1970s as a subfield of geography. This discipline looks at human beings as central to geographical study, and examines the world and its locations through human experiences, feelings and geographical behaviours. Some of the greatest proponents of humanistic geography are Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Tim Cresswell.

² Allahabad is a North Indian city located beside the *Triveni-Sangam*, the confluence of three holy rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and mythical *Saraswati* in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. Recently the government of India has renamed the city "Prayagraj"; however, the article is consistent in calling the city Allahabad, since Neelum Saran Gour's narratives also use this name.

Tickell) reviewing Indian cities seen through the eyes of Indian English authors focused on the works of Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Aravind Adiga and Jeet Thayil, but remained silent about Gour's contribution to the literary reconstruction of the Indian city. One possible reason for this omission may be found in Gour's own assertion that a writer is "expected to do more than just write a good book," while this author is not keen to advertise "her own work ingeniously, travelling around pushing the latest book, sometimes even funding his or her own book events and also cultivating the media and networking ceaselessly" (Gour, "Silhouetting" 187). Such self-promotion neither suits Gour's artistic temperament nor is particularly accessible in the city-space to which she belongs. Her city is not one of the greatest metropolises of the country offering all kinds of advanced amenities and opportunities, but a city of ethnic heritage. The hegemonic domination of metropolitan urbanity and its technological progress in contemporary discourse means that reflections upon ethnic cities such as Allahabad are difficult to find in spatial literary studies in the Indian context.

Over the centuries, Allahabad fascinated many western scholars representing diverse disciplines, including Bishop Heber, Mark Twain and Kama Maclean, who aimed to describe the city objectively, either in terms of its political history of colonialism or in relation to its Hindu religious associations. Within these objective representations of the city, many ethnic realities and experiences of insiders have been overlooked. Literature helps to decrypt such spatial ethos and the inhabitants' experiences, through which a postcolonial alternative knowledge of the city can be garnered. This study seeks to investigate these issues through the fictional lens of Neelum Saran Gour's *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, set in Allahabad in the postcolonial era of the twenty-first century. Interrogating the interdisciplinary crossover between narrative theory (Ryan) and cultural geography (Sauer; Mitchell; Anderson et al.), the article will use the theoretical framework of E. V. Ramakrishnan's reflections in order to examine Gour's literary city not simply as a fixed, homogeneous and objective representation, but as a spatialized cultural "kshetra" that brings into focus the experiences of its people. "Kshetra" is a native Indian concept that frequently blends elements and nuances beyond the semiotics of linguistics and invokes a space-specific "subliminal cultural cosmos of lived traditions, shared memories and collective attitudes and assumptions that inform the social imaginary of the people" (Ramakrishnan ix). This article proposes new possibilities of adapting the Indian concept of "kshetra" to spatial literary studies, and suggests that Gour's texts may serve as an alternative, postcolonial source of knowledge

about the city of Allahabad: through a community introspection of “doing culture,” the texts incorporate the shared experiences, beliefs, religious practices and traditions of the city’s inhabitants. Additionally, this paper attempts to extend the city’s political significance by re-contextualizing its longstanding multicultural ethics in the contemporary times of crisis. This re-contextualization may hypothetically affect a shift in the city’s relevance—from a regional singularity to a place of significance in the broader perspective of ethnically diverse South Asian countries and beyond.

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IN-TEXT “KSHETRA”: GOUR’S “SPATIAL STORIES” AND ALLAHABAD’S CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Popularized by Michel de Certeau, the phrase “spatial stories” (115) refers to the unbreakable connection between narrative and space, since narratives “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (115). The spatial trajectory of a text is never linear, causal, or stable; it is always heterogeneous and located within the multifaceted realities of its culture (Schwyzer; Chedzoy; McRae). The literary organization of a text facilitates an alignment of culture and space that enables us to rethink a number of connections between narrative theory and cultural geography. Neelum Saran Gour’s “spatial stories” offer a rich archive of a city’s culture. Additionally, it is necessary to clarify that, in the context of this essay, “culture” denotes a practice, a form of “doing” and also a “way of life” (Anderson et al. 3–5) performed through people’s shared experiences, recurrent beliefs, religious practices, and traditions. Consequently, culture implicitly contributes to the construction of Allahabad’s geography since “culture is spatial” (Mitchell 63).

The liaison between “culture” and “space” concretizes the foundation of a geographical framework, in which culture acts as agent and space as medium, resulting in a distinct “cultural geography” (Sauer). It offers a nuanced understanding not only of “how cultures are spread over space but also . . . how cultures make sense of space” (Crang 2). Beyond disciplinary gridlines, narratives are an effective means by which authors such as Gour strive to make sense of space not simply by drawing locations as settings or backdrops of action, referred to as “spatial frame” in narrative theory (Ryan). Rather, relying upon the agency of those spatial artistic representations, Gour’s narratives culminate in the culturally sustained “production of space” in the Lefebvrian sense. Therefore, Gour’s *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, texts set in postcolonial Allahabad, may bring

together narrative theory and cultural geography through the aesthetic of literary imagination that spatially organizes the narrative and constructs the cultural space. The text of *Allahabad Aria* includes a thematically diverse range of stories that share the common city-space of Allahabad and, within their simplicity, give a profound outlet to the essence of *Allahabadi* culture through the interplay between space and the characters. The narrative of *Invisible Ink* exhibits, as well as constructs, a similar kind of cultural city geography, adding temporality to the spatial dimension through the evolution of the spatial experiences of the main characters—Rekha, Amina, Leelavati—as well as a number of other characters.

In these spatial narratives, the driving idea of “process” between space and people bridges narrative theory and Allahabad’s cultural geography. This “process” becomes effective through the textual arrangement of the plot—the actions and ideologies of the characters in different locations narratologically construct the “story space” (Ryan). In Gour’s narratives, these places—zones of action—range from the “microgeography of the household” (Sanders 9) in Allahabad city to natural (*Triveni-Sangam*) and built (streets, shops, parks) public spaces. Such space-action duality in Gour’s texts in turn transcends the tangible topography of the city, generating a “kshetra”³ of its own, where individuals develop social and cultural values through their experiences. This implies that “kshetra” operates almost as a crossroad of various socio-cultural aspects, marking the identity of both people and space through cultural attributes of lived traditions (such as rituals, festivals and other events), shared experiences and attitudes.

Allahabad’s “cultural cosmos” is often envisioned through the cultural tradition of *Kumbh mela*,⁴ which takes place at the confluence of *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Saraswati* rivers and is a series of Hindu festivals involving shared performative rites such as *snan* (bathing rites), *asthi visarjan* (ash immersion in the *Triveni-Sangam*) and other rituals. Based on this festival’s primarily religious function, Allahabad has often been explored as a sacred space reserved for Hindus (Bhardwaj), or even as a “faith-based

³ “Kshetra” is not equal to “region.” As per Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai’s *Sabdataravali*, “kshetra” denotes “fertile land, an abode of god or place of worship, the physical body, a place of work or place of origin” (700). For further details, see Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai.

⁴ *Kumbh Mela* celebrations take place in a cycle, in four Indian holy cities: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nasik and Allahabad (Prayagraj). Allahabad is the only city that hosts the largest of the celebrations, called *Maha Kumbh*, organized every twelve years. The celebrations take place at the confluence of three sacred river *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati*. The *Maha Kumbh* is celebrated every twelve years, the *Ardha Kumbh*—every six years, and *Magh Mela* is the annual festival.

utopia” (Parida). The rich tradition of Hindu cultural practices—and their presence in public space—is rooted in the city’s history. References to these practices can be found in *Rig Veda*, *Puranas* and in Indian epics that undoubtedly shaped the city’s identity—the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. However, all of the above represents only one side of Allahabad’s “cultural cosmos,” which has been equally influenced by Islamic tradition ever since Mughal emperor Akbar founded the Mughal city Ilahabas in 1527. These two strands of tradition—the Hindu and Islamic cultures—were supplemented by a wave of western influences in the 18th century, when Allahabad became one of the premier cities of North India during the British Raj. In the geography of this city, the osmosis of Hindu, Islamic and British culture in postcolonial times forms a unique cultural cosmos.” Gour’s fictional alignments of time, place and action in her plots reflect this cultural blend, reproducing the “kshetra” in the texts.

This in-text “kshetra” is largely constructed through the cultural experiences of characters within the various “locales” of Allahabad (narrative settings). In the process of interacting and participating in collective cultural practices of the city, Gour’s characters shape their own understanding of the city, as well as the city itself. Their intersubjective realities within the textual “kshetra” simultaneously decode the existing values of the city and generate new evolving spatial meanings and codes. This process enables the characters to “construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions, and environments. In short, they construct geographies” (Anderson and Gale 4) of meanings across the city of Allahabad. In the construction of Allahabad’s cultural geography through the characters’ negotiations of space and action, culture in Gour’s “spatial stories” becomes a continuous process, in which acts of imagination and performance make Allahabad a “practiced place” (de Certeau 117). In such a “practiced place,” the characters engage in “doing” culture (Shurmer-Smith). The entire network of characters’ “doing” culture within Gour’s textual “kshetra” constructs inter-subjective spatial realities. Such textual realities of Allahabad’s “cultural geography” transcend the paucity of homogeneous objective representation. Moreover, the inter-subjective cultural “doing” in Gour’s texts offers scope for community introspection within the city of Allahabad.

A “DOING” CULTURE: A SUSTAINED COMMUNITY INTROSPECTION

From the 1980s onwards, the “new cultural geography” has been extensively applied to social and political concerns. It primarily defines and constructs spatial meaning through the effective medium of culture in social or political

contexts (Duncan; Jackson). Cultural geography merges strand of social geography with cultural interpretations and the narrative, as well as the construction of a “counterfactual world” consisting of characters’ beliefs, speculations and experiences (Ryan), focusing on these intersections to demonstrate how spatially oriented literary texts “build and inform diverse social and aesthetic realities” (Selby and Peterson 1). The textual “kshetra” of Gour’s narratives as conceptualized in the previous section is loaded with such social realities within the cultural geography of Allahabad. The efficacy of such geographic realities in both *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink* relies primarily on the subjective, as well as collective experiences of the characters. Their practices and actions inside the city construct the meaning of “culture,” in the present context in terms of its “doing” sense. It includes values, beliefs and shared commitment, conceptualizing a way of life broadly attuned to their community consciousness as *Allahabadi*.⁵

A “community” is defined as a religion-based group with shared needs, goals, values, beliefs and activities; but sometimes, the ethos of a community, within and beyond religion, connects people through geography (McMillan and Chavis; Nasar and Julian). Such a collective consciousness is visible at a microscopic level among the neighbours sharing everyday experiences, or at special occasions organized in built or natural public spaces, while attending or performing religious rituals, practices and so on. Marking the distinctness of a spatial culture, such performative “cultural geography” of Allahabad formulates the base of Gour’s textual “kshetra.” It is primarily invoked through the subjective realities of the characters as they experience the city and, therefore, offers a new ground for community introspection.

In *Invisible Ink*, the primary projection of this shared culture is visible in the characters’ lifestyle in their residential plot “Bulbul Kothi.” Here, the families of two friends, Rekha and Amina, representing different religious backgrounds (Hindu and Muslim respectively) share more than their colony and dwelling in a denotative sense; they share the experiences of each other’s religious rituals and practices. It is Amina who is invited to partake in the Hindu religious ritual of “kanya bhoj”⁶ to become a manifestation of goddess Durga in Rekha’s family: “[W]e (Amina and Rekha) were both goddesses that day” (*Invisible Ink* 28). Even the idols of Lord Krishna for the prayer room of Rekha’s family in “Bulbul Kothi” were handcrafted by neighbour Shakheel Mustafa during his “roza”⁷ time. The

⁵ Residents of Allahabad are called “Allahabadi” or “Illahabadi” in native language.

⁶ On the eighth and ninth days of the goddess Durga’s festival, a Hindu ritual is celebrated: minor girls are worshipped as manifestations of the Goddess Durga. During the ritual, the girls are given offerings of food, which is known as “kanya bhoj.”

⁷ “Roza” refers to the Muslim religious custom of fasting during *Ramadan*; fast is kept for a month, from sunrise to sunset.

inmates of the colony also help one another to carry out their respective religious practices. Rekha's mother Leelavati's making of "sootpheni for Mehru Apa's sehri"⁸ and "gram-flour pakowries and chaat and sweet things for Mehru Apa's evening iftar" (*Invisible Ink* 108) while fasting for Lord Shiva in the same month underpins the ethos of a geographically connected community, since all its members see their shared space as "our Bulbul Kothi"—"our lane" (*Invisible Ink* 6). The existence of this spatial consciousness shared by a multicultural community is also evident in *Allahabad Aria*, particularly when a Muslim vegetable vender, Imtiaz, recites Urdu poetry and all the listeners, irrespective of their religion, willfully view themselves as members of the *Allahabadi* community, saying "Trust us Ilahabadis" (141).

The projection of a spatial community in the narrative is not limited to the city's residential areas and the interactions between neighbours. Gour's textual arrangement of the plot, characters and their actions echoes the introspective scope for community life both in the built and natural public spaces of the city. As a result of their shared experiences, the neighbours develop respect for each other's religious practices and endorse the same in "doing." Rekha and her friend Amina love visiting the Ghazi Mian's shrine in Secundara, Allahabad, and even make a "chadar (coverlet) offering" (*Invisible Ink* 4), which is primarily a Muslim ritual. Natural spaces in the city form a vital part of the spatial consciousness shared by the community. One such natural site is the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*, or the confluence of rivers in Allahabad, a place of rich shared heritage and traditions dating back to the antiquity. In the context of Ryan's narrative theory, the "story space," or plot, reaches totality with "story world," engaging "the reader's imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge" (798). Here, cultural awareness is deeply ingrained in the geographical riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*, Allahabad's most significant natural area. According to Hindu mythology, it is the holiest place, as its water is believed to carry "amrit," a nectar that has the miraculous power to cleanse earthly sins. Therefore, bathing, or "snan," in the convergence of rivers is a celebrated Hindu practice. Beyond the factual description of the Hindu sacred rite of bathing in the *Sangam*, the textual "kshetra" of Gour suggests an introspective community consciousness shared by the people of Allahabad, as "some Ilahabad Mussalmans do take dip in the Ganga on holy bathing days" (*Invisible Ink* 189).

Those who engage in the "bathing" tradition may not share the same religious beliefs, but the act functions as part of their community

⁸ "Sehri" are meals eaten by Muslims before dawn prior to fasting during *Ramadan*; they are followed by "Iftar" after the sunset.

consciousness as *Allahabadi*. The people of the city share experiences of cultural practices such as “bathing” irrespective of religious divisions, which generates a geographically oriented “we”—a sense of belonging. For this very reason, Mr. Triloki from *Allahabad Aria* can easily identify the bathing practice as an element of the city’s culture and asserts that it is significant “for us, Allahabadis” (Gour 69). This “us” denotes all the people of Allahabad regardless of their religion. This rich blend of Hindu-Muslim practices within the city’s geography is not at all a contemporary phenomenon. Its presence is evident in stories such as the popular account of the Mughal Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar’s previous incarnation as a Hindu Brahmin in Allahabad. According to popular belief, his name was Mukund Brahmachari; he accidentally swallowed a cow’s hair, which is an act strictly prohibited by Hindu religion. To cleanse this earthly sin, he sacrificed his life by jumping from the indestructible Banyan tree (Akshay Vat) into the holy water of *Triveni-Sangam*. After reincarnation he became Akbar, a Muslim who “came to this city (Allahabad), [and] recognized the place where he used to live. He recognized the tree he’s jumped from and decided to build his fort around the tree” (*Invisible Ink* 63–64). The city’s culture consists of shared historical values and symbols. But it also relies on “doing,” or manifesting, those ideals in practice. Therefore, the “doing culture” links the people to a place by means of sharing a deep sense of spatial community, which demonstrates how cultural practices work within society. The textual construction of “kshetra” in Gour’s narratives envisions the culture of *Allahabadi* community not just as a utopian construct expressed in purely aesthetic terms. Rather, it operates in an introspective way, illuminating the postcolonial cultural knowledge of Allahabad city through the experiences of insiders and by forming a community in the political sense, offering the possibility of a re-contextualization of the city’s longstanding multicultural dynamics in times of crisis.

ALLAHABAD’S LIVING TRADITIONS: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF MULTICULTURALISM

Apart from collective attitudes shared by a community, “lived traditions” are important tools for the “cultural cosmos” of “kshetra” as discussed in E. V. Ramakrishnan’s conceptual framework. The textual arrangement of spatial events within Gour’s narrative space does not objectively represent the “lived traditions” of Allahabad, but the textual “kshetra” manifests the alternative realities of the city’s “lived traditions” by referring to subjective experiences. The most enchanting and remarkable “lived tradition” of Allahabad is *Kumbh mela*, observed at the confluence of *Ganga*, *Yamuna*,

and *Saraswati*. For centuries, this “lived tradition” has fascinated both Indians and foreigners. The American author Mark Twain was captivated by this cultural tradition, noting that “[i]t is wonderful . . . No matter what the impulse is; the act borne of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold white” (qtd. in Gupta 58). Quite understandably, as a western visitor to the *mela*, i.e. cultural fair, he did not grasp its essence, but was mesmerized by the incredible charm of a spiritual experience shared by all the visitors, pilgrims, businessmen and common people. Within and beyond religious faith, this tradition has become a vital part of the city’s (and more broadly—India’s) cultural identity, drawing millions of pilgrims and visitors from all over the country and the world to the *Sangam*. Acknowledging its impact, in 2017 UNESCO placed this tradition on its list of practices representing the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.”

Moreover, as a sacred religious gathering, this cultural tradition may preserve the heritage of the city, but it is also a “lived tradition” of communal assimilation reaching beyond religious dichotomies that infuses the geography of Allahabad with its multicultural ethos. Utilizing the geographical area of the confluence of rivers, the *mela* serves as a basis for constructing the cultural geography of the city and the in-text “kshetra” of Gour’s *Invisible Ink* and *Allahabad Aria*, reconstructing the obscured multicultural reality of “lived tradition” through the characters’ actions. In the story “Family Album,” included in *Allahabad Aria*, Mr. Triloki (a Hindu by religion) finds himself in the *mela* primarily for a business purpose, whereas his friend Jameson, an English photographer, is interested in its visual potential: he aims to capture the vastness of *Kumbh mela* sprawling “across acres and acres as far as the eye can see” (63). The presence of the “crowds of plodding pilgrims, its ash-smeared, chillum-smoking ascetics” (*Allahabad Aria* 66) in this “lived tradition” is one side of the picture; on the other hand, this tradition has contributed to the city’s cultural heterogeneity that draws “millions of people-milling, jostling crowds wearing every conceivable Indian costume, speaking every conceivable language” (66).

Within and beyond the sacred reasons, the wide range of traditions brings members of the community close to one another by integrating cultures. In *Invisible Ink*, both Rekha and Amina thoroughly enjoy the *mela* despite their different religions; they cherish it for enlivening their friendship from adolescence into adulthood. Their personal experiences visualize the cultural osmosis of Indian ritualistic conventions blended with western technical advancements in this “lived tradition” of the city: “There are computerized horoscope plottings and new-age meditation gadgetry. Also Disneyland Mickeys and Jurassic Park dinosaurs. And sadhus⁹ in saffron

⁹ “Sadhus” are Hindu ascetics.

with matted locks and ash-smearing faces striding past with laptops slung on their shoulders" (*Invisible Ink* 190). The composite, multicultural ethics of Allahabad merge Hindus, Muslims and Europeans into a cosmopolitan social fabric through "lived traditions." The transcendental values of these traditions rise above the petty earthly binaries of "self" and "other," "orient" and "occident," and, perhaps more importantly, above the "global" and "local." For this very reason Gour's character Mr. Triloki addresses Jameson as a "local," noticing his interest in the bathing rite of *Kumbh mela* and observing "to us you're a local" (*Allahabad Aria* 70), thereby accepting Jameson as a member and an insider of *Allahabadi* culture.

Constructed by the characters' beliefs, practices and experiences, Gour's in-text "kshetra" retains Allahabad's internal "lived traditions" and enables readers to navigate through both the intra and extra-textual realities of the city's multicultural ethos. As an ethnic South-Asian city, Allahabad is built upon a mosaic of socio-cultural pluralities and heterogeneity. It has evolved over centuries through a continuous flow of assimilation and adaptation of varied cultural influences coming with subsequent Mughal and European invasions. As a result of this process, the composite culture of Allahabad and its true spirit are largely based on the strands of both *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* (a poetic Awadhi phrase that describes the distinctive, syncretic fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures) and *Vasudheiva Kutumbakam* (a notion, according to which the entire universe is a family). Reflection on this multicultural blend within the geography of Allahabad through Gour's textual "kshetra" is decidedly political, particularly since the city's name was changed to "Prayagraj" in 2018. "Prayag" was the city's ancient name according to ancient Hindu scriptures, and "Prayagraj" means "the king of devotion" in Hindu mythology. Today, many government officials argue that the rich Hindu traditions and culture were ignored when in 1575 "Prayag" was renamed "Ilahabas" by the Mughal emperor Akbar, and then renamed again "Allahabad." Therefore, the latest name change can be perhaps seen as an attempt to rejuvenate the ancient Hindu traditions. No culture is ever static or fixed; cultures evolve in a processual manner. Allahabad's multicultural blending over the centuries exemplifies that process and becomes an integral component of the identity of the city.

According to Christopher Tilley, place names are of "vital significance because they act so as to transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced" (18). Therefore, "Allahabad" is not merely a name, but a social, historical and cultural emotion of its people, constructed largely upon the ethics of multiculturalism. Being an *Allahabadi* (inhabitant of Allahabad) herself, Gour experiences these emotions as attuned to the city's name.

The author expressed her attachment to the name “Allahabad” after the official name of the city was changed to “Prayagraj.” As she stated in an interview,

The present regime has changed its name to Prayagraj, but the city I live in—and thousands like me—is Allahabad. That stands for a certain cultural construct that has grown over centuries, and that resides in our consciousness—an inclusive temper, a dash of Western cosmopolitanism leavening our traditional but open Hinduism and a correspondingly open Islam, a spontaneous osmosis of cultures ever operating between the three. (“Silhouetting” 181)

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Gour touches upon this unique multicultural blend of the city in her texts *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, both of which reconstruct the “cultural geography” of the city. Her reconstruction becomes implicitly political, since it re-contextualizes the cultural heterogeneity of the city in contemporary times of need. It is primarily relevant to the city in question, but its relevance extends beyond postcolonial South Asian countries.

CONCLUSION

Collating a range of interdisciplinary approaches within the field of spatial literary studies, the article reflects on the agency of a work of fiction as an artistic form as much as on its representational and reflective power. The paper decodes the production of in-text “kshetra” in Neelum Saran Gour’s narratives in the context of Allahabad’s performative “cultural geography.” It bridges the gap between factual geographical descriptions and flights of the writer’s imagination, producing an alternative, postcolonial source of knowledge about the city of Allahabad through the intersubjective realities of the characters. The textual “kshetra” allows readers to pursue a certain kind of “local” knowledge and sharpen their political perceptions of the spatio-cultural conundrums of Allahabad by re-contextualizing the city’s longstanding syncretic multiculturalism as a way of life in contemporary times of crisis. Moreover, Gour’s textual representation not only offers regionally specific cultural knowledge. The author constructs a counterfactual narrative universe that transcends its regional context and connects to the large-scale, globalized world. Implicitly suggesting ways to sustain cultural heterogeneity, her narratives strive for the ethics of collective identity, where autonomy and respect for others can go hand in hand. This in turn offers a new opportunity for community introspection in terms of collective behaviour in everyday life, particularly at times of crisis, on a local and global scale.

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Episodic Literary Movement and Translation: Ideology Embodied in Prefaces

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses translation practices from a historicist viewpoint, contextualizing them in their emerging “episode.” The latter is a concept drawn from sociology of literature and accounts for the rise of certain discourses and ideologies in a society. On the basis of the argument that translation practices are informed by the general literary and socio-cultural milieu in which they are produced and consumed (also known as ideology of representation), the paper studies the translators’ prefaces to three translations published between 1953 and 1978—a period dominated by Leftist and Marxist discourse in Iran. Drawing on a historically oriented model which holds that the translator’s ideology is revealed at the moment in which he/she chooses a text, and continues through the discourse he/she develops to translate that text, the research embarks on studying translation practices on two levels of choice mechanism and prefaces. Prefaces are discussed in the light of the dominant ideology of representation that is characterized by a revolutionary discourse. The research demonstrates that these translators opted for a strategy that incorporates the translations in the Persian cultural setting with minor changes in a way that politicizes the foreign literature.

Keywords: episode, ideology of representation, translation practices, prefaces, Marxism.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding cultural products, including literature, in the context of their creation is the main tenet of historicism (Malpas 55). The concept of “episode,” first developed in sociology, is a concept deeply rooted in the historicist approach for it has some connections with the historical context of cultural production. Episode refers to “a cluster of interrelated, aesthetically significant literary texts that form a discursive movement in a particular historical period,” each cluster demonstrating “a harmony within itself and a difference with others” (Talattof 8). Since we are dealing with such texts here, literary translation can be included in this episodic approach, as well. Given that excluding the role history and ideology play in the process, as well as in the final product of translation leads to a curtailed account of translation practices, such an episodic approach is not foreign to Translation Studies.

This study draws on Talattof’s concept of episodic movement to investigate the translation practices of a certain episode in modern Persian literary history, an episode which he calls “Revolutionary Literature” or “Committed Literature” (Talattof 2). The episode begins with the US-led coup in 1953 and ends with the 1979 Revolution. First, an account of the features of this episode will be given and then some translation practices will be analyzed in light of the episodic movement. The practices are materialized in prefaces to translations published in the period. The translations—the prefaces to which I study here—are selected because they were widely read in Iran in the period under study. Moreover, their translators are among the best-known in the intellectual circles of the time and the publishers were among the most celebrated. There were many other works translated from the Anglo-American tradition which were either unpopular or without any significant paratextual material that would meet our criteria. (For more information on the literary history of the period see below, as well as Talattof.) The books selected are translations of the following works:

Paton, Alan. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Translated by Fereyduun Saleki and Nader Ebrahimi. Amir-Kabir, 1969. [The Persian title: *Muye kon sarzamin-e Mahbub*]

Paton, Alan. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Translated by Simin Daneshvar. Kharazmi, 1972. [The Persian title: *Benal vatan*]

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Translated by Simin Daneshvar. Kharazmi, 1967. [The Persian title: *Dagh-e nang*]

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Waste Land*. Translated by Parviz Lashkari. Nil, 1972. [The Persian title: *Dasht-e satarvan*]

THE EPISODIC LITERARY MOVEMENT AND TRANSLATION PRACTICES

“Ideology of representation” refers to the dominance of a particular ideology in literary representation which engages much of the literary creativity of an era (Talattof 10). Thus, episodic literary movements are caused by factors such as socio-political changes and guide the mode of reading—and, by extension, translating—in a period, making a discourse prevail (15–16). Metaphor, defined here as something beyond a mere linguistic device, is to perceive a sign in terms of other signs, and since it conveys ideology, it is important for episodic literary movement (12). Each literary movement has a specific way of conveying meaning through “theme (the substance, the idea), characterization (the dialogue, the strategy of behavior), form (the shape, the structure), and style (the mode of expression, the figurative language)” (8). Readers interpret the texts, metaphors and ideology implicit in them in accordance with the dominant discourse. Talattof calls this “discursive interpretation” (16–18). Such an episodic fashion can happen in other areas of discursive practices specifically in translation because with the change in social formations new translation practices rise (Venuti, “Translation, History, Narrative” 804).

The translator’s “positionality” (von Flotow 13) or “historicity” (Gouanic 94) is manifested in the choice that he or she makes in the very first stage. The choice is definitely ideological: the choice of texts *and* the discourse developed to translate them, Venuti asserts, are charged with ideological issues and are strategic in nature (*Scandals* 10).

Since this study focuses on the role of the episodic literary movement in translators’ prefaces, analyzing prefaces constitutes an important part in our analysis. In historical investigation, they sometimes provide information on translation practices that the text itself falls short of (Tahir-Gurçağlar 59). As Simon states, prefaces are indicative of the “prominence given to the translator” (111) and the most important statements about translation are made in the prefaces, “that is in a context where the focus on immediate readership is foremost” (ibid.). She believes that prefaces are both action and speech and that they bring their authors protection from the “outrages of power” (ibid.). In spite of the fact that we cannot take translators at their word regarding what they write in their prefaces and what they actually practice, we can link the agenda behind prefaces to their respective political context: “In addition to revealing the historically shifting relationship between author and translator and foregrounding the foundations of literary values, prefaces are useful precisely because they trace the contours of literary ideology and expose for us the sociopolitical

context which commands literary exchanges” (Simon 112). As a result, translators’ prefaces can be regarded as being on the same level as the translation itself when exploring the relationship between episode and translation practices.

THE EPISODE OF “REVOLUTIONARY LITERATURE”

“[R]evolutionary literature within a revolutionary social context,” or “politics of poetics,” as Hamid Dabashi puts it, is the dominant literary practice in the episode of “revolutionary literature,” where the term “revolutionary” embraces both social and political senses (147). Commitment is defined as “a presuppositional engagement with and concern for social causes, revolutionary ends, and ideological statements” (149). Committed literature in the context of prerevolutionary Iran, which was translated as *adabiyat-e mota’abbed*, is seen in the work of writers like Samad Behrangi, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and many others (see Dabashi). Whatever the authors’ background are—aristocratic, middle- or upper-class—they have one thing in common: the “mystical glorification of the masses” (Dabashi 154). That is to say, the masses are regarded in the work of these writers as the principle social group which should be freed from “the bonds of poverty, ignorance, and tyranny” (155) because a revolution would not be possible without the workers’ gaining knowledge about their situation.

Dabashi’s categorization of different modes of poetics *vis-à-vis* politics is more intricate and accurate, and transcends the aesthetic-political dichotomy. He sees three sets of literary practice (171–72): 1) literature devoted to revolutionary and ideological ends where poetry acts like a “rifle”; 2) literature that is “atomized and isolated from society”; and 3) literature that stands somewhere between the two above, where aesthetic and political issues are appreciated at the same time. The third type is the most important one in terms of its political content: “[i]n this literature social problems and political repressions are clearly expressed, but they are not its *raison d’être*” (177). Writers like Gholamhossein Saedi and Al-e-Ahmad belong to this group. In a bid to contribute to the socio-political causes which committed writers encouraged the masses to form, they dispelled the traditional inhibition and normativeness imposed upon classical literature (180).

The Left’s analysis of “the woman question” was a class-based one where women from different classes were exploited in various ways. Besides, the dominant imperialist culture, “male chauvinism” with its “concomitant religious mentality,” also had a role in exploiting women in

a cultural way (Shahidian 227–28). Cultural imperialism was considered to be the main culprit in the corruption of youth. According to this view, “[w]omen’s oppression was attributed now to world imperialism and its internal allies—the Shah’s state apparatus and the comprador bourgeoisie—rather than to the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of Iranian society itself” (230).

One of the main concerns of the intellectuals, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, was the “authentic culture” or Eastern (domestic) culture as opposed to the Western one (Nabavi 92). The reasons behind the proliferation of the authentic culture among the Left-leaning intellectuals are twofold: 1) given the constraints that the Pahlavi regime had placed on political activism, the intellectuals found “less direct avenues to express their opposition” that led in time to an increase in the number of intellectual publications; and 2) the success of “Third Worldist movements” in resisting imperialism (Nabavi 92–93). Iranian intellectuals used “third world issues allegorically to refer to the state of affairs in Iran” (93). By attacking imperialism, which they could criticize, the intellectuals leveled criticism at the status quo, revealing the powers that supported the Shah’s regime which, they believed, was a product of Western imperialism (*ibid.*).

In order for the intellectuals to be able to raise “national consciousness” and to awaken people, they had to revert to the past, which helped create the authentic culture discourse. Although some intellectuals distinguished between the imperialist and the Western culture that should not be rejected in its entirety, the general trend was to recover the authentic, “Eastern” culture and to question the Western cultural influence (94).

The state also got involved with this Left-leaning discourse—though it adopted the discourse of the 1960s Left—and implemented a number of cultural policies similar to those of the anti-establishment or Third-Worldist intellectuals. Yet there is a difference between these two: “Whereas disenchanted intellectuals, by and large, included a degree of anti-Westernism as a manifestation of their third-worldism, for the establishment, promoting authentic culture did not necessarily equate with opposition to the West” (97). The establishment, therefore, used the third-world discourse to unite the nation and to make it understand its cultural heritage. This discourse, however, was significantly different from the one adopted by the anti-establishment intellectuals in that the establishment tried to reconcile with the West rather than confront it. For the intellectuals, it was not putting on display the cultural tradition through festivals, for example, that could “stimulate social consciousness” but reintegrating the past into the life of people that could do better to achieve such a goal (100).

Ali Shariati, a key thinker at the time, proposes concepts like “return to oneself” (*bazgasht be khishtan*). His approach to Islam is different from the conventional approaches current in the decades leading to the Islamic Revolution. Shi’ism, considered by Shariati to be revolutionary, is mixed with a variety of Western philosophies like existentialism and Marxism. Regarding the issue of culture and society, Shariati sees the class differences of the Sassanid era, the resulting feudalism in the Islamic era and frequent foreign offenses against Iran as the main culprits leading to the lack of national harmony (Gheisari 99). Also, Western ideologies have affected Iranian identity in various ways; modernism, for example, makes an “Iranian or Muslim modernist . . . feel as if he had closer ties to Western culture than to his own” (100). He believes that the Western intellectuals emerged in the European context in reaction to Christianity, and that the Iranian intellectuals must not blindly follow the same line. He proposes an alternative definition of the intellectual in terms of response to an Islamic culture (*ibid.*). What Shariati attempted to propagate was a mixture of trends that had purely Western roots, notably Marxism, and the authenticity discourse. He sees a sort of atheism in Marx, which is in opposition to Islam. When revolutionary Marxism is mixed with Islam, they can both form a revolution and radical change in society (Mirsepassi 122).

TRANSLATION PREFACES IN LIGHT OF THE METAPHOR AND DISCURSIVE INTERPRETATION

Metaphor is a key concept in Talatof’s framework as it makes possible the expression of ideas which would have been censored by the Pahlavi establishment if they had been put into explicit terms. For instance, “night” in the work of the committed writers is a metaphor of the Shah’s regime, not the night in its conventional sense. Under socio-political circumstances which prevent writers from engaging directly with the sensitive political matters on the ground, making them resort to metaphors, translation is also a metaphoric activity that can escape the eyes of the censors. Translators choose texts that have a potential to be read and translated on the basis of dominant discourse and apply a discursive interpretation to the foreign text which can convey the ideology they have in mind.

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY

In the preface to their translation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Saleki and Ebrahimi begin with an ironic point about the situation of the whites and blacks in South Africa:

South Africa . . . is seemingly located in the south of the African Continent [sic] and has a population of about fifteen million. Out of this fifteen million, nearly two million are white and they have obviously the fate and lives of the remaining thirteen million in their hands; that is to say, the rule of white elites on the black masses.¹ (Saleki and Ebrahimi 5)

After pointing out how the first white settlement was set up (in 1652) in South Africa by the “well-known and equality-seeking ‘East India Company’” (ibid.), the translators recount how Great Britain dominated the “lowly” South Africa in 1841. Great Britain, they believe, found their precursors’ method incorrect and drove these “occupiers” of South Africa to the North in order to “return to the blacks their rights [sic]” (ibid.). Apartheid, a discriminatory law against black people, was passed after the Second World War. According to this law, which the translators sarcastically call “a bright, humanitarian and prideful project,” blacks were sent to mines to work and were threatened with punishment if they avoided working. “The tactfulness of a threat,” the translators state ironically, “lies in the way it is carried out, and the Europeans are tactful enough” (6). This sarcastic tone is evident in the remaining part of the preface, where Verwoerd is quoted as uttering imperialistic sentiments about black people, calling for their presence in South Africa as “cheap work-force” (ibid.). They even call into question the role of international bodies like the United Nations and quote a Persian encyclopedia’s entry that states that the General Assembly of the United Nations only “lamented” the racial policy in the country in 1959 (ibid.). This “brave lamentation” fell flat when in the following year a large number of black people were punished “brotherly” (7). For translators, the supporters of racism in South Africa are “American racists, racist organizations in Britain, all of the European fascists, the majority of the religious missionaries, and all of the colonizers of Africa and of other continents in the world” (ibid.).

Simin Daneshvar has published a Persian translation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* as *Benal vatan*. The preface to her translation is replete with direct and indirect references to colonialism and imperialism in the main setting of the novel—Africa—but with metaphorical points that contextualize the translation in contemporary Persian culture and politics. She likens the South African situation to a “chess game” in which the African natives are supposed to be the black pieces and the colonizers the white. She is very optimistic about the future of South Africa where she states the black population would learn how to play the game someday. Yet, the colonial game in South Africa is more evident than in any other country stricken by

¹ All the translations of the extracts from prefaces are by the author.

colonial domination. In other countries, this game goes on clandestinely (Daneshvar, Preface to *Cry* 7). This translator also brings out the issue of apartheid whereby black people are deprived of the natural right to determine their own destiny. The supporters of the central government, that is, “owners of industry and of gold and diamond mines,” found the *status quo* appropriate for their benefits. Apartheid, as the main point of this preface, paves the way for further exploitation of the native black population.

Daneshvar’s translation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is dedicated to the translator’s husband, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, who died in 1969, two years before the translation was published. Daneshvar writes:

Once more for your memory and your name, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad,
Whose characteristic was his name [Jalal],
Pity for all that fortitude.
Simin

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The praise extended to Al-e-Ahmad whose first name is *Jalal* (meaning “glory” in Persian) is of great importance because the book is dedicated to one of the most prominent committed writers of the period, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, with an influential oeuvre on the issues pertinent to activism, Westoxication, colonialism, imperialism and the authentic culture. The translator conceals behind her seemingly innocent dedication a sort of political activism that is reflected in her choice of work. The black-white dichotomy, justice and equality are the main threads that run through these prefaces. Daneshvar mentions in an interview that she was not content with her translations and the motive behind her translation activities was merely financial (Milani 10). She states that she translated *Divine Comedy* by Saroyan, for example, to buy a refrigerator; she therefore regards herself as a “victim” of translation because she *had to* translate due to financial problems (ibid.). Although she claims to be ideology-free due to her avoidance of joining any political party, she could not help being under the influence of the dominant ideology (13).

THE SCARLET LETTER

Simin Daneshvar has written a very illuminating preface to her translation of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The novel is about a woman subjected to unjust treatments in an extremely religious community. The translator found this theme similar to the concepts dominant at the time in Iran, namely, the Leftist demand of equality and justice for all people, including women.

The translator's "*Harfe Akber*" ("The last word") is indicative of Westoxication discourse: the translator asserts that mere translating is dangerous in countries like Iran where there should be more creativity on the part of the domestic writers. She laments the fact that she translates instead of writing in Persian. She recounts two reasons for the dominance of translation over original composition in Iran from the 1950s onward: 1) translation is much easier than original writing; 2) economically, since Constitutional Revolution translation has enjoyed a better market. She comments further on the second reason: translation is emphasized because, she argues, the people believe in others, particularly "the West," and less in their own compatriots (Daneshvar, Preface to *Scarlet* 5).

She resorts to the Westoxication discourse using terms like *az khod biganegi* (self-alienation) and *gharbzadeh* (Westoxicated). For her,

most of the contemporary translators know at least one foreign language well because they are trained in the West or Western and Westoxicated [*gharbzadeh*] schools, Persian being their mother tongue. It was thus that translation movements developed in Iran and many of our citizens bought translations and . . . became self-alienated and ignorant of their rich treasury of literature and mysticism. (Daneshvar, Preface to *Scarlet* 6)

The translator believes that translation is a second-hand writing and that what would save Iran from being trapped in self-alienation is original compositions. Westoxication is again condemned here for alienating Iranian people from their rich literary history by forcing them, in one way or another, to translate Western literature.

The translator asserts her purpose in line with Hawthorne. The author, she believes, undertook writing such a book to improve the condition of women in his society because he seeks a world emptied of all these prejudices and turbulences. Introducing the author of the book and his other works she presents a picture of the place in which the story is set, New England. The last paragraph of Daneshvar's introduction summarizes what she thinks about the women's cause in the Iran of the 1960s:

An interesting point that occurs to the present writer is a hope that the author of the book [Hawthorne] holds for the betterment of women's condition and for a better world in which there is no sign of these vicissitudes and prejudices. Hawthorne hopes for a new woman who will become the future prophet of this world; a learned and meritorious woman who is the beacon of happiness and elation and the oracle of goodness and luck. This is a woman who can construct the man-woman relation on a better and wiser basis and disrupt the custom that others,

that is, the mighty [*zurmandan*] of society, have wrongly imposed on women. The translator also undertakes translating this text in the hope of the coming of this woman. (Daneshvar, Preface to *Scarlet* 14)

One may see tinges of feminist discourse in this extract. The translator, an author well-known for having written *Savushun*,² looks for a “learned and meritorious woman.” She believes that there will be a day when all these prejudices against women will be eliminated. In one respect, she deviates from the Leftist approach to culture as such. The Left did not give any supremacy to the women’s cause and placed it under the banner of national struggle. That is to say, what was important for the Left in Iran was not the women’s cause but women’s oppression under the yoke of imperialism and despotic regimes (see Shahidian).

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THE WASTE LAND

Similar to these anti-imperialist and East-West discourses, yet to some extent directly applicable to Iran’s contemporaneous discourse, is the one promoted by the likes of Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ahmad Fardid. The former is responsible for the widespread usage of the term both before and after the revolution. Parviz Lashkari’s preface to his translation of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published with Eliot’s shorter poems, is replete with direct and indirect references to this concept. Lashkari begins his preface with the point that *The Waste Land* is the “hero-less epic of an era devoid of value” in which material embellishments have made us forget the meaning of “tradition” (Lashkari 5). Human beings have created an “invisible prison” where God and nature have lost their meanings and are replaced by the goddesses of the new era, viz. money, material power and the machine (ibid.). The author of the preface criticizes the machine-worship which ruins the human being and makes him a dependent slave to the machine. The result of machine-worshipping is a man who does not have any purpose or social ideal (Lashkari 6). The translator calls *The Waste Land* an epic because “it recovers from among the dried bones of the dead the meaning of the ancient traditions and customs” in a world now devoid of prophets (6).

The text hinges around the East, pointing to the Westoxication discourse promoted by Al-e-Ahmad whose concept of return to the “roots” is a key term that pertains to resistance to “mechanosis” or *mashin zadegi*:

² *Savushun*, the first Persian novel written by a woman writer. For more information on the novel, see Jafari.

Al-e Ahmad argues that a “return” to an “authentic” Islamic culture is necessary if Iran is to avoid the homogenizing and alienating forces of socio-technological modernization. Yet, the “return” advocated by Al-e Ahmad was a rather complicated political discourse. Ahmad’s populist Islam would not reject modernization as such, but would seek to reimagine modernity in accordance with Iranian-Islamic tradition, symbolism, and identities. (Mirsepassi 96)

This “authentic” Islamic culture, a return to which is necessary for embracing modernity, avoids Western frameworks. Al-e-Ahmad’s romanticism denigrates reason in politics and promotes his Shi’i romanticism. This “reactionary modernism” is an “embodiment of the self-realization of a modern intellectual lost in the plight of modern life” (Mirsepassi 105). The “blind mechanization” that has dominated the Soviet Union and the US has annihilated all ideals. In keeping with Al-e-Ahmad’s thinking, Lashkari refers to the present and the past of the East:

This is the beginning of an East that founded the spiritual civilization and this is the end of an East that asks for help from the shrine of “The New Age” that satisfies the needs of the Westerners in distant lands. Westerners have taken down the Heaven and set up an earthly Heaven and begun to worship it but have derived from it nothing but gluttony and laziness. (Lashkari 6)

The West, exhausted by this monotony, has turned to the East to find “God” who is also forgotten in the East’s present. This bemusement is due to the fact that the West does not want either to abandon its “earthly Heaven” or its religiosity (7).

In a more direct reference to Westoxication as conceptualized by Al-e-Ahmad, the preface goes on to state that the West has cheated the East by providing it with “cosmetics” to embellish this “bride that has forgotten her mother”; this is done in order to make a familiar setting for the Westerner who comes to see this “Eastern bride” (7–8). Eliot’s search for spirituality in a place other than the West leads him, as the translator states, to look to “Buddhism and Zoroastrianism” as alternatives to God that the West has lost. This East is partly represented for Eliot through Khayyam’s poetry (1048–1131 CE) and through people who are not slave to their material needs and, though not fully fed, remain pious (8). In a more telling passage of the preface, the issue of mechanization is brought up again. The development and growth of the machine, Lashkari believes, have brought us an “invaluable souvenir” from the West, shed doubt on human beings’ individuality and started a road whose end is not clear. The machine begins to annihilate the values inherited from the past

and then sets the yoke of mechanization on people (9). This, in turn, leads to similarity and conformity among the people. Precisely at this time they begin to realize that they are no longer “backward” and that they have joined the ranks of the “developed” (10). The passage resonates with Al-e-Ahmad’s idea about “nihilism” in the West brought about by the machine which, as he supposes, “must not be . . . an autonomous mover beyond human ideals, ideology and tradition” (Mirsepassi 109). This nihilism is transferred to Iran through colonialism and imperialism.

The views of intellectuals on a domestic, authentic and Eastern culture as a prerequisite to modernity is clearly stated in this representative preface. Lashkari reverts to the past to provoke a domestically initiated thinking about modernity. The translator claims (maybe wrongly) that he shares with Eliot a notion of the East’s glorious past. Foreign imperialism, as one of the key obstacles to the freedom of the masses, is obviously stated by the translator. The approach which the enemy, the West, adopts in the face of the Persian and Eastern culture is a sort of “cultural invasion” or *tabajom-e farhangi*. This latter term appears frequently in Al-e-Ahmad’s writings and refers to a type of “cultural imperialism.” According to the Left’s approach to the issue of cultural imperialism, it was the Shah who paved the way for foreign imperialism. By choosing to comment on foreign imperialism in a preface, the translator-cum-activist wants to level clandestine criticism at the Pahlavi’s political apparatus. We should also note the fact that not all things Lashkari writes in his preface to *The Waste Land* hark back to Eliot’s works. They are rather the translator’s own (mis)interpretation of the ideas contained therein.

CONCLUSION

Since prefaces guide the reading of a text and contribute to its discursive interpretation, they have been chosen to investigate the effect of ideology, episodic movement and discursive interpretation on translation practices. Unlike the readings or interpretations of general readers, translators are readers whose readings are made flesh. Their choice of work which is informed by the dominant discourse and ideology is indicative of their positionality. The practices that the translators undertake are a response and complement to the general episodic movement in which they are positioned. Translations have been traditionally considered less constrained by the state censorship because they are considered to be talking about other countries. Translators, however, have the power to criticize the *status quo* more covertly and contribute to the current discourses.

Given the commentaries presented by the translators in their prefaces, it seems that committed translators tended to politicize literature (which is a discursive interpretation in light of the episode) rather than write political literature. The translators' subscription to the dominant "ideology of representation" is different from that of the anti-establishment and the so-called original committed writers in that the former do not use the text as a "rifle" against the regime. The sharpness of their language is, therefore, so blunted that they can escape censorship. In general, what is evident in the final analysis is the fact that the committed translators who had a political inclination particularly to the Left and its emancipatory promises were aware of the pressure that the Pahlavi regime had put on the anti-establishment camp; to avoid this they preferred to translate rather than write original texts. As a consequence, their allegorical references to Iran and the recourse to Leftist themes are the most important points about their translation practices.

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REVIEWS

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A Review of Agnieszka Łowczanin, *A Dark Transfusion: The Polish Literary Response to Early English Gothic: Anna Mostowska Reads Ann Radcliffe* (Peter Lang, 2018)

In this book, Agnieszka Łowczanin considers the work of Anna Mostowska (1762–1811) principally in relation to the work of Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), but her range is far wider than that and situates Mostowska in the context of a broad swathe of early English Gothic novelists, principal among them Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis and Jane Austen. Mostowska’s corpus of work is quite small and has not always been well assessed by critics, but this book does much to restore her to her rightful place in Polish literature, while tracing broader cross-currents of influence in the wide field of European Gothic.

The Introduction sets the scene, attending to the increased recent attention to a variety of national Gothics, while confirming that within this format of a canon of “global Gothic” very little attention has thus far been paid to the Gothic of East/Central Europe. Łowczanin conducts an extremely thorough literature review, listing all of Mostowska’s works and alluding to the relevant critical reception.

Chapter 1, “Anna Mostowska: Her Times and her Gothic Project,” opens by introducing the reader to the various cultural contexts of Poland/Lithuania leading up to the late eighteenth century. It traces the introduction of Gothic in the region, principally through architecture, and introduces two arguments which will run through the book, about Gothic as a female mode of writing and about Gothic as essentially bound up with political, even nationalistic, projects, before detailing Mostowska’s own position within the social and national context, as an aristocratic woman nevertheless attempting, very much against the grain, to earn a living by writing.

Chapter 2, “Romance, Translation, Terror and the Gothic,” enters into the critical dispute in England in the late eighteenth century about the romance and the novel, focussing especially on Horace Walpole’s revolutionary experiments with genre, before shifting terrain onto the broader field of European debate. French sources play an important role here, and act as a suitable transition to bring on stage the parallel, yet different debates in Poland/Lithuania, where the novel was very much an emergent form in search of a definition. A key text here, occupying a very similar originary position to Walpole’s Prefaces to *The Castle of Otranto*, is Mostowska’s Preface to *Strach w Zameczku*, which is characterized by modesty and caution, but which still emphasizes the respectability, even the necessity, of depicting elements of fear and the supernatural. In *Strach w Zameczku*, Łowczanin picks out a number of key themes which indicate both the similarities and the differences between Mostowska’s Gothic project and those of the contemporary English authors: the role of the Church and religion, the position of feminism and the task and role of fiction as entertainment, to name but three.

She then introduces us to other stories in Mostowska’s Gothic *œuvre* and offers us this insightful account of her preoccupations:

[Mostowska] has a full understanding that the dark recesses of a terrified heart remain impenetrable irrespective of the era, fear remains the emotion that knows no borders of time . . . that no rationality or enlightenment can control. The Gothic is for her a clay from which she moulds a variety of shapes and emotions, a bridge she constructs to take us, her readers, to the evasive, unexplored past that abounds with mysteries, that is a remote territory from which a few stories and a few records remain, but from which no traveller has ever returned. (129)

The third chapter, “Sensibility, Femininity, Education, and the Gothic,” is for me the finest in the book, full of critical acuity and adept in pointing out the many ways in which Gothic, despite its apparent distance from quotidian life and from social and political concerns, is nevertheless full of contemporary relevance, and also the specific ways in which Mostowska’s work participates in this cultural dialectic. Here is where the argument about the relations between Mostowska and Radcliffe achieves its full depth. A particularly fascinating example is Łowczanin’s contrast between Radcliffe’s emphasis on the influence of fathers and male relatives on daughters as opposed to Mostowska’s emphasis on mother/daughter relations: “[T]he first striking difference between Radcliffe’s and Mostowska’s writing is in the motherless households of Radcliffe’s heroines and the fatherless households of most of Mostowska’s stories” (133). An extended

and brilliant analysis of *Matylda i Daniłó* deals adeptly with the theme, or motif, of the ghost—later in the book, Łowczanin speaks of the ghostly spectral figure Emily sees in Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, who may or may not be the sinful Laurentini, before returning to the figure of the ghost in Mostowska’s tale:

Edwarda’s ghost, similarly dreadful and pale, is in the same way the embodiment of her sinful existence, used by Gryzalda in the story she tells her daughters as a corrective measure to regulate their behaviour. Everything about her life has a tragic end, her marriage she terminates with the murder of her husband, her motherhood, terminated by “heaven” to check her moral downfall, and then her existence as a ghost when she appears tormented as a dreadful spectre. (185)

The crucial theme that Łowczanin so ably brings out here is that of moral instruction: both Radcliffe and Mostowska may be writing “entertainment” but they are also writing with serious purposes in mind, concerning the upbringing of young women, purposes that can be seen as conservative in the sense that there is an imperative to submit to the demands of patriarchal society, yet also as radical in that they provide women with voices of their own with which they may choose to express their frustrations with the system in which they are forced to live.

One of the most intriguing suggestions made in the book is that Mostowska follows Radcliffe to an extent by deliberately providing incomplete explanations for the phenomena, especially the supernatural events, that she describes; there is here, it is claimed, “an understanding that Gothic stories are to be written with ‘gaps’ left in them” (137) for the reader to fill. It might not be going too far to say that this presence of the narrative lacuna is proto-modern in essence, and that is one of Mostowska’s great strengths.

There is much more that could be said about this excellent book: it is very good, for example, on the relations between Gothic and the ruin, which has such different meanings in England and in Poland:

Ruins in England were the result of domestic politics, of internal transfers of power with often religious implications. . . . By contrast, the possible reservoir of ruins Mostowska could be drawing from was the result of numerous foreign invasions into the territory of Poland-Lithuania, where architectural structures . . . often ended up destroyed by the invaders during recurrent military conflicts. (194)

But I will conclude by calling attention to what I consider to be the book’s three greatest strengths, which emerge with particular force in the final

chapter, “Empire and Female Gothic.” The first is that it provides us with an excellent account of the political and cultural situation of Poland-Lithuania at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so that we as readers are able to read and appreciate Mostowska’s work with new depth. The second is that, in its account of Gothic’s engagement with history, the book also provides us with a key to the more contemporary history of Poland as the figure of Gothic continues to revive and gain added potency. The third, and it would seem the most important of all for Łowczanin, is the connection between Gothic and the situation of women. Here is part of the concluding paragraph of a book which is a pleasure to read, as well as providing a series of highly articulate challenges to political and social orthodoxy:

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[I]n her historical Gothic stories [Mostowska] depicted those she knew history would bypass: women. She used the Gothic to write about women left in their alcoves, often when their men were out on the battlefields making history, about women who had to bear the daily consequences of man-made politics, about those manipulated by men, and those who were playful, domineering, and strong. Her stories centre on wives, daughters, mothers, lovers, and ageing story-tellers, and on their emotions of love, longing, hatred, fear, and revenge.

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Thinking about Thinking Nothing: A Review of Nolen Gertz’s *Nihilism* (MIT P, 2019)

“Nihilist” is a very convenient epithet to hurl at someone. Everyone understands that it describes someone who holds objectionable, if not dangerous, views or ways of life. And yet it remains a fuzzy notion: workaday definitions of nihilism differ greatly from—and indeed are surprisingly often diametrically opposed to—what prominent European philosophers have understood it to mean.

Nolen Gertz’s *Nihilism* is an engaging study that sets out to analyze various conceptions and misconceptions of nihilism. Any such enterprise has to survey the intellectual history of what today has come to be known as nihilism, and this Gertz delivers in almost exemplary fashion in the second chapter. In his history of nihilism from Socrates to Friedrich Nietzsche via René Descartes, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, the author manages to summarize key tenets of these most influential thinkers while dexterously driving forward his discussion of nihilism, thereby demonstrating that Western philosophy developed alongside, and frequently in reaction to, the epistemological and existential threat of nihilism, which so often lurks ominously around those who dare to explore the shadowy byways of scepticism. It might have been expedient to mention Gorgias of Leontinoi, as well (whose moniker, “Gorgias the Nihilist,” though hotly disputed, nevertheless attests to his relevance to this subject), or to speak more about the idea of solipsism (mentioned only in passing on p. 27), but that might be asking too much of an informative but slim book that makes no claim to exhaustion of the topic at hand.

This admirable synthesis of Western thought from the point of view of the conceptual development of nihilism is then followed by an equally accomplished chapter which establishes helpful parallels—and, perhaps more importantly, vital differences—between nihilism and kindred concepts

such as pessimism, cynicism and apathy. In what must come as a surprise to some readers, the author establishes that someone can in fact be optimistic, idealistic, sympathetic, and pursue happiness and still be a nihilist; this is partly because for Gertz, as for most of the philosophers studied in *Nihilism*, “nihilism is about evading reality rather than confronting it” (73). A pessimist is too self-aware to do so, whereas optimism breeds a happy complacency that fits that conception of nihilism like a glove. Likewise, the cynic’s distrustful brand of realism makes them less vulnerable to nihilism than the idealist’s forward-looking and less grounded worldview. Finally, while apathy entails a partial or complete emotional detachment, the strong feelings stirred by sympathy are more compatible with the absorbing, reality-alienating nature of nihilism.

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In the fourth chapter, the author goes on to examine four ways of thinking of nihilism: as denial (along Nietzschean lines); as denial of death (from an existentialist perspective); as denial of the death of meaning (or the postmodern debasement of metanarratives); and as denial of the death of meaning of childhood (that is, the anxiety of freedom and the nihilistic nostalgia for a child-like lack of responsibility, as identified by Simone de Beauvoir). Gertz deserves credit for laying out these intriguing ideas, as well as the rest of the book, in an emphatically accessible way, as attested by the book’s playful cover illustration and the author’s constant allusions to popular culture and well-known apps (and by the ubiquity of the phrase “in other words,” which occurs 45 times).

While the effort to appeal to an audience that might be less familiar with the intricacies of Western philosophy is certainly laudable, this approach is not without its risks. The countless examples drawn from modern popular culture are not always illuminating, sometimes coming across as superfluous or even confusing (it is understandable that Holden Caulfield’s self-righteous, anti-nihilistic zeal should itself be perceived as nihilistic, but how can that logic possibly apply to a character like Lisa Simpson?). Moreover, while certain rhetorical flourishes such as the use of dramatic tricolons also seem intended to improve the reading experience, they can be slightly distracting when resorted to as frequently as they are. Yet such shortcomings should not detract from the important benefits that this more colloquial approach provides, including the way it may lend clarity and contemporary relevance to the discussion of an arguably rather daunting subject for a non-specialist audience.

The fifth chapter is perhaps the least convincing. It deals with the cultural framework of nihilism: nihilism, the author shows, is found not only in time-worn books penned by Continental philosophers but everywhere today (on TV, in the classroom, in the workplace and in politics), equally decried in rhetoric and championed in practice. While the arguments for

the disturbing presence of nihilism in the two last domains are cogent, the claims related to the first two are rather less so, especially the subchapter about education: the use of screens in pedagogical contexts is simplistically linked to the pressures of content glut that are fed by phenomena such as binge-watching; the nefariousness of plagiarism is reduced to a moral issue (as opposed, for instance, to being deemed inimical to critical thinking, which incidentally is one of the least nihilistic faculties conceivable); and in general what is attacked is an outdated view of learning, which, while certainly still prevalent in certain contexts, has long ago been superseded in education studies. Some of these sweeping claims ought to have been adjusted and refined through a stronger engagement with the voluminous recent scholarship on related topics in pedagogy.

The last chapter is once again on a more solid footing. It delves into the relationship between technology and nihilism (explored by Gertz at greater length in a book that was published one year before this one) and it yields interesting insights, such as the conservative nature of technological progress as far as values are concerned. The Nietzschean idea of fighting passive nihilism with active nihilism is also thought-provoking, and it would have been fruitful to dwell on it a while longer (as the author does in a noteworthy article he wrote this year for *Aeon* magazine). Complete with a brief glossary of helpful terms to navigate the murky waters of nihilism and some unobtrusive endnotes that are exclusively related to bibliographical references, Gertz's *Nihilism* is a great starting point for the exploration of nihilism in its many guises.

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“Whenever there’s too much technology”: A Review of Don DeLillo’s *The Silence* (Scribner, 2020)

In a year punctuated by the global catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic and various other social upheavals, Don DeLillo published his seventeenth novel, *The Silence*, which—in many respects—can be read as a kind of coda. Novelist Rachel Kushner observes on the jacket blurb that “*The Silence* seems to absorb DeLillo’s entire body of work and sand it into stone or crystal,” and the book certainly distills many of the prevailing concerns in DeLillo’s previous books: technology and the inherent dangers in its global interconnectedness (*Players*, *Cosmopolis*); the compulsive allure of the screen (*Running Dog*, *Libra*, *Point Omega*, *Zero K*); consciousness-shaping communal experiences (*White Noise*, *Mao II*, *Falling Man*); language as a near-mystical, impenetrable socio-historical meditation (*Ratner’s Star*, *The Names*), and sports as a defining cultural moment (*End Zone*, *Underworld*). To varying degrees, all of these issues are at play within the narrative of *The Silence*.

The book could also be seen as the third movement of a post-*Underworld* trio of novellas starting with *The Body Artist*, followed by *Point Omega*, and now *The Silence*, with each book serving as a reflection or extended meditation on the corporeality of grief (*The Body Artist*), when the concept of a “haiku war” collides with familial loss (*Point Omega*), and when people are enveloped in the immanence of a global event just beginning to take shape (*The Silence*). In the case of the latter, the result is a novella of fractures, what occurs off-screen or out of the frame, as the narrative momentum is propelled more by the elisions of the unsaid or undescribed, the “unknown known,” to borrow from former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s (in)famous memo, than by clearly delineated plot points.

The action of the novel, minimal though it might be, centers on a seemingly global event, which appears to disable all technology—and

perhaps most notably for DeLillo—the television screen. This is of particular relevance given that this technological crippling coincides with the playing of the Super Bowl, the American football championship that is also the largest and most watched annual sporting event (as well as most expensive television advertising slot) in the country. It is the promised watching of the Super Bowl, after all, which brings all of the characters together: Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens, a married couple who are en route to New York on a flight from Paris and who plan to join their friends' party once they land; and Diane Lucas and Max Stenner, a long-time couple hosting the party, plus Martin Dekker (Diane's former student), who compulsively studies Albert Einstein's 1912 *Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity*.

In *The Silence*, time is tallied and disclosed by screens: during their plane flight, Jim ritualistically recites the time to their destination via the screen, while Max—awaiting the start of the game—remarks that “opening kickoff is one commercial away” (23). In what may be a nod to David Foster Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, where the calendar years are marked by absurd corporate sponsorships, the stadium in which the game is to be played is named the “Benzedrex Nasal Decongestant Memorial Coliseum” (24). And DeLillo is perhaps at his most American when his subject is sports. In response to Martin commenting on having watched the World Cup, Max replies with what is an efficient summation of the prevailing attitude in the United States regarding soccer: “Fake fucking injuries . . . And what kind of sport is it where you can't use your hands? Can't touch the ball with your hands unless you're the goaltender. It's like self-repression of the normal impulse. Here's the ball. Grab it and run with it. This is normal. Grab it and throw it” (25).

Shortly after Max's comment, all electronic devices are rendered useless, and the television screen flickers and then goes blank: “All the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense” (29). Diane, Max and Martin (and the reader, too) are left in a state of waiting—for the football game to return, for Jim and Tessa to arrive, for whatever comes next. In the charged atmosphere of the unknown known, Diane nervously wonders: “Is this the casual embrace that marks the fall of world civilization?” (35). Although her remark is potentially global in nature, the characters largely stay moored to the interior of the apartment. In the absence of the actual Super Bowl, Max starts running imaginary game commentary, recitations that seem to have been dislodged from long-term memory, and which also echo Jim's earlier chant-like repetitions of flight details. The characters revert to rituals and routines as the geometry of their now-shared lives, and Jim and Tessa even find comfort in seeing a jogger, a “woman [who]

just kept running, looking straight ahead” (40). This attachment to and performance of familiarity brings to mind a poignant observation that the writer Michael Lewis made in 2009: “[A] society that has been ruined overnight doesn’t look much different from how it did the day before.”

As the narrative moves forward, it increasingly resembles a “bottle episode,” an episode of a television show that is written in such a way that it typically requires only one set and a limited cast. The seemingly omniscient narrator poses the question: “What happens to people who live inside their phones?” (52), and, as if picking up the thread, Diane muses: “No e-mail. . . . More or less unthinkable. What do we do? Who do we blame?” (61). Enveloped in immanence, the characters toggle between standing mutely and speaking, not quite in conversation, talking *at* or *near* rather than *with* each other.

Given the numerous disaster and apocalyptic books, films and television series over the years, DeLillo seems to deliberately avoid trying to picture or dramatize some kind of global carnage. Without any working technology to capture it, what would even be the point, we might ask. The tension or prospective anxiety then comes from what is happening outside of the frame, on the other side of the windows nobody wants to look out of.

One of the details that hovers out of the frame—both in terms of subject matter and technological attrition—is an observation DeLillo made in his 1973 novel, *Great Jones Street*: “Whenever there’s too much technology, people return to primitive feats. But we both know that true privacy is an inner state. A limited environment is important” (238–39). The typeface and book design further reinforce the idea of this technological retreat by laying out the text with a typewriter script and margins left-justified. In an incident that seems to presage the events later, one that signals just how technologically-dependent we have become (and are thus vulnerable), early in the novel Tessa recalls the first name of Celsius without having to search online, to which the narrator adds: “Came out of nowhere. There is almost nothing left of nowhere. When a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost” (14–15).

One last way to conceive of the book—and clearly this was the route the publisher used to market it—is to read *The Silence* as a prescient commentary on or coda to our current COVID-19 pandemic. The temptation is perhaps understandable given the interiority in the novel and 2020 being the year where “shelter-in-place” entered our vernacular, but the analogy has some limitations. *The Silence* might better be seen as the other side of the coin, the “upside-down,” to use *Stranger Things*-speak, of our current moment. COVID-19 has imposed upon many of us an intensely online existence, dramatically increased screen time (and screen

fatigue) and technological dependence. The event in *The Silence*, rather than expanding our individual or collective bandwidth, instead completely eliminates it. In some respects, DeLillo is imagining the forced reversion to a social dynamic that had already existed in his lifetime, one before the ubiquitous glow of screens. For all of DeLillo's explorations of technology, the complete and instantaneous erasure of it might be one of the most unsettlingly realistic scenarios to contemplate, the pushing of a global socio-historical mute button: "The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal" (67).

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A Review of Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Performing Commedia dell'Arte,* 1570–1630 (Routledge, 2019)

Much has been written about *commedia dell'arte* over the years, and Natalie Crohn Schmitt's 2019 publication provides evidence of that. What one could call an impressive bibliography occupies a large part of an otherwise not very comprehensive book. It would seem, then, that the primary purpose of *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630*, a book which received the 2020 Ennio Flaiano Award in Italian Culture, is to present the existing state of knowledge rather than to put forward new theses on one of the most widespread theatrical genres in Italian (and not only Italian) culture and, above all, in theatre studies worldwide.

This is not the first time that the author—an experienced researcher working at the University of Illinois, Chicago—has tackled *commedia dell'arte*. Published in 2014, Schmitt's *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios* was devoted to a collection of old prints documenting the title scenarios. She went on to present source material that is fundamental to understanding the genre, which she brilliantly analyzed. The book raised the interest of researchers and was discussed in the most important specialist journals.¹ It was undoubtedly a great contribution to the field of theatre studies.

It is difficult to discuss *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* without referring to the author's previous book. It is a kind of an appendix to, or perhaps a more popular version of, her history of *dell'arte*, intended for less specialized readers. Although Schmitt also frequently refers to Flaminio Scala's scripts, she places her story of *dell'arte* in the broad context of cultural and literary studies. In fact, she has written a book about the contemporary establishment of *dell'arte* rather than the traditional historical narrative.

¹ See, for example, Kerr, Soleo-Shanks or Heck.

Schmitt makes this clear in the “Coda” of *Performing Commedia dell'Arte*, where she recalls a statement by Christopher B. Balme, who assumed that *commedia dell'arte* is not—as UNESCO wanted to acknowledge—a living heritage, since its practice lacks historical continuity; therefore, one could say, following Eric Hobsbawm, that the contemporary practice of *dell'arte* is an “invented tradition.” Thus, the last part of the book is devoted to contemporary troupes performing *dell'arte*, such as El Teatro Campesino, Le Théâtre du Soleil or The Improvised Shakespeare Company operating in Chicago (it is a pity that the author does not mention Dario Fo). Nevertheless, in my opinion, the last chapter sets the perspective for the whole book, which becomes the story of the establishment of *dell'arte* by twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars: historians, anthropologists, as well as literary and theatre researchers.

Thus, from the very first chapter, the author places her discussion of improvisation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *dell'arte* in a context familiar to twentieth-century anthropologists—the oral tradition and the tensions it creates in the learned culture of writing (e.g., Ong). Obviously *dell'arte* was a popular genre; however—as Schmitt reminds—it originated from written comedy, that is *commedia erudite*. It was based on the script (researched once in her previous book), but during each performance, the actors and actresses had to be in close contact with the audience, reacting in real time and adapting the language to the dialect spoken in the area. The performance was essentially a medium between the culture of writing and orality.

Schmitt also analyzes the representations of *dell'arte* groups in the medieval and Renaissance rhetorical tradition context, which is also readily referenced by memory scholars (e.g., Carruthers). Memorization is the author's point of interest as an individual practice, as well as cultural mechanism: it is also a question of mediatization between the written and the oral in culture. The author analyzes techniques of memorization, and again she reaches contemporary acting practices. When she reflects on the degree of difficulty of multi-person improvisation, she recalls the words of a director from the Chicago school of improvisation, who stated that “it is no more difficult for a number of actors to improvise together than it is for them to engage in conversation at a dinner party” (18).

In the chapter devoted to acting, the author continues her reflections on the status of improvisation and the factors conditioning the performance of a role. Schmitt draws attention to the numerous dialects operating in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, to which performers had to adapt when creating characters on stage. Also, the classical set of *dell'arte* characters and the way in which they spoke, took on a different meaning in different parts of the Apennine Peninsula. The presentation of plays by

roaming companies was, as the author shows, a constant manoeuvring not only between different social groups speaking different dialects, but also between the meanings produced in a certain context.

The reflections on voice are noteworthy. The author's guide here is Quintilian on the one hand, and the less obvious figure of Emily Wilbourne and her book *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* (2016), on the other (the juxtaposition of a classical author and a contemporary researcher is symptomatic of the perspective of Schmitt's work). At first, Schmitt patiently recounts the arguments of the Roman, only to later recall the brilliant analyses of the New York scholar, who, while researching the beginnings of opera, has devoted considerable attention to the aural dimension of dell'arte. From this perspective, the act of listening was as much a form of participation in the performances as watching them (the English term "audience" for participants in the performances confirms the researchers' assumptions in this regard). The voices heard from the stage evoked an emotional response, but also referred to the identities constructed in the performances—nationality, age, gender, health, education, social status, etc.

The author reconstructs the actors' gestures in a more conventional way. She cites scripts, other written sources, preserved visual records, and also applies a comparative perspective, reaching back to the performance traditions of the Elizabethan stage and Shakespeare's theatre. It becomes apparent that the author is genuinely engaged by this argument. In her reconstruction, she also draws on sources she has previously researched, and perhaps being overwhelmed by them prevents her from making a more generalizing interpretation—a diagnosis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian culture, so to speak. One would have liked her to develop her thought—even, as she continually does, by recalling other scholars—on how the relationships between the stage characters are indicative of the social tensions of the period.

The author writes about similar tensions in the next chapter, devoted to masks. Examining their usefulness for scriptwriters, actors or audiences, the researcher poses important questions concerning social distinctions. Characters in masks belonging to the lower social strata have comic potential; at the same time, fantasies spun on stage have emancipatory potential (see e.g., Orgel), giving the oppressed in a patriarchal society an opportunity for self-expression. The mask does not so much cover the actors' faces as creates characters who are agents of social conflicts.

Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630 presents important problems of commedia dell'arte, but primarily these are ones that scholars have raised in the last few decades. The questions they raise have often not been asked by the creators, actors or spectators of commedia dell'arte

performances, so for obvious reasons they are not answered in the sources. The story told by Natalie Crohn Schmitt touches upon the emergence of these questions (asked as much in the past as today) and the search for answers to them. The contemporary perspective—not only a research one, since the author also refers to her experiences of watching contemporary dell'arte performances—is very much present in her book. To repeat after Christopher B. Balme, there is no historical continuity of our times with the dell'arte. What remains, then, is the continual reinvention of this tradition.

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